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THE MAN OF PERFECT TASTE

TEXT: RICH TAYLOR/PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE BUTERA

• Butera and I have been in Boston for five days taking pictures of Mark Gibbons' cars. At the moment, we're in the back garden of an estate out past Brookline that is owned by one of Gibbons' friends . . . who just happens to be a DuPont. Butera has Mark and me and a kid from Harvard Business School named Tom Callahan—who followed the Bugatti from Cambridge to Brookline just to find out whose it was and has ended up spending two days carrying out Butera's orders for his curiosity—pushing, not driving, *pushing* cars inches at a time, into position for his camera. It gets to be noon and after, and finally Mark says, "Janey didn't feel like getting up early this morning, so I left her in bed. I'm going to pick her up, and on the way, I'll get us something to eat."

Great. Tom and I continue wiping fingerprints off the immense Henley, and Butera keeps on clicking away at the 1750 Alfa—visions of soggy McDonald Big Macs and Triple Ripples keeping us from complete collapse. We do this for another hour or so, and by now we're beginning to wonder where the hell Mark has gone for the hamburgers. Finally we hear his Porsche rasping up the half-mile drive that leads off the highway and into the garden by the tennis court. Mark waves and hops around to help his now wide-awake girlfriend out of the car. She comes complete with a huge wicker picnic hamper. Beautiful.

But behind them, is another car we haven't seen before. It comes filled with RiRi Loughran and Ellen Desmond, friends of Janey's who have come along to keep us company on their way to a tennis match. They have another picnic hamper. Behind *them* is another carful of Mark's friends headed by one of his old Harvard classmates, with his wife and daughter and her friend, and they, too, clomp over for lunch. By this time, Janey and RiRi are unloading rounds of cheese and fruit and whole cold cornish game hens and big loaves of French bread

onto a red and white checked tablecloth that is marginally smaller than the singles portion of the tennis court. Mark is opening the first of an ample supply of bottles of dry white wine fresh from its own cooler. Ellen is opening a beer for Tom and RiRi is slicing bread for me. Soon, we've got what you call your *perfect* garden party going. Here we are expecting sacks full of wax papered take-out food, and Gibbons shows up with all the props for a Cosmo fashion spread. Except with him it's all real. As he says immodestly, "I don't have style, I have a *lifestyle*." What he means is that absolutely everything that affects his environment has been personally chosen to reflect what he considers to be standards of good taste. For Mark Gibbons that means a certain Puritan Ethic conservatism rather than any frenetic pursuit of the HMH seal of good living. If anything, it is a lifestyle that is the exact antithesis of the *Playboy* philosophy.

His life is organized primarily around his business interests, but these too, have been chosen so that they function in a manner that most people would consider pleasure rather than work . . . the obvious culmination of determined planning rather than fortuitous coincidence. After a career in real estate, Gibbons has personally acquired a good deal of land in and around Cambridge, which he now leases to builders. This means his income is basically self-maintaining. In turn, this means Gibbons has earned the freedom to wage his private campaign in pursuit of excellence. But puritanical as he is, those forays generally earn rather than lose. For example, although he has an apartment in a nineteenth century Italianate carriage house next to one of the few houses in Cambridge that still sits on a good size piece of land, Gibbons felt the need for a vacation house in the sun.

