

Mexican Road Race

by Leonard Wibberley
writing as
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DEDICATED

to my friend of long standing, Bill
Dredge, engineering consultant and
copilot on this race from border to
border. Also to Bill Dredge's
Morgan Plus Four.

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Chapter One

WOODY HARTFORD squinted in the bright California sunlight which flooded the concrete bed of the Santa Barbara race track and then glanced at the stop watch in its socket on the dashboard of the Black Tiger.

The stop watch confirmed what he already knew. There were five more minutes to go in the race. Five minutes. That was time for two more laps, and to pass the two Ferraris ahead he had to make up half a lap on top of that. That meant he must drive two and a half laps in the time he could make only two circuits of the track with any degree of safety, even going full bore. All the Ferraris had to do was to hold their positions.

“Maybe wind up on my head, but here goes,” said Woody to himself. He pressed firmly on the accelerator pedal and the note of the Black Tiger’s engine settled into a deep, sullen hum. He could feel his torso sink back into the seat as the car picked up speed. The concrete roadbed rushed toward him to slip beneath his wheels. He heard above the note of his engine a sea-like roar from the crowd and guessed that they were cheering him.

Woody had been racing the Black Tiger, a rear-engine sports car of revolutionary design, for a full year and had gained the title of “Last Lap Hartford.” It always seemed that, whenever he won, he did so in the last lap of the thirty-minute race. Woody didn’t plan it that way. It was his instinctive method of driving. He drove at his best when the odds were slimmest. Then he felt the challenge and was stimulated to rise to it.

There was a puff of smoke from the two Ferraris as they changed down to go into a bend. Woody knew the bend well. It was a right angle, broad, and on the surface nothing to worry about. But it had a slight cant in the wrong direction which made it difficult to control the skid or drift around it. He’d long ago learned that you don’t steer a sports car around a bend. You set up a drift and control it until the car has skidded around, slipping sideways like a crab to a previously planned position. Then you step on the gas, pull out of the drift, and go on.

The two Ferraris had established their drift now. Like a couple of partners in a dance they slipped easily across the concrete, tires

screaming, engines roaring, but in perfect control. Dave Kingston was driving the first and Kurt Kreuger the second. Both were old friends and rivals of Woody.

Woody put his right hand on the stubby gearshift of the Black Tiger to change down for the corner. He meant to change because he knew he needed the additional power to get around. It was the safe and sensible thing to do and every instinct told him to do it. But he didn't. He put his foot on the brake pedal and pressed hard twice, then glanced at the speedometer. It showed seventy-five miles an hour. Too fast for that corner. He hit the brake again, flicked the Black Tiger's wheel over, said, "Take it, baby," and hit the accelerator.

It seemed to Woody in the next few seconds that he was not driving a car over which he had control, but was a passenger in a balloon that moved where it wished. His wheels seemed to have lost all grip of the concrete roadbed. The chassis of the Black Tiger swung over in a big dip and stayed there. He caught a glimpse of Kingston's Ferrari right before his front wheels, and a pile of hay bales loomed suddenly in front of him. There was a high, protesting squeal from his tires, and above this and the noise of his engine a louder shout from the crowd behind the snow fence. Everything, for a while, seemed to be in slow motion. Woody caught a glimpse of the crowd breaking from the snow fence and scattering like dust before a puff of wind.

He was sure he was going to crack up but he had no sense of panic. He felt a heavy bump on the rear of the Black Tiger and realized that he had hit the hay bales. He stamped on the accelerator, heard the squeal of his rear tires, released the pedal, and stamped again. And suddenly the Black Tiger was back under control and around the corner headed down the straight. There was only one Ferrari ahead, Kurt Kreuger's.

"Baby," said Woody, "I don't know how you did it but you did it. Thanks."

