

HOW TO DRIVE YOUR CAR SAFELY

The increasing number of accidents caused by driving of cars, busses, and trucks should turn our attention to better ways of driving. It is not enough that a car or truck be mechanically in top condition. Of course, this should not be neglected. But the fact is that new machines have often figured in accidents. In this article we have two assumptions to begin with: (1) that the car is not defective and (2) that the driver is not just learning how to handle the wheel, how to shift from first to second, how to turn around in the back yard, or how to park the car. We make good time between widely separated places, running around forty to seventy kilometers an hour on the open road and pushing through towns and lines of traffic as quickly as common sense will permit. From an experienced driver's article on the subject of good driving we learn the following ideas: The most important single principle for

open-road driving is: that you must constantly drive not only your own car, but you must drive the car(s) in front of you and the car(s) behind. Let's take the one(s) behind first.

First, you have got to know, at all times, just what is behind you; that means that you have to look in your mirror perhaps every ten to thirty seconds (depending on the road) to see what's going on there. You may protest that on a straight road, with little or no traffic, there's no use. To this I reply that on a straight road, with little or no traffic, there isn't any use. But if there is a fairly good chance that a car will come up behind you, you must know if it does.

Let's see how it works. Sometimes I push the speed limit a bit, particularly when I think the limit does not make sense. In a situation of this sort, I keep track of every car in sight behind me. I say to myself: there are

three in a bunch, a quarter of a mile back, and they are respectively red and blue and a convertible. It is vital that I know what is behind me, and what changes are taking place, so that I have the knowledge necessary for action, whether I take it or not.

But let's take a more usual case; you look in your mirror two or three times, and you see that a car is coming up behind you and getting fairly close. Obviously that car is making better time than you are. What do you do?

What you do is so important that I think it needs to be established as an extremely important principle: any car traveling faster than you must be allowed to get ahead of you and out of the way just as fast as is safely possible. Sometimes you may see that the driver can't pass you (or if he does he is a suicidal maniac), but let's assume that he can pass you, and that he and you will come through the experience intact. Your first move is this: pull over a little closer to the right side of the road to show that you are aware of his presence behind you and

to give him as much room for passing as you can. Suppose that the driver doesn't pass you right away. There are two chief reasons for this: (a) the road or the traffic conditions don't allow him to do so; or (b) he is what I should like to call a "follow-traveler."

Saving this second reason for a moment, what can you do to help in the first situation? Here is what you don't do: you don't say to yourself, "There's a poor chap behind who's in a hurry and who can't get by, so the best thing for me to do is to speed up a little so that even if he can't pass he can, perhaps, go as fast as he wants to." If you speed up, that just makes it all the harder for him to pass, and even if conditions ahead improve somewhat at this new, higher speed, he may be even more seriously stuck behind you. The best thing to do is to slow down (and, if necessary, even pull over onto the shoulder); this may slow him down momentarily, but it's much easier now for him to pass, and if he really wants to he shouldn't be so long in doing it. To me, every driver

who wants to go faster than I do is a person I admire (not revile, as some drivers do). The general rule in this case is: do whatever is necessary to get him past in the shortest possible time. You won't do it by speeding up.

And now let's take the "follow-traveler." Even as I consider him I begin to feel my blood pressure going up. I mean to give him his due importance. The most dangerous average driver on the road today is the one you will find behind the wheel of the *second* car in a line.

Think this over. To be second, he must have been going faster than the car (or truck) now leading the line, and his duty was to pass as soon as he could. Perhaps for a few moments, or even for a few minutes, he couldn't pass. But that length of time is seldom long enough for two or five or twenty cars to come up behind him, and be stuck there. Most "second-car" drivers don't pass, not because they can't, but because they have some completely irrational habit of following. If I have seen it once, I have seen it ten thousand times. He is always un-

decided. I believe he is incapable of thought. He is just a "follow-traveler"; he wants someone else to do his thinking for him.

You know as well as I do the result of this irrational following: much of our traffic on the open road moves not car by car, but in bunches and often in long lines. (I am not talking about week-end traffic jams on inadequate, over-travelled highways where there is no choice but to follow as there is no open space ahead.) A line is a group of drivers who were and are anxious to make better time than the cars in the lead. They may restrain themselves for a while, but you know what happens to them after ten minutes of it, or half an hour. They get, to put it mildly, impatient. Then at one swoop, they start to pass the six or eight or ten closely spaced cars ahead of them. Theoretically, with everything just right, it is no more difficult to pass a hundred cars in a bunch than to pass one. Practically, since nothing is ever completely right, the difficulty and danger of passing more than one car at a time goes

up, I believe, in some sort of geometric ratio.