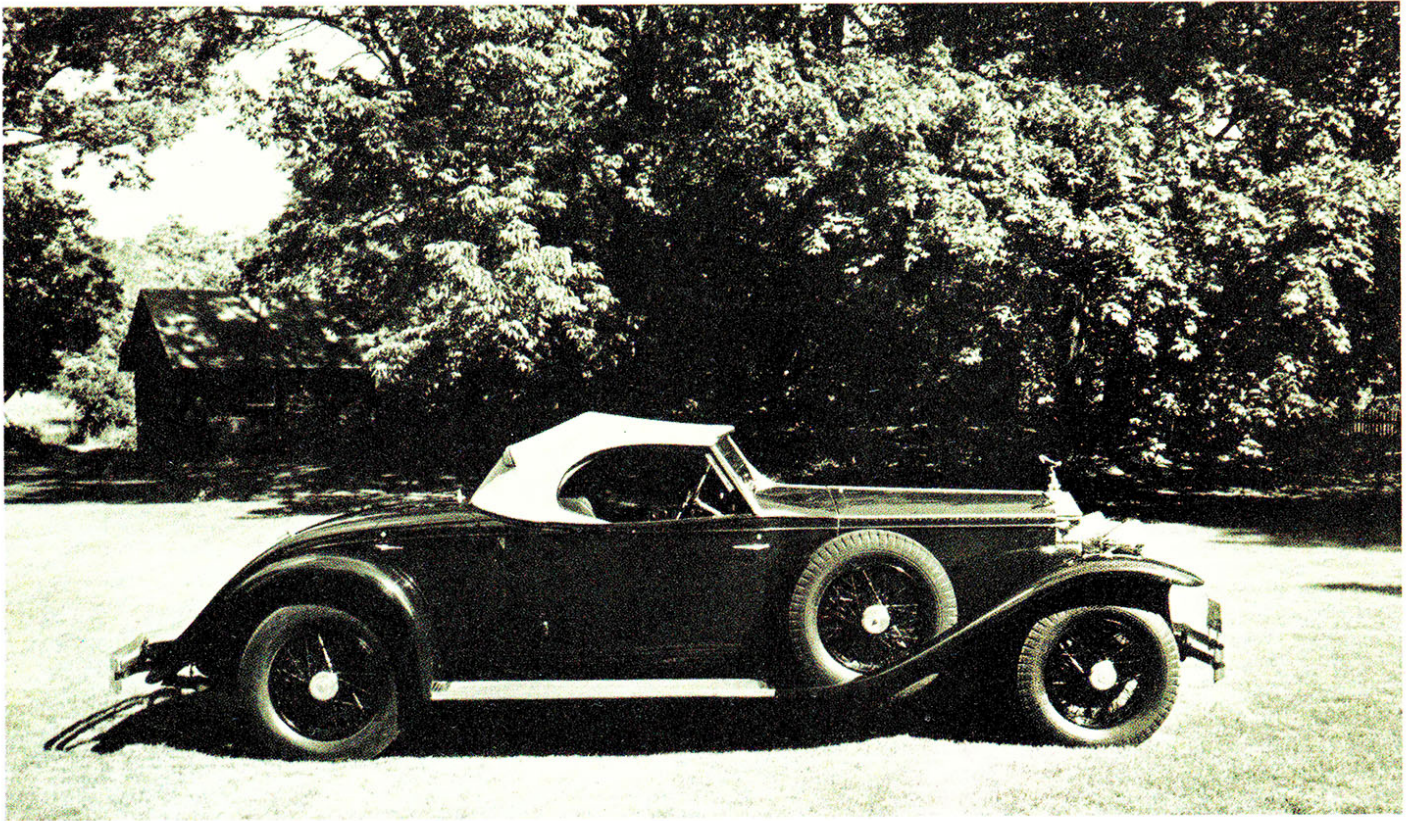
Characteristically, he now has a 6-man firm in the Vale do Lobo region of the Portuguese Algarve peninsula which

restores nineteenth century fishermen's houses into luxury vacation villas, primarily for American Jet Setters. The first one went to Gibbons. It has that classic Mediterranean character with white-washed stucco and lots of exposed beams and a view of the ocean. It also has a complete American bathroom and kitchen because Mark feels we *do* make that type of mundane hardware well in our factories. Consequently, what started out as a vacation home is now a going concern with complete restorations starting in the \$150,000 range. Thus Gibbons has become an internationalist, with the success of both his business and his lifestyle based on his standards of taste. But then, everything about Mark Gibbons is based on his taste: his clothes, his homes, his businesses, his girls . . . and his cars.

