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The Idea in the Back of My Brother's Head

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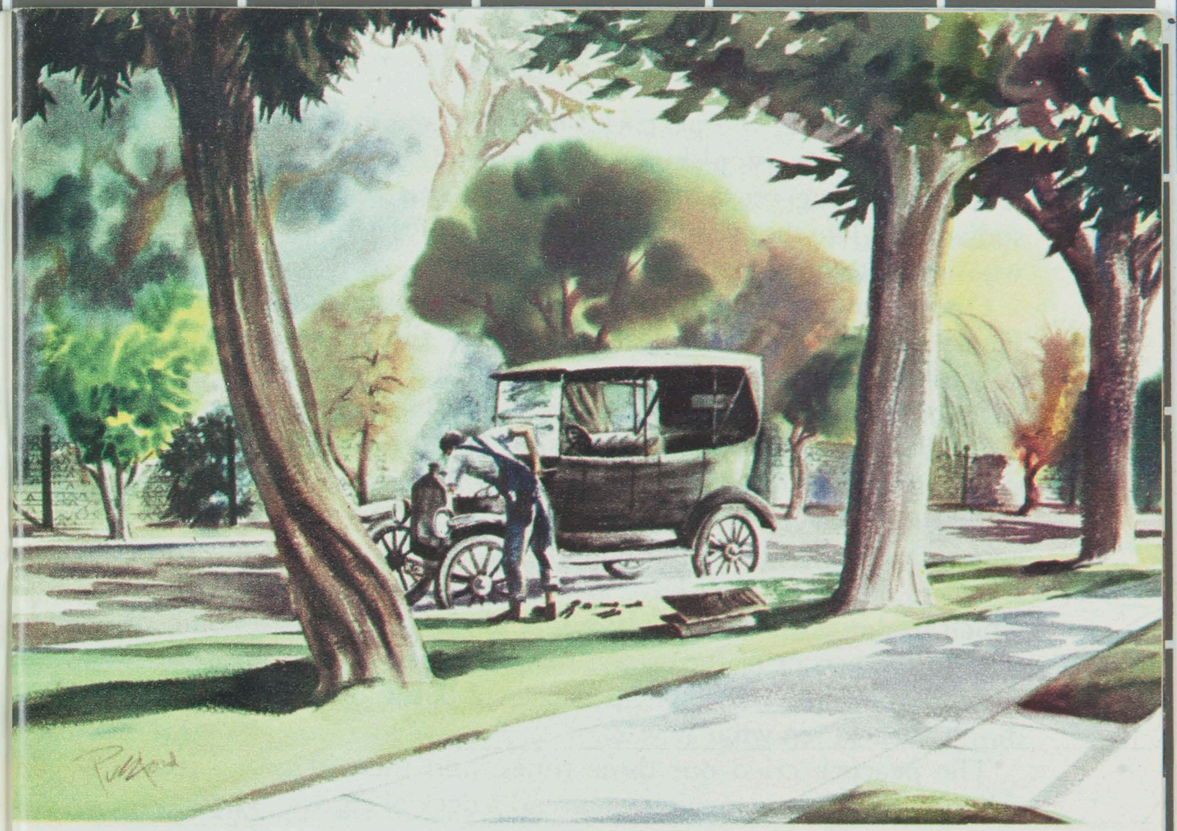
I COULD HEAR my brother that whole wonderful month of August doing mysterious things with hammers and wrenches, pistons and plugs, pliers and parts, early every morning before he went to work at the telegraph office. Lying in bed half asleep I knew it was old Henry working on the family car because when I first heard the noise I got out of bed to see what it was.

I stood at the open front door and watched Henry study the motor. With my own eyes I saw him remove a bolt from somewhere and look at it as if he'd expected to see something else. Then I saw him put the bolt on the patch of lawn between the sidewalk and the curb where the car was parked, beside the neatly folded black hood. I saw him get out another bolt and look at this one as if it weren't exactly like the first one, and I very nearly said to myself, "Old Henry, he's fixing that car up because he's got something in the back of his head."

Henry was sixteen. I thought of him as old Henry because he was three years older than I was but also because he was a pal, the way older brothers always are, stepping in with a quick ponk of a hard fist on the side of the head of a boy getting the best of his kid brother in a neighborhood fight, telling family lies to cover up for his brother in trouble at school, taking the place of the school and all of the teachers put together as a real source of useful instruction. That first morning he worked so quietly I could barely hear him getting the hood off and I almost didn't wake up. All day I wanted to know what it was old Henry had in the back of his head. When



Old Henry works on the Ford at daybreak

I got to the telegraph office that afternoon I said, "What are you doing to the Ford, Henry?"

"Plugs," Henry said.

"What about 'em?"

"The car's been a little slow starting."

