

**Lesson Number One<sup>1</sup>**  
**By Robert Benchley**

Frankly, I am not much of a hand at machinery of any sort. I have no prejudice against it as such, for some of my best friends are of a mechanical turn of mind, and very nice fellows they are too. But the pencil sharpener in our office is about as far as I, personally, have ever got in the line of operating a complicated piece of mechanism with any degree of success.

So, when George suggested that he teach me to run his car, it seemed a reasonable proposition. Obviously, *someone* had to teach me. I couldn't be expected to go out and pick the thing up by myself, like learning to eat olives. No matter how well-intentioned I might be, or how long I stuck at it, the chances are that I never could learn to drive a car simply by sitting in the seat alone and fooling around among the gadgets until I found the right ones. Something would be sure to happen to spoil the whole thing long before I got the hang of it.

The car was, therefore, brought out into the driveway at the side of the house, like a bull being led into the ring for a humid afternoon with the matador. It was right here that George began to show his true colors, for he stopped the engine, which was running very nicely as it was, and said that I might as well begin by learning to crank it, as I probably would spend seven-eighths of my driving time cranking in the future.

I didn't like this in George. It showed that he wasn't going about it in the right spirit. He was beginning with the assumption that I would make a dub of myself, and, as I was already beginning to assume the same thing, it looked rather black for the lesson, with both parties to it holding the same pessimistic thought.

So, right off the bat, I said:

"No, George. It seems to me that you ought to crank it yourself. Today I am learning to *drive* the car. 'One thing at a time' is my motto. That is what has brought our modern industrial system to its present state of efficiency: the Division of Labor—one man who does nothing but make holes in washers, another who does nothing but slip the washers over the dinguses over which they belong; one man who devotes his whole time to running a car, another who specializes in cranking it. Now, in the early days of industry, when the guild was the unit of organization among the workers—"

George, having cranked the engine, motioned me into the driver's seat, and took his position beside me. It struck me that the thing was very poorly arranged, in that the place which was to be occupied by the driver, obviously the most important person in the car (except, of course, the lady member of the party in the tonneau, who holds the bluebook and gives wrong directions as to turnings), was

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<sup>1</sup> From *Of All Things*

all cluttered up with a lot of apparatus and pedals and things, so much so that I had to inhale and contract in order to squeeze past the wheel into my seat. And even then I was forced to stretch one leg out so far that I kicked a little gadget on a box arrangement on the dashboard, which apparently stopped the engine. As he cranked it again, George said, among other things, that it couldn't possibly have been done except on purpose, and that he could take a joke as well as the next man, but that, good night, what was the use of being an ass?

As if I, with no mechanical instinct whatever, knew what was in that box! I don't know even now, and I have got my driver's license.

George finally got things stirring again and climbed in, leaving the door partly open no doubt in order that, in case of emergency, he could walk, not run, to the street via the nearest exit.

"The gear set of this car is of the planetary type," he said, by way of opening the seminar, while the motor behaved as if it were trying to jiggle its way out from under the cushions and bite me. "This planetary system gives two forward speeds and a reverse motion."

"Nothing could be fairer than that. It sounds like an almost perfect arrangement to me," I said, to show that I was listening. And then, to show that I was thinking about the thing as well, I asked: "But surely you don't have to pedal the thing along yourself by foot power! All those pedals down there would seem to leave very little for the gasoline power to do."

"Those three pedals are what do the trick," explained George. And then he added ominously: "If you should step on that left-hand one now, you would throw in your clutch."

"Please, George, don't get morbid," I protested. "I'm nervous enough as it is, without having to worry about my own bodily safety."

"The middle pedal, marked 'R,' is the reverse, and the one at the right, marked 'B,' is the foot brake. Now, when you want to start—"

"Just a minute, please," I said sternly. "You skip over those as if there were something about them you were a little ashamed of, George. Are you keeping something from me about the reverse and the foot brake?"

"I didn't know but that somewhere in your valuable college course they taught you what 'reverse' meant, and I was sure that your little son had told you all about the foot brake on his express wagon," said George, waxing sarcastic in the manner of the technical man that he is.

"I don't want you to take anything for granted in teaching me to run this thing," I replied. "It is those little things that count, you know, and I would feel just as badly as you would if I were to run your car over a cliff into a rocky gorge because of some detail that I was uninformed about. You know that, George."

“Very well,” he said, “I’ll get down to fundamentals. When you push the reverse pedal, you drive the car in the opposite direction from that in which it is headed. This is done by tightening the external contracting clutch bands which are between the gearing and the disk clutch.”

Somehow this struck me as funny. The idea of reversing by tightening *any* bands at all, much less external contracting ones, was the one thing needed to send me off into roars of laughter. The whole thing seemed so flat, after the excitement of the war, and everything.

Naturally George didn’t get it. It was ‘way over his head, and I knew that there would be no use trying to explain it to him. So I just continued to chuckle and murmur: “External contracting clutch bands! You’ll be the death of me yet, George!”

But I felt that, as the minutes went by, the situation was getting strained. My instructor and I were growing farther and farther apart in spirit, and, after all, it was his car and he was going to considerable trouble to teach me to run it, and the least that I could do would be to take him seriously, whether the thing struck me as being sensible or not.

So I calmed myself with some effort, and tried to bring the conversation around to an opening for him to begin with further explanations.

