

The Inspection

One hot day last summer, the major was in London for the annual vintage car show. As he was leisurely and nonchalantly driving downtown in his favorite armchair (the other one was in the repair shop for upholstery repairs) his daydreams were cut short by the intimidating sight of a policeman who had suddenly stepped out into the middle of the road. Outstretching a stiff hand in front, he flagged the major down.

With astonishing reflexes for a man of his middle years, the major immediately shot out his right foot and dug hard with his heel into the sweltering tarmac, braking a little haphazardly. He now began to skid, but, stabilizing the vehicle with his left foot, he nevertheless managed to skew his pretty little one-seater to a less-than-abrupt halt.

He had stopped within one yard of this London 'bobby'. Not without panic, he managed to drag his slouched body from its highly indecorous and helpless position, (having somewhat overshot the seat), back onto the throne from which he had been so mercilessly deposed.

He now tried, ineffectually, to look cool, calm and collected, knowing he was not entirely legal. This preyed upon his mind. He ran the fingers of one hand through his wind-swept hair, or should I say toupee, which had now become unstuck and stood up at an obtuse angle. He popped it back down. The other hand tweaked at his waxed and elongated handlebar moustache.

His eyes were now watering from the speed, and his face was stinging from numerous high-velocity encounters with insects. The pungent smell of burning rubber filled the air as he examined his heel, lamenting the damage to his designer Guccis.

"Would you please pull over, sir?" asked the man in blue, with stunning neutrality.

The major immediately did so in swift obedience to this representative of the law, who winced as the rusty rollers squeaked irritatingly as they mounted the footpath.

The officer approached, rocking back and forth on his heels. Observing the exposed nature of this unusual vehicle, the officer now leered at it, inquiring not without a hint of sarcasm:

"Splashed out on a convertible then, 'ave we, sah?"

This initial attempt at police humor did not escape the major.

"Well, I prefer to call it an 'open-top' myself, officer", chuckled the major nervously.

He continued. “-Sorry, officer. Was I speeding?”

“Could I please see your driving license, sah?”

“Why, yes, of course, officer!”

He should have known better than to ask a copper a question. He reached down under the seat where he kept all his documents, -well, everything really, - certificates, bills, magazines, jack, toolbox, spares, rags and all manner of sundry items. He nervously floundered around under there for what must have seemed to the policeman like ages, until, after surely trying his patience, he finally found and fluttered that very document in front of him.

The officer brought the license close to his pinched face, so close in fact, that the major was at a complete loss to understand how it might be possible for him to read it at all, if indeed, that faculty were open to him. He scrutinized it up and down with great purpose, then scrutinized the major, then the license again, and began to wrinkle forehead, eyebrows, eyes and nose with great and concerted effort.

This lasted for at least a few nerve-wracking minutes as he tried with stalwart determination to find whatever it was he could not find. His scrunched-up face twisted and contorted this way and that, co-operating with his neck, until finally, everything seemed in order and there did not seem to exist a prima facie case for document forgery.

He took a moment of relief from the summer heat, wiping his brow unhygienically with his navy-blue sleeve, panting like a lion. Now that the driver’s essential legality unfortunately seemed unquestionable, the officer’s mounting frustration was evident; his nostrils began to flare, and a previously taut mouth now began to buckle.

With a contemptuous gesture, he rapidly flicked the license-bearing arm back toward the major, looking the other way, exasperated and contemptuous. Beaten finally by the law he had sworn to uphold, he was forced to relax his strained facial muscles, and concede defeat, on this point at least.

Sweating profusely now in his Bobby’s helmet, he swiftly removed his lid, like a chef revealing an exquisite gourmet dish, exposing an almost completely bald head bordered by two long, red, levitating tufts of hair that stood horizontal to his body, without, -ladies and gentlemen, -the aid of a safety net.

However, with impressive resilience, he recovered a renewed investigative and incriminatory zeal. His previously accusatory face took on a sudden sweetness, of one who had perhaps lost the battle, but who was nonetheless about to win the war. He craned his neck forward, placing a cheeky hand on top of the major's beautifully polished leather seat and took out his trusty notebook, followed by a pencil.

"You're not wearing a safety belt, sah!"

"No, officer", replied the major.

"That means a fine".

"Well... uh....you see, officer...uh, I'm not wearing a safety belt...because...uh... I don't actually have one!"