Every morning that whole month I heard old Henry working on the car, out in the street in front of that house we lived in on El Monte Way in Fresno, across from the multimillionaire's square-block estate with castle and gardens and a real peacock. And after he'd really got going, three or four days after he started working at daybreak every morning, I began to hear the cry of the peacock which up to that time I had heard only around sundown or on Sundays. You know the cry of the peacock most likely better than I do, but in those days, when I was beginning to get ideas about the wonderful world I lived in, and the wonderful part I was going to play in that wonderful

world, that cry of the peacock seemed to me an appropriate indication of the astonishing success ahead. At the same time it seemed to suggest a little of the loneliness that is likely to stalk a man like that around the rest of his life. A man, I mean, who is out to do something, and far away.

One morning when I got up to have another look at old Henry and the work he was doing I saw the peacock at the edge of the multimillionaire's estate, on the other side of the wire fence, an oleander tree on one side, a rose tree on the other, both trees loaded with blossoms and flowers. Henry was standing in front of the car, looking at a piston as if it was one of the noblest achievements of contemporary art. Old Henry concentrated on everything he did. That morning he concentrated so hard he didn't have any concentration left over with which to notice that the multimillionaire's peacock had come over to the corner of the estate, to watch him or to protest to the early morning noise. The peacock cried out, but still Henry didn't turn to see what it was.

The peacock cried out three times, and then it spread its tail feathers the way magicians spread a deck of cards in vaudeville. The peacock started strutting and showing-off, and I was sure Old Henry would turn and take a look, but he didn't. I thought I'd holler at him to look, but I decided not to, because it wasn't any of my business, and I wasn't sure old Henry wouldn't say, "I already seen him."

The oleander blossoms and the red and white roses on both sides of the peacock with its tail fanned out was a sight to see though, and I guess I just had to figure all that color and crying at a time of absolute silence in the world had something to do with me and my idea of getting out there pretty soon myself and doing something.

The next Sunday Henry asked me to give him a hand, about getting the motor off the frame. The rest of the family gathered around to see what was going on. They offered to help, but old Henry said work like that wasn't for women. He and I tried some more, and then he saw that he hadn't removed one bolt, and that was the reason we couldn't lift the motor. He wasn't willing to make this fact known in front of the women though, so we both kept trying to lift the motor out anyway.

After a while my mother's Uncle Gotto and his two daughters came up to the house in a horse-drawn carriage, so the women went off to receive them and serve refreshments.

Old Henry went to work as fast as he could on that last bolt, got it out, and then he and I lifted the motor out, just as Uncle Gotto came up.

"Let me see what you've got there," he said.

"That's the motor," old Henry said, "and these are the parts that fit into it." He waved a finger slowly at a very orderly display of everything that he'd been able to get out of the motor.

"What's that screaming?" Uncle Gott said.

"Peacock," old Henry said. This time he waved a finger in the direction of the multimillionaire's block-square estate across the street.

"Why is the peacock screaming?" the old man said.

"He's *got* to," old Henry said.

The old man thought about that a moment, and then he said, "Henry, do you know how to repair the motor of an automobile?"

I thought old Henry was going to say he did, but he said, "I'm learning as I go along, Uncle Gott."

"Good boy," the old man said. He went into the house, walking slowly and stopping when the peacock cried out again.

That whole month of August, one of the truly great months of the year, one of the wild and wonderful months of life, especially when you're thirteen or sixteen, I heard old Henry working every morning on the Ford.

Early in September he said he believed he was finished, and now all he had to do was get the motor back, and all the parts back into it.

The following Sunday we worked together and got the motor back, and I thought the time had come to ask him straight out.

"Henry," I said, "what have you got in the back of your head?"

"San Francisco," my brother said.

"What about it?"

"I'm going to drive there."

"*You're* going to drive there?" I said. "What about me?"

"I'm going to drive, and you're going to sit beside me."

"When?"

"Beginning next Friday morning," old Henry said. "I've already asked Tomlinson for Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday for the both of us, and he said he'd see, but I know he'll give us both five days."

"Does the rest of the family know?"

"Not yet," old Henry said. "I thought I'd tell them at the last minute. I've got about thirty dollars saved up, and I guess you've got something, too."

"About six dollars," I said, "but I'll save some more right away."

Out of his back pocket old Henry brought a grease-stained highway map of California, unfolded it, and traced our course with the finger he'd used to point at the dismantled motor and in the direction of the peacock.

"Here's Fresno," he said. "We get up here at three, have breakfast, get our stuff into the car, and drive north to Chowchilla, where we turn west and drive to Los Banos. We keep going west, but now we start climbing. We climb and keep climbing until we get to the top of Pacheco Pass. Then we keep going west, but downhill now, straight to Gilroy. Then we turn north and head for San Jose, and from there we go on to San Francisco."