By now, it must be apparent that Gibbons could never settle on anything but vintage cars, cars of perfect taste—but with that essential dash of style mixed in. It should also be evident that Mark has the collector mentality; not one house but two, not one business but two, and quite possibly, more than one girl. But as in everything, Gibbons did not take the passive approach to cars. He made a thorough study of the history of the automobile, and decided the high-point of car production was reached in the decade between Black Tuesday and the Blitzkrieg in Poland, and that the *best* cars from that era came from Europe. He further decided that the best of these European models were the limited-production coachbuilt cars. He also

**A 1936 MG TA, a 1939
Talbot-Lago by Pourtout
and a 1939 Bugatti
Atalanta: exquisite
coupes to complement
Mark Gibbons' lifestyle**





has a predilection for open cars, although he required three coupes to round out his collection.

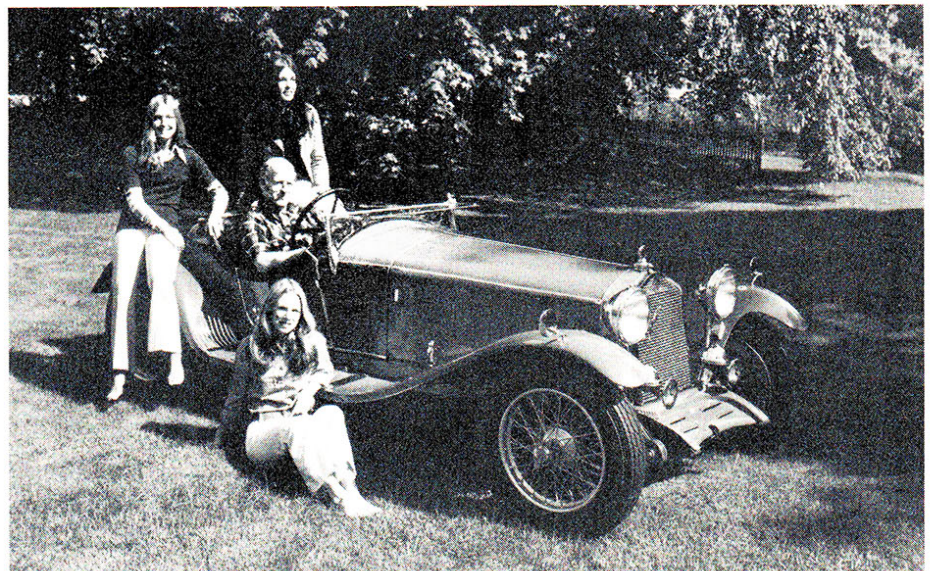
And that collection *is* near perfection. Representing a decade, what better than ten cars? Of course those ten must be carefully chosen to fully represent the entire period from beginning to end. A perfectly symmetrical collection of cars to which none could be added, from which none could be deleted without destroying the essential composition of the entity. Not unexpectedly, there is actually a master plan behind Mark's assemblage . . . not a will-o-the-wisp dream but a *plan*, written out in a great leather-bound notebook. The cars were acquired over some 15 years and only recently, with the purchase of the MG Airline Coupe in 1972, has it all come together.

