

THUMBS UP

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NOW that I have left my teens and am rapidly approaching the age of respectability—and responsibility—I sometimes find myself sitting back in a chair and substituting remembering for doings. As this is a climbing journal you might expect accounts of daring deeds on high hills but instead I would like to recall some of the adventures and interesting people I have met with en route to the mountains: for I am one of those two-a-penny common creatures—a beggar of the road.

Shall I ever forget the naughty excitement of my first lift? I was out taking a spin with friends in a 1920 Rolls Royce when we ran out of petrol. My cousin (36, 24, 36), blonde, blue-eyed and wise in the ways of the world knew what to do. She put up her thumb. Instantly a lorry halted in a cloud of dust and whisked us off to the nearest petrol station. I felt like Toad, as we roared down the road in the hot summer sun, “Poop, poop, this is the only life for me.” So I became one of society’s beggars, exchanging conversation and company for a free lift. Since then I have discovered that it isn’t as easy a mode of transport as it seems. Hitch-hikers, of the professional category, have to work for their living. I once collected peat-hags in the north of Scotland and carried them across miles of bog to the waiting car, the only vehicle on the road. In that same country I helped to deliver some sheep—smelly, stupid things—and was deposited with them in the middle of a field, my usefulness now over. If I could have understood Scots it would never have happened! I have helped change wheels, walked miles in search of petrol and once, Oh Virtue! downed a double whisky to keep my driver “sober.” This last fellow had picked us up in Fort William intending to drop us a short way up the road. Many hair-raising miles and bottles of beer later he stopped at the Cluanie Inn for a “rest,” having decided to go to Skye. Foolishly we left him on his own for a few minutes and returned to find him sitting before several empty glasses. What could we do? It was pouring with rain but the road and his driving were more than a trifle hazardous: hence the whisky.

Hitching abroad can be fun too. One Sunday morning in August, having spent a cold night with the drunks on Basle Station,

we set off for Ostend. Our shortest route would have been through France but we doubted our ability to cope with amorous Gauls so we lashed out on our train fares to Ostend. Soon we were beginning to regret our decision as we stood on the deserted Autobahn, when the Fairy Godmother of hitch-hikers came to our aid. A car stopped. Our Prince Charming was an unshaven American G.I. who was already accompanied by a German student and huge quantities of baggage. Twenty miles of smooth, silent speeding followed and then we ran out of petrol. As if from nowhere the police materialised with screaming brakes. There began a magnificent pantomime, the all-American boy gradually reaching a crescendo in order to make himself understood: then pantomime was replaced by charades and at last the police produced petrol. In exchange we pooled our meagre resources—one Swiss franc, a handful of lira and a few pfennigs. Our gracious gesture was refused with obvious disgust and only the great name of Mother America saved our petrol. Our driver-host kept us entertained with discussion and argument and I gained the impression that he was a highly-educated and cultured man. It was pouring with rain when we reached our turning, so we readily accepted his invitation to visit H.Q. at Saarbrücken. Shortly afterwards we found ourselves in a rather scruffy little serviceman's flat, surrounded by philosophical books and stared down upon from all sides by life-size photos of nudes. However, he gave us some food, a large bar of chocolate ("Should keep you alive for two days") and also four marks in pfennig pieces. We eventually neared Cologne after a pleasant ride with a Polish jazz drummer. Then followed a luxurious night under a hedge and next morning we spent our precious pfennigs on cups of coffee and an exceedingly dubious toilet. That day brought a series of Mercedes and a feeling of well-being to both of which we were unaccustomed. I remember one white limousine with a Belgian opera singer who drove along at eighty, singing arias.

There came the inevitable day, of course, when I had no companion to travel with and in spite of Mama's pleadings and many warnings not to, I set off on my own. Generally, drivers tell me, they don't approve of women travelling on their own—it's too dangerous—but, they always add quickly, "You're quite safe with me." I must admit I have occasionally had my doubts. I remember a trip

to North Wales with a gentleman who intended to visit Chirk. After a while he decided his business was in Bangor, though I would have been quite happy to forego his banal company. Finally, he drew up in a lay-by (in a quiet place) and produced a bottle of vintage wine, bought for my benefit. How kind! But what were those things my mother told me?

On my very next trip to Wales I had rushed out of school in my climbing gear, praying that I would get safely away before any of my pupils saw me. The bearded young man who answered my prayer told me that he never picked up lone women: it appeared that he had mistaken my sex. It was his opinion that women who travelled alone were generally loose women on the move. (What me, looking like a man an' all?). By the time we had run out of petrol and walked four miles to acquire some I knew that he had been married for thirteen years, didn't get on with his wife, had a paramour in London, was a Conservative and a Nonconformist. But he didn't only want to talk about himself. What did I do? How old was I? What clothes did I like my men to wear? What did I wear in bed? Were they "sensible" pyjamas? He then assured an ultra-timid me that he had something much better waiting for him than a mere hitch-hiker. It wasn't until afterwards that walking through the fields in the dark and chatting about the birds and the bees struck me as odd.

Strangely, my most uncomfortable moment was with an elderly vicar in Kent. He asked me if I enjoyed hitching on my own, whereupon I innocently remarked that as I had arrived in Dover with sixpence in my pocket and a large rucksack on my back I had but little choice. First, he offered me money. Fatherly concern? Then he suggested visiting me in the Lakes. Interest in my spiritual welfare?

I must add here that few women have ever given me lifts and they were all unexpected. "We just had to pick you up when we decided you were a girl."

This has been in the nature of a swan-song: I am thinking of buying a car. However, while there was no money in the bank and mountains waiting in the distance, the life of an autostoppeuse was a good and a merry one.