

FORMER PRESIDENT ALAN DOMVILLE CONTINUES HIS REMINISCENCES AS A MOTORING WRITER & LIFELONG GROUP FRIEND.....

I thought I had learned many years ago something that my first editor used to often warn me about... "Never volunteer for anything, son."

In my earliest years as a journalist I was up for everything, probably for the simple reason I had an inflated view of importance of myself because of the profession to which I now belonged.

A journalist has a quite incredible privilege of being paid to express ones' view in print to an audience which, at least in those days, numbered millions - but at the same time a writer should keep his or her feet firmly on the ground.

And so it happened that I was invited to attend an annual dinner of motoring correspondents and their partners in a rather swish hotel. I felt I had now become part of the in-crowd; the gathering included many of the greatest names in motoring journalism. Shortly before the pre-dinner drinks were to be served I was surprised to be taken aside by one of the organisers and escorted up to one of the bedrooms.

When the door was opened I was astonished to be greeted by a very pretty girl whom I'll call Jenny and who had worked for me at the Guardian many years before.

She introduced me to her boyfriend, whom I'll call Paul. "We asked to look at the guest list," he explained, "and we saw your name and realised we had a friend on whom we could rely."

If I had not been so flattered by the remark I should have exclaimed an emphatic "no" to the question that followed. "Paul is a hypnotist," explained Jenny. "We are the after-dinner act and we need someone to help us on stage." Paul added that four volunteers were needed but only one - me - would be "in on the act."

He wasn't a hypnotist at all; I was to feign being put under his influence. I wouldn't be embarrassed by any of his commands, he promised, and he went through an elaborate sequence of signals that would trigger the responses he would need from me to fool the audience.

It appeared to work for Paul and Jenny received a standing ovation before the encore. The big finish involved Paul pouring gallons of water from glasses into a pitcher as I came out of the pseudo-trance; I had to react to this by immediately dashing out of the room, as if to go to the toilet but in fact to hide. This, he said, would make so many people in the audience do exactly the same. Whether they did or didn't I have no idea, nor did I then care.

For me of course there was no applause - just a couple of my colleagues at my table asking if I felt all right after my wretched ordeal.

Never again!

CHAIRMANS CORNER: SOLUTION

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