"-Ho-ho, well, well then....that's two offenses then, isn't it, sah?"

Dabbing his pencil point on his tongue, the man in blue began to write, simultaneously talking in pace with the written word.

"Failing... to wear.... safety belt....failing to 'ave... safety belt. My lucky day this. No convictions in over a month now".

The major dared to make the observation that, not having a safety belt, he could hardly then actually wear one. The officer responded with impeccable logic.

"Uhm, not 'aving a safety belt does not actually give you immunity from putting it on, sah!"

Then the major tried the one he nearly always used.

"This is a Bentley, officer. Vintage year, you know. Pre-regulations model. Prince Phillip also has one!"

By now, a small crowd had gathered, staring curiously.

"What model is this?" someone in the crowd ventured to ask.

"What year?" another enjoined.

"What do you do when it rains?"

Without a word, the major reached down under the seat, and from the small rack, deftly produced a rather large and encompassing multi-colored umbrella, opening it with a ploof! All the while, the policeman was barely tolerating this untimely interruption and anxiously marked time with his foot with a funny sort of clacking sound. It was only then, that the major couldn't help but notice the policeman's two gigantic shoes.

They were really, I mean, really enormous. He had never in his life seen such big feet. They looked like, well -they actually *were* circus clown's feet. Was there a circus in town? Now it seemed to the major almost inconceivable that the good force might be currently be recruiting from that quarter, so it occurred to him that maybe this was some kind of joke. Perhaps he had been caught off-guard by 'Candid camera', or something like that; -but no, it turns out that this really was a police officer and that they were really and truly his own feet.

Now our major knew that coppers had flat feet, and all that, and that the law had a long arm (and all similar jokes that began to occur to him) but nothing had prepared him for this, no sir! Those shoes had to be nearly one yard long with the typical, hilarious, oval bump at the tip. To crown it all, and to make matters hysterically funny as well as absurd, he wore platform soles from the hippy era of the 70's to try to make himself look taller than he was. I mean, those feet, as they tapped and flapped up and down, really had to belong to Bozo the clown.

But the best part of all was that he took his job so seriously, with those silly-looking feet flapping and springing up and down at a wide angle of approximately ten minutes to two. He seemed totally unaware of how ridiculous he looked. The major now lost his nervousness completely as he stared from time to time at the copper's feet, unable to keep a straight face, and in severe danger of bursting out in an uncontrollable spasm of lethal laughter. However, the last thing the major wanted to do, though, was to provoke him. More people from the public now chimed in.

"How does this vehicle work? I've never seen anything like this before."

Momentarily forgetting his predicament and delighted to have been asked, the major now took the opportunity to expound on the noble virtues of his prize possession. He began to recite somewhat mechanically:

"Twenty-nine Bentley, restored. Custom model. Eight -cylinder oxygen induction manifold system. Water-vapor conversion /gravity system. Double-helix suspension. Ecological, environmentally friendly."

Impressed glances from all sides now made him the center of attention and temporarily feel like a monarch. The inordinate attention he was receiving added fuel to the fire, for our bobby began to grind his teeth producing that terrible, grating sound that spreads tension all around.

He took steps to disperse the growing crowd. With each step, he flipped and flopped, and his shoes made a hollow sound, hardly like the sound of leather at all, and more like plastic. He drew his truncheon and twirled it several times as an initial disuasory tactic, addressing those assembled with a not untypical:

“Alright....move along there please, now.....move along! Nothing to see here! Move along there please! Nothing to see here!”

The major became ever so slightly offended.

“-Nothing to see? A '29 custom Bentley. “-Nothing to see?

He was comforted by the fact that, evidently, the crowd did not share that view. When everyone had dispersed, ‘Bozo’, truncheon in hand, looked quite agitated. The major felt that ‘Bozo’ might well be an appropriate name for this officer, though they were not yet on intimate terms. He would hardly wish to refer to such a colorful character merely by reference to his number, PC 66, although his apparent malevolence might indeed warrant the more superstitious of us in attributing to his number yet another six.

Bozo did not, as one might expect, now put away his truncheon, but began to beat on the side of his leg with it. Circling the armchair very slowly, upper lip curling and twitching, he now drew his attention to the rollers. He tapped each one in turn with his truncheon, which, like his shoes, issued a funny, hollow plastic sound.