"Keen," I said. That was the word we said in those days.

Working steadily that Sunday afternoon old Henry got everything back in place, including the secret map, and the hood. He went off about ten yards, turned, faced the car, and for about three minutes stood there looking at it. Then he got in and sat behind the steering wheel and pressed the starter. I heard the right kind of sound when he did that, but after he'd done it I didn't hear anything more. He pressed the starter again, the sound was just right again, but it was followed by no other sound. Then we heard the multimillionaire's peacock cry out again.

"They've *got* to do that," old Henry said.

He got out of the car and went around to the back of it and got out the crank. He told me to sit behind the wheel

and get ready to feed the motor gas just as soon as the plugs fired. I got in behind the wheel and got set and old Henry started spinning the crank, but the plugs didn't fire. When he was tired, I went to work with the crank, but it didn't make any difference, the motor didn't start.

"I've got that motor in perfect shape," old Henry said.

"All the wires and connections back in place?"

"Everything."

"Why doesn't it start?"

"Stiff."

He started cranking again, and then when it was my turn I cranked, and then he cranked, and then the women came out of the house, the three in our own family, and the two visiting, and the old man, Gotto, and everybody watched, and Henry sweated, and the peacock cried out some more.

Henry lifted the hood and looked at the motor. It was real clean, handsome, and exciting. The women all looked, too, and the old man as well. But old Henry didn't touch anything. He just put the hood back and started cranking again. At last the spectators went back into the house and Henry came over to where I was sitting, all set to feed the motor gas, and he said, "Come on, let's go see Kluck."

I knew what that meant. It meant old Henry needed some help and was willing to own up to it, because Shag Kluckjian, or Kluck as he was called, was the most famous mechanic in our whole world.

Kluck was sitting on the steps of the front porch smoking a cigarette because he was nineteen now and out of school and working for a living. His father was sitting beside him, smoking a cigarette, too, and it seemed as if they had been talking quietly until we showed up. Old Henry asked Kluck if he'd come over to our house and have a look at the family Ford, which wouldn't start. Kluck invited us to sit up front with him in his Ford, with his father in the back, for the ride, and we drove straight ahead to Ventura Avenue, and then on to our house.

Kluck worked fast and you could see he knew what he was doing. Old Henry watched every move he made, but he didn't say anything, and neither did Kluck.

Around sundown the multimillionaire's peacock came over to the corner of the estate, right across the street from where we lived, and cried out three times, and then spread its tail and began strutting around. Kluck stopped work long enough to notice the proud bird and he said, "Take a look at her Royal Highness, will you?"

"*His*," old Henry said. "They're male."

"They *are?*" Kluck said. "I always thought the ones that showed off were female. Goes to show you how mistaken a fellow can be about almost anything."

Kluck didn't criticize anything old Henry had done to the motor of the car but you could see he was a little amazed now and then at the mistakes that came to light as he took the whole motor to pieces again.

It was almost night when Kluck was finished, and the motor was working the way it was meant to work, and always had in fact.

Old Henry stuck his hand in his back pocket and brought out a little wad of currency. He held it out to Kluck who said, "What's that, Henry?"

"For the work you did, Kluck."

Kluck took the money and I just couldn't help it, I gulped, because I knew that that was all the money old Henry had saved up for the idea he'd had in the back of his head for so long. Kluck unfolded the currency and examined each piece. There were five fives and five ones, and Kluck said, "Thirty dollars, Henry."

"That's right, Kluck. Thanks very much."

I was about to put in my two cents' worth about all that money for six hours of work in the shade, with something like a park across the street, and a peacock in the park showing its feathers and letting the world hear its thrilling call, but I reminded myself that I was three years younger than my brother, and if he wanted to give Kluck thirty dollars for a job that couldn't be worth more than six, a dollar an hour, then of course that was his business, although he must be crazy, and would never get rich.

But Kluck put the folded money back into Henry's hand and he said, "You know, Henry, I been thinking about that

crazy peacock. You paid me when you told me they're male. I'm going to remember that."

"No," old Henry said, "that money's yours, Kluck." But Kluck was already back in his car, and the car was on its way back to L Street.

The following Friday morning we were up at three, and ready to take off on the greatest adventure of our lives so far. The women of our family came out in the dark to see that we got the apple-box full of food properly settled on the floor of the car in the back, and all the other things they believed we ought to have, and then at last old Henry put the car to moving.

By the time we got to the Ventura corner of the multimillionaire's estate I heard the cry of the peacock three times, but when I mentioned it to old Henry he said he hadn't heard anything, so maybe I had imagined I had heard it, because I was so excited about the wild idea I had about getting out there real soon myself and doing something real right and unforgettable. ■