“But, all joking aside, George, how can you be so sure about these things? You say that when you push the reverse pedal you tighten the external contracting clutch bands. Did you ever see them tighten? Or were you taking some one’s word for it? Remember how the German people were deceived for years by their rulers! Now supposing—just supposing—that it had been to some unscrupulous person’s advantage to make you think that the—”

“Now, listen, Bob,” said George (my name *is* Bob, and I see no reason why, simply because I am writing a piece about myself, I should make believe that my name is Stuart or Will, especially as it is right there in black and white at the head of the story. This assuming new names on the part of authors is a literary affectation which ought to be done away with once and for all). “Now, listen, Bob,” said George, very quietly and very distinctly, “the only thing for you to do if you are going to learn to run this thing, is to get right down to brass tacks and *run* it, and the sooner you try it, the better.”

“Oh, you practical guys!” I said. “Nothing will do but you must always be getting down to brass tacks. It’s men like you who are driving all the poetry out of the world.”

“You flatter me,” said George, reaching bruskiy across me as if he were after the salt and pepper, and adjusting a couple of dingbats on the steering wheel.

“This here is the spark, and this is the throttle. The throttle governs the gas supply, and the spark regulates the—eh, well, it regulates the spark.”

“What won’t these scientists think up next?” I marveled. “It’s uncanny, that’s what it is—uncanny.”

“Now, then: hold your foot on the clutch pedal and keep her in neutral, while you shove your hand lever forward as far as it will go. *That’s right!... That’s fine ... ’way forward . . . now . . . that’s right . . . that’s fine!*”

I was so encouraged by the way things seemed to be going that I took all my feet away from all the things they were stepping on, and sighed:

“Let’s rest a minute, old man. I’m all of a tremble. It’s much easier than I thought, but I’d rather take it stage by stage than to dash right off the first thing.”

The trouble seemed to be that, in lifting my feet, I had discouraged the motor, which sighed and stopped functioning, giving the car a playful shake, like an Erie local stopping at Babbitt (N.J.) on signal. So George said that, in the future, no matter how well things seemed to be going, never to give in to my emotions again, but keep right on working, even though it looked as if I were in danger of becoming an expert driver in three minutes. There is always something to learn, he said. Then he got out and cranked the engine.

We went through the same process again, only I kept my foot on the *vox humana* pedal until I had crammed it ’way into *fortissimo*. Then suddenly a wonderful thing happened. The whole thing—car, engine, George, and I—began to move, all together. It was a big moment in my life. I could see the headlines in the evening papers:

#### YOUNG SCRIBE OVERCOMES NATURAL LAWS

##### Causes Auto to Move by Pushing Pedal

But this elation was for only a moment. For, while we had been arguing, some one had sneaked up in front of us and transplanted the hydrangea bush from the lawn at our side to the very middle of the driveway, a silly place for a hydrangea bush at best, but an absolutely fatal one at the moment when an automobile was being driven through the yard.

It was but the work of a second for me to sense the danger. It was but the work of half a second, however, for us to be rustling our way slowly and lumberingly into the luxuriant foliage of the bush. So I was just about half a second late, which I do not consider bad for a beginner.

“Put on your brake!” shouted George.

Quick as a wink (one of those long sensuous winks) I figured out which the brake was, by finding the symbolical “B” on the pedal. Like a trained mechanic I stepped on it.

“Release your clutch first, you poor fish!” screamed George, above the horrible grinding noise. “Release your clutch!”

This was more than flesh and blood could bear. Again I relieved my feet from any responsibility in the affair, and turned to my instructor.

“Don’t *shout* so!” I yelled back at him. “And don’t keep calling it *my* clutch! It may be because I was brought up in a Puritan family, but the whole subject of clutches is a closed book to me. If it is something I should know about, you can tell me when we get in the house. But, for the present, let’s drop the matter. At any rate, I stopped your car, clutch, or no clutch.”

And so I had. There we were, in the middle of the hydrangea bush, very quiet and peaceful, like a couple of birds in a bird house atop of rustling oak (or maple, for that matter). Even the engine had stopped.

I reached out and plucked a blossom that was peeking over the dashboard where the whip socket should have been. After all, there is no place like the country. I said so to George, and he tacitly agreed. At least, I took it to be agreement. It was certainly tacit. I was afraid that he was a little hurt over what I had said about the clutch, and so I decided that it might be best not to mention the subject again. In fact, it seemed wiser to get away from the topic of automobiles entirely. So I said softly:

“George, did it ever occur to you how the war has changed our daily life? Not only have we had to alter our methods of provisioning our tables and feeding our families, but we have acquired a certain detachment of mind, a certain new sufficiency of spirit.”

(We had both alighted from the car and had placed ourselves, one on each side, to roll it out of the embraces of the hydrangea bush.)

“I have been reading a book during the past week on Problems of Reconstruction,” I continued, “and I have been impressed by the thought which is being given to the development of the waste lands in the West.”

(We had, by this time, got the car rolled out into the driveway again.)

“The problem of the children, too, is an absorbing one for the years which lie ahead of us. We cannot go back to the old methods of child training, any more than we can go back to the old methods of diplomacy. The war has created a hiatus. That which follows will depend on the zeal with which America applies herself to her task of rehabilitation.”

(The machine was now moored in her parking space by the porte-cochère, and the brakes applied.)

“It seems to me that we are living in a great period of transition; doesn’t it look that way to you, George?”

“Yes,” said George.

And so we went into the house.