“Not a millimeter of tread on any of these four, sah. I’ll ‘ave you for that, sah!”

Then the major tried yet another one he nearly always tried.

“Rollers, officer, rollers. Micro-grip. Most modern system currently available. Surprised you haven’t heard of them. Import job. Very few here yet. Slow to catch on initially. We’ll see them hit the market properly just as soon as the price of titanium comes down.”

He now braced himself for the response. Bozo raised one eyebrow and squinted the other, unconvinced. The major continued.

“Tires out-moded now with these beauties. Expensive, mind, but far better grip in the wet. Long-lasting, no punctures, no practical jokers to let the air out of ‘em. Hardly any wear. No further expenditure, and of course...no problems with the law.”

The major looked away, biting his knuckles, wincing internally at the tales he had just told, hoping Bozo might swallow them hook, line and sinker. He waited for the backlash. Bozo now looked like a totally unbalanced man at his wit’s end. He clenched his teeth. In a dramatic movement, he desperately reached into the inside breast pocket of his tunic.

The major thought, this is it! He’s going to shoot me. He’s really going to do it. He’s not going to waste words. If he can’t get a prosecution, he’s going to end my life here on the teeming high street in broad daylight, -and all for not wearing a device I don’t have, and which in any case, ironically, is designed to save my life.

Bozo’s grip tightened on the object that, in slow motion, was now coming into view. The major’s terror was at its maximum. Crinkling his face, he threw up his hands, uselessly thinking that they would somehow offer him protection against death by bullet.

When Bozo’s hand came into view, it turned out to be holding not a gun, but a small noggin of whiskey from which he unscrewed the cap, tipped his head back as far as possible facing the sky, opened his eager mouth, and ceaselessly glugged the contents until he was only sucking air.

Bozo began to sob, and after a few breaths, exclaim:

“What have you got against me sah?”

Folding his arms rather stiffly, the major replied rather cheekily:

“Well, that’s rich, isn’t it, officer, - with you here trying to frame an innocent man”.

Bozo now glared at the major intensely, and without warning reached inside his tunic. It would surely have to be a gun this time, thought the major. Well, this time he really did pull out a gun! The major couldn’t believe it. He winced and screamed with mortal fear, his whole life flashing before him in a matter of milli-seconds.

Preparing himself for the impact, his impassioned face writhed as the cop squeezed the trigger. A shot rang out.

“-Aaaagghhh!!!!!!

The major let out a terrified scream. He fell and clutched his body, his life-blood spilling and draining fast, or so he imagined. From the tip of the gun, a metal spike had flown out, following by an unfurled white flag, bearing the word 'BANG' with an exclamation mark in red letters. Gasping with relief, the major's expression of disbelief at still being alive seemed to please Bozo no end, because he now began to laugh like a lunatic.

"Whoah ho! ho! ho!.....Got you there, didn't I....Whaa! ha! ha! ha! ha!"

Visibly shaken, the major responded.

"-Very funny, indeed, officer."

Bozo stopped laughing now, changed his tone, and suddenly became very serious.

"Now then...where's your lights?"

The major reached down under the seat once more and began to rummage around. He never stopped fishing out reams of assorted, useless junk that Bozo thought would never end. There were nuts, bolts, screws, spools of unraveled cassette tapes, old yellow newspapers, magazines, dog-eared books, used pens, broken picture frames, plastic bags, broken watches, and sea-side souvenirs, just to mention a few items.

It seemed incredible to the officer that so much stuff could fit down there. His mouth was wide open, and remained incredulous as the major eventually surfaced some minutes later with two large headlights and two tail and brake lights. More agitated now, and not a little thwarted by the major's ability to produce whatever was requested of him, Bozo asked:

"Ok. Where's your indicators?"

The major went down. A few minutes later, the major came up, bearing a further plethora of junk, and, like a magician producing a rabbit out of a hat, he produced four really big indicators on demand.

"Wing mirrors?"

The major went down again for a few more minutes. His head came up. He produced two out-sized wing mirrors, accompanied by an even more incredible amount of garbage, plus miles of old television cable that began to spool around the policeman's feet. Bozo almost lost his balance trying to step out of all this miscellaneous junk that just kept on coming and coming, seemingly without end.

He began to grind his teeth again.

