

## **“And Her Mother Came Too.”**

(1000 words)

By

Jim Reeve

As dawn broke, I pulled back the bedroom curtains and looked down on Betsy, our old Austin A 40, which we had packed the night before with all our camping equipment for our Great European adventure.

To my horror I found I was staring down on an empty space ; the car had gone. With my heart thumping I looked again and then I saw it, in the middle of the road opposite. Somebody had moved it in the night for a joke.

With the plastic cover flapping in the wind we were soon roaring down the road to Dover, with a gallon of Betsy’s favourite drink in the boot, oil! Our 1954 car was an oil-o-holic. As we sped along, I listened intently to the sound of the engine but was reassured by the RAC’s Get You Home service in the glove pocket. There were five of us, Me, Joan, my wife, my sons aged 4 and 5 and my 60 year old mother-in-law, who had never been abroad before and we were going to remedy that by taking her to as many countries as we could in a fortnight, subject to the car staying the course.

Mum loved the crossing and as we drove off the boat she warned, “Don ’t forget to drive on the right Jim !”

As if I needed reminding but I did find it strange. The RAC instructions were excellent, that even I could not go wrong. In those days there were no toll roads and we drove along bumpy roads with our camping gear rattling around in the boot. As the light began to fade I become anxious as foolishly, in order to save money I had failed to buy a light conversion kit.

### **“And Her Mother Came Too”**

With the dust kicking up behind us we sped along intending to make Lille before dark then a British couple waved us down, they had run out of petrol and so I went and bought them some, despite the fading light. As we left them, I put my foot down, determined to reach Lille before the sun set. Suddenly I saw a car speeding towards us on the wrong side of the road with lights blazing ; the fool, then almost too late I realized, it was my fault and swerved out of the way.

Exhausted, we set up our tents in the middle of Lille, on a site that was more crowded than Glastonbury and just as many drunks. Mum was terrified of creepy crawlies and slept in the car. As the morning mist rose we were soon on the road again, much to the annoyance of the late night revellers but at that time in the morning, the traffic was light. In the '60's, there was no European Union and at each border we had to show our passports.

We had just crossed into Belgium when it started to rain and to our horror we discovered that the windscreen wipers would only go one way and not come back. Joan had the ingenious idea of tying a piece of string to them and pulling them back each time. How dare she complain that her arm ached after only travelling one hundred miles to Namur where we set up camp on such a beautiful site that we stayed for two days! Mum continued her hatred of creepy crawlies and still slept in the car. On the second day it was time to move on and as we all climbed in the car Mum asked “Where are we off to today, Jim?”

“Luxemburg and then Germany!”

“Can't we stay here! I hate the Germans. I remember the War.”

### **“And Her Mother Came Too”**

“Mum, you’ll love it.”

It seemed as if the car was in cahoots with Mum as it refused to start. Finally, I persuaded Betsy that Germans were nice people really and would not harm her and soon we were on our way.

That night we made Strasberg and again Mum slept in the car until about 2 am when she crept into the tent saying she was scared. She had every right to be because that morning the camp was in uproar, everybody except us had been robbed. The police seemed to be convinced we were the culprits and used our tent to hold their enquires, only releasing us when we convinced them we were innocent.

It was still raining when we set off so Joan had to continue to pull the string on the windscreen wipers. Finally, we reached the German check point and as I handed over our passports Mum glared at the guard in his green uniform and I quickly drove across the border before there was an international incident. In towns, pedestrians could not believe their eyes at our unconventional windscreen wipers. That night we camped in the Black Forest. After a bottle of wine, a play on an accordion and a dance in the café, Mum decided that the Germans were not so bad and did not want to move on. We decided to cross over into Italy, just to say Mum had been there. We slipped over the border, bought a bottle of wine, and then returned. We stayed in Germany for a few more days and then it was time to move on,

Switzerland was our next destination and Mum was captivated by the wonderful countryside and the snow capped mountains and was amused by the clanging of the bells round the cows’ necks. What surprised us was how well the children got on,

**“And Her Mother Came Too”**

despite their different nationalities. Mum was convinced that Dracula came from Lichtenstein not Transylvania and wanted to visit the country and so armed with crosses and hanging garlic round the car we crossed into the land of the vampires. Soon, our fortnight was over and we headed for the channel port, having visited seven countries. We had just enough francs to buy one litre of petrol to get us on the boat. Mum never stopped talking about that holiday until the day she died - two years later.

The End

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