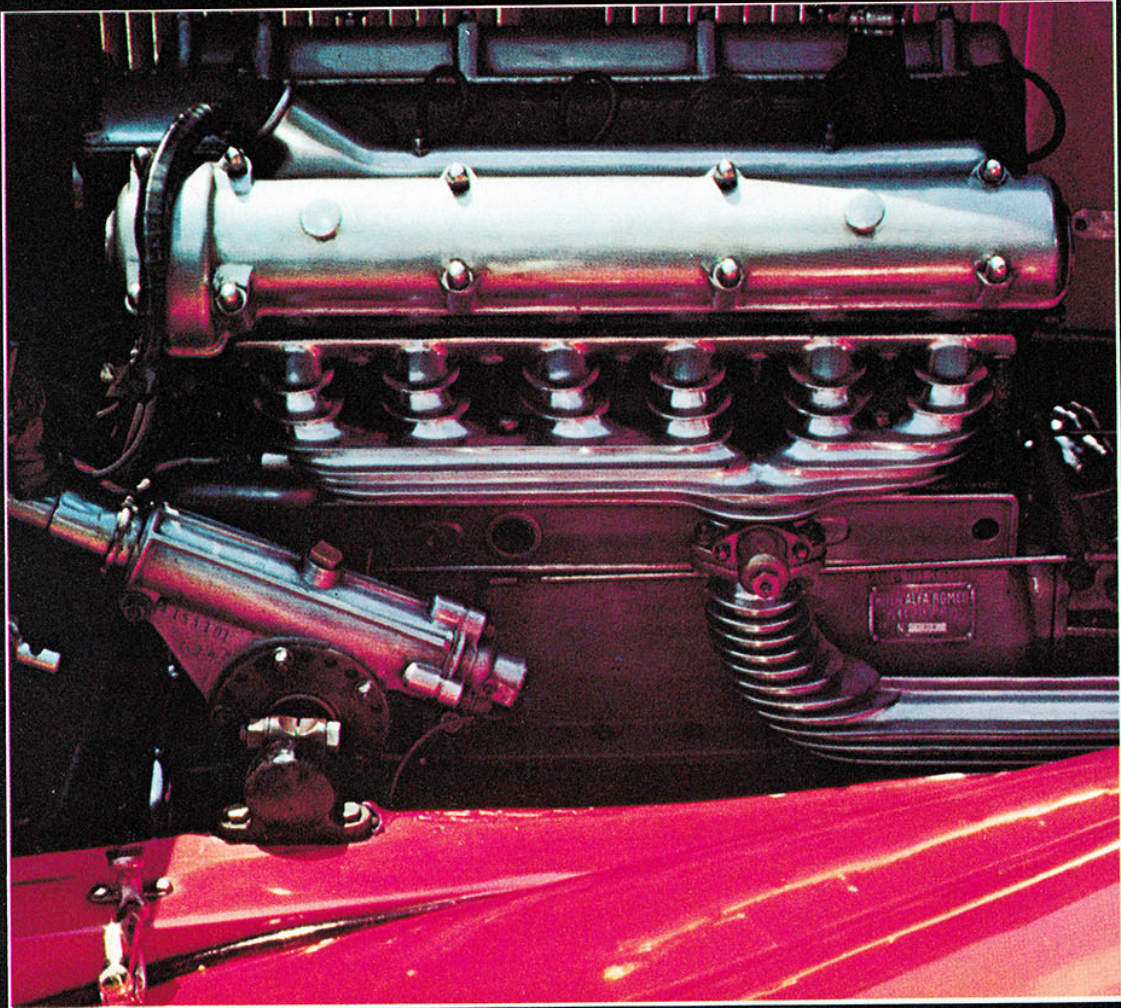
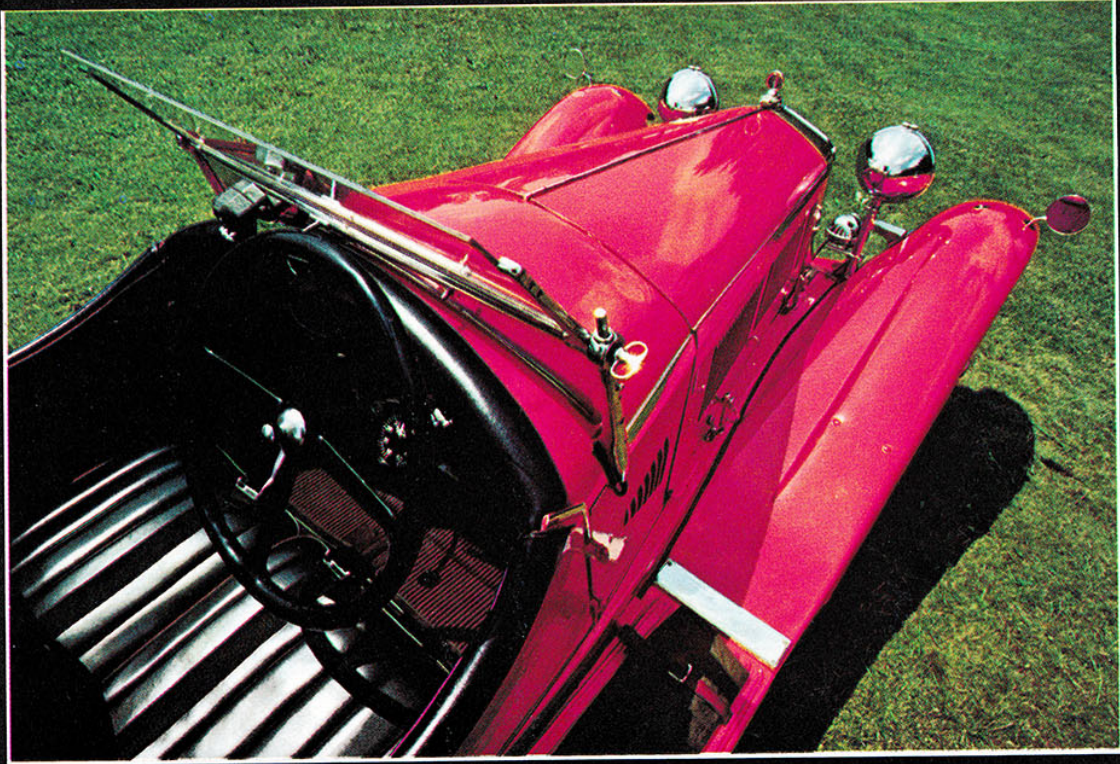
The earliest representative is a 1928 Mercedes S, not an SSK, but the 4-passenger tourer, which is rarer still. The model Mark owns is a 36/220, which means it's powered by a supercharged 6.8-liter straight Six with a single overhead cam rated at a maximum of 220 hp when the blower is engaged. It has a factory-made lightweight racing body, as this was the model used for Mercedes production racing in the late Twenties. But even with the minimal body, total weight is nearly 5000 lbs. and its acceleration is more noisy than fast. The top speed is in the 115 mph range, however, and with a \$16,000 restoration complet-