There are just a few things about the treatment of "follow-traveler" behind. First, remember that you have *complete control* over the car behind. You can keep it from passing (by just moving over to the left, or by otherwise scaring the driver); you can force it to pass, and get rid of it; or you can very easily run it off the road by swerving out at just the right moment. The way you behave is fully as important as the way he behaves, if not more important. Second, some progress is being made in the mechanics of the car itself. Improved rear-vision mirrors are advertised and praised, and many new cars have more window space in the critical direction.

Now let us take the case of the car ahead. The essential truth about that car is that you can't control it. If it is coming toward you, and is weaving or keeping in the middle of the road, or passing in an impossible spot, the only thing you can do is to protect yourself. You can slow down and pull out to the right, if necessary into

the ditch, or you can (if you're lucky) run up a side road. One salient fact about the car coming toward you is that it seldom gives you much time to do anything, and most of what you do is not your choice — it's forced upon you.

The situation with the car you are about to overtake is a little different. First, you must choose your own time and place for passing. If your man ahead is helpful, there won't be any trouble. But if you can't see ahead, don't let him make up your mind for you, even if he is a co-operative truck driver, who waves that all is clear. Second, as you approach him, you have time enough to get some idea of how he is driving — whether he obviously sees you and pulls over slightly to the right, whether he is going fairly fast or is just poking along, or whether he is unaware of you and is in the middle of the road. You can't control him except by getting up close and trying to blow him off the road with your horn, a disagreeable process that I find necessary only a few times a year.

The main thing that you can do is to size up the probabilities ahead. If he is driving very slowly, he is particularly dangerous, for then he is able to turn or step suddenly. (If he is going fifty miles an hour and makes a sudden left turn, he is going to turn over; not many people do that, what with the high price of automobiles.) Another thing is to see if there are any places into which he could possibly make a left turn — a side road or driveway. You can always watch his front wheels (as you come up alongside), for you can see his wheels turn before the car as a whole moves any appreciable amount. And as you come up abreast, if he makes any not-too-sudden swerve or turn, you can often brake fast enough so that he doesn't run you off the road. The chances are that when you brake, he will not, and that he will pass ahead of you. (If he is determined to cause an accident, and is clever about it, there is nothing you can do.)

My ideal way of getting rid of a car I want to pass is to keep my speed, watch the

road ahead, but at the same time watch the driver and how he is driving, and get past him quickly. How neatly this work depends, of course, on the kind of road you are traveling, and the amount of oncoming traffic.

There are a few other familiar types that you cannot control. One is the driver who sticks firmly in the middle of the highway and won't move over. Do you pass him on the right? I do, but I don't like it, or him. I try to be prepared for the worst, for if he swerves over to the right and runs into me, I am not only unhappy but may be legally in the wrong. And then there's that really despicable person who, with plenty of room on the side of the road, stops or parks with a piece of his car on the road. Then again there is the driver who suddenly halts right before you without warning of any kind. The only remedy for these "smart" guys is to have their license cancelled.

What about turn signals? Sure, if they are needed. But it's a great deal more important to put your car in the proper position to turn,

than, for example, to get in the right lane and then signal that you are going left. If there is nobody behind you, there is not the slightest reason for signaling.

How about yielding the right way, and being polite? My rule: don't ever do either. The road is no drawing room. Rules have been formulated so that one car in a certain position, or on a certain road, has precedence over another. Don't ever give up your right, for although you and another driver may carry on in a pleasant Alphonse-and-Gaston manner, a third car coming along may well ram into one of you, or be in a serious accident trying to get around you. But don't take this advice to mean that you lose all common sense; if a large truck comes out of a side road, taking your right-of-way, your resentment should be tempered with wisdom. I have never yet tangled with anything much larger than I was; something

my own size usually gives me the right of way, when it belongs to me.

What's the best thing to do about the appalling headlight problem in night driving? I almost never drive any distance at night. If you can't avoid it, I have only one suggestion to offer: when the oncoming car is some distance away, use his headlights to size up the part of the road that you will come to in a moment, while blinded. The best thing to do is to stay at home and go to bed.

How often should you use your horn? My first impulse is to say never, and I almost stick to it. If it is your intention to annoy or confuse other drivers, don't hesitate. Certainly, there are occasions for tooting — heedless children playing in the road, someone driving in the middle of the road who doesn't know you are behind — but most horn blowing takes the place of looking and thinking.