“Horn?” said Bozo, testing.

The major went down. He continued to pull out never-ending stuff of all kinds, until he produced an old fashioned horn with a black rubber bell. He quickly raised it, squeaking it loudly near Bozo’s ear, causing him to shout and start back, nerves frayed.

“Spare tire?” enquired the officer, with some sarcastic flat-footed humor at this stage.

“-No! No!...Please! Please!...Leave it! Leave it! -It’s ok! It’s ok! I take your word for it!” supplicated the officer.

Before Bozo had a chance to say “Just kidding”, like lightning, the major, who was not listening, was down again, fishing. After a few minutes more, he produced, as if by magic (along with more never-ending junk) the spare tire.

Along with it, he produced an old blackened penny from the 19th century, bearing queen Victoria’s face.

Bozo couldn’t believe that he could pull out the spare tire, or that so much stuff could come out from such a tiny rack under the seat of a single-seater. The major had a lot more stuff under there in which he didn’t think the officer would be interested.

“Look at this penny, officer”, said the major, enthusiastically, holding both penny and tire. “1894. Collector’s item. I don’t collect them. Probably worth some money now. Here, you may have it, if you like. Please, be my guest”. The major out-stretched his hand.

Now the tire was rather heavy, and in a moment of awkwardness, it slid from the major’s grip, and unfortunately fell onto Bozo’s foot and bounced off into the distance.

“-Aaaagghhh!!!!!!”

All hell broke loose as he began to shriek, hopping around on one leg for half a minute and yelling “No!... No!... No!...No!”

He sat down on the pavement nursing his injury, and now started to weep disconsolately.

“-Over thirty years in the force, and this has to happen to me! Why me?...Why me? A-boo-hoo! All I can ‘ave ‘im for is *not* displaying all that junk. There’s almost no point.”

The major felt sorry for him now, and ever-so-slightly guilty.

“So sorry, officer. Come on. Cheer up! It’s not so bad. Come on! Tell you what! It’s such a beautiful day. I’ll take you for a ride in my Bentley, if you like.

Bozo stopped sobbing now, and looked at the major through those big feet of his, positioned at ten minutes to two. His face now began to brighten from sadness into an ever-widening smile.

“You will?” he replied with child-like enthusiasm.

He got up straight away and awkwardly clambered onto the top of the armchair with those big feet of his. Now excited and gleeful, Bozo now took on the delighted aspect of a child being taken for a piggy-back ride. The major put the Bentley into first gear, honked the horn, accelerated and they both took off around the block. Bozo now asked a question the major was afraid he might ask, but which he had not, up to this point.

“You do have brakes, don’t you, major?”

The major became very serious. He said and did nothing for some time. He then dutifully removed his right shoe, showing the officer the underside of the damaged Gucci.

Bozo slowly began to smile. The major also reluctantly began to smile. Bozo now began to giggle. The major began to join in, giggling too, a little nervously. Both of them now began to laugh so heartily, and it became so infectious, that they could not stop. They laughed and laughed and continued like this for some time going around the block a number of times, the wind in their merry faces.

The noisy Bentley began to sputter now, then lurch and eventually conk out, coming silently to a halt. The laughter slowly stopped. “Have we run out of gasoline?” asked the major, turning the ignition key repeatedly on and off. It was no good. The car would not re-start.

They both looked around for help. From behind, in the distance, they saw two uniformed figures approach and offer to give them a push, an offer to which they both assented. To their elation, the Bentley once again burst into life. They now went around in circles various times, making various hooting and whooping noises, tooting the horn as they went, the Bentley occasionally back-firing.

They were having a great time. Well, all good things must come to an end, I suppose. Their assistants now approached them once more and advised them it was getting late, to keep the noise down and to try not to disturb the other patients. They were having great fun, and it was a great end to a great day.

In compliance, they stopped the playful hooting and pulled over. While the major slowly reversed the Bentley, police officer Bozo jumped out, raising a hand. With the other, he took out his whistle and began to blow it. All traffic was halted while the major began the delicate operation of parallel parking in a corner of the ward.

With dramatic gesticulation, officer Bozo safely guided the major with precision into the appropriate spot. The nurses now affectionately took them both in arm and walked them back to their adjacent beds, cajoling them.

“-Come on Bozo and Schumacher. Time now for your medication – then beddy byes!”

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