Now a reaction set in. A flush of anxiety and relief went through his body and he realized he had taken a risk he had no right to in not changing down. He'd asked more of the Black Tiger than the Black Tiger was designed to give. He'd come through, but it was the result of some unexpected regaining of traction for which he could take no credit. He looked at Kreuger's Ferrari two

hundred yards ahead, and, putting other thoughts from his mind, concentrated on the problem of passing Kurt. The stop watch said four minutes. Four minutes meant a lap and a half, or about fifteen bends with never so much as half a mile of straightaway. The Black Tiger could take a Ferrari on the straight, even a Ferrari driven by Kurt Kreuger whom Woody had never yet beaten. But the Black Tiger, because of her rear engine, couldn't corner like a Ferrari. She had the built-in cornering troubles of many rear-engined automobiles—unequal weight distribution throughout the chassis which made her temperamental on a corner.

But if Woody was to pass Kurt it would have to be on a corner, and Kurt was a wizard on corners.

Woody knew Kurt's driving characteristic well. He had what was almost a formula for shooting bends. He entered them wide and cut right in across the sharp angle of the bend to flatten it out, in effect halving the angle. The method was not especially Kurt's, but Kurt had brought it down to an exact science. He took the same path through each corner, lap after lap.

Woody stepped on the accelerator and overhauled the Ferrari on the third of a mile of straightaway which lay ahead. At the end of the straightaway was a series of S-bends. Kurt shot these in full bore and Woody did the same. Now came another straightaway, about a quarter of a mile, and then a switchback, a corner not quite so tight as a hairpin but one to be treated with the greatest respect.

Woody waited for Kurt to change down. He saw the puff of smoke from the Ferrari's exhaust and heard the roar of the engine. Then another puff and another roar. Kurt was going to take the jack-knife in third. It was time for Woody to change now. He touched the brake and watched the tach needle move over to five thousand rpm. Then he declutched, hit the accelerator, and moved the gearshift into third, touched the accelerator once more and the clutch, and dropped down into second. He was in the corner. The Black Tiger drifted a little but the Ferrari clung to the inside like a leech.

Woody caught a glimpse of Kurt's left shoulder poised over the Ferrari's steering wheel. Woody's front wheels were almost level with the Ferrari's rear wheels. He knew what would happen now. Kurt would drift wide for a fraction of a second and Woody would be forced to drift wider, too, unless he again demanded more of the Black Tiger on a corner than he had a right to expect.

Woody was never conscious of making the decision. As the Ferrari left the inside of the corner in a nicely controlled drift, Woody pulled the Black Tiger over to get into the vacant place. For a moment he thought he was going to make it and had a second of exhilaration. Then he had a feeling that his steering rods had broken. The wheel twisted violently in his hands, the landscape spun around through a half circle, then a complete circle, and he knew he was spinning out, his car waltzing around on the track completely out of control.

Dave Kingston, whom he had already passed and forgotten about, flashed by him within inches, a Jag clipped the front wheels of the Black Tiger and went careering off the track, and suddenly the Black Tiger was lying on its side in a cloud of dust and smoke.

All this seemed somehow unreal and remote to Woody. He sensed that he had had a bad crash but he could not thoroughly grasp the fact. He was still in the car, which was on its side, held in by his safety belt. His feet seemed very hot and he glanced down and saw a slow yellow tongue of flame creeping through the floor boards. Woody reached forward with his left hand and switched off the ignition. He kept saying "safety belt" to himself, and plucked ineffectually at it. But it was like a dream where serious danger presented itself and yet there was nothing to be done to avert it.

Then a man in white coveralls appeared with a carbon-dioxide extinguisher. Woody looked at him and said "Hello," and wondered why he should say anything so foolish in the circumstances.

More men appeared, and arms reached down and pulled him out of the driver's seat. A flood of sharp pain went through him when he was lifted up, and he heard the wailing of a siren. And then everything merged into blackness.

When Woody recovered consciousness he was in bed in a room which seemed to him quieter than any other place he had ever been in his life. He opened his eyes and saw a nurse sitting in a corner at a small table writing something. There was a scratchy sound caused either by the stiffness of her uniform or the movement of her pen. The nurse kept on writing, and Woody watched her with vague interest and thought over what had happened.

He was in a hospital. He had been in an accident. Then he remembered. The Black Tiger had cracked up. "Hey," he said, overwhelmed at the thought, "how's my car?"

The nurse turned quickly to him. "How do you feel?" she asked.