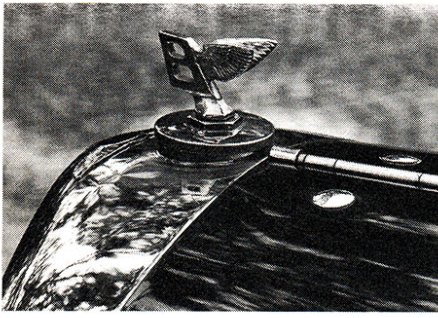
ed only two years ago, the car is in better condition than new. Mark bought the Mercedes in 1961 and it is one of three of these factory team racers extant. Originally white, Mark has had the car restored with silver over black on the exterior, and beige leather on the inside.

The Mercedes is perhaps the most visceral of Mark's machines. Most of the others rely on a certain refinement and understated elegance for their *raison d'être*, while the Mercedes is a true brute of a car—harsh, demanding and uncomfortable. Teutonic, in the finest sense of the word. It is not a pleasant road car, but an arduous challenge to drive well. This, of course, brings its own rewards

Two very different roadsters from 1931: the Rolls-Royce Henley epitomizes British luxury; the Zagato Alfa, with its supercharged engine, the quintessential Italian racer







**Three perfect tourers
in an appropriate setting
(previous page): the 1931
Invicta and 1936 Bentley
seen over the top of
the 1928 Mercedes
factory racer**

for a collector of Mark's temperament.

Chronologically, the second car in the collection is a 1930 Invicta, also an S-series. This is the low-chassis model, with a heavy Meadows truck engine lurking under its long hood. This engine is a 4.5-liter Six, and gives the relatively light tourer a top speed of around 100 mph. Mark's is medium gray with a tan interior. In concept, the Invicta is similar to the Mercedes, only refined and detailed into a smaller, tighter, more enjoyable package. These cars had a long career in British club racing until well after World War II, for despite the fact that they are cursed with weight distribution that gives them a propensity for spinning, they have good acceleration, and are inherently solid and reliable. Mark bought his in 1964, as an example of the perfect image of the British sporting motorcar, circa 1930. The short, cycle fenders on the front wheels were a fad among custom coachbuilders at the time, and add the necessary lightness of line required by the long hood. They also expose the graceful curve of the frame rails—each covered with its own set of intricate louvers. The Invicta is truly a visual delight, a connoisseur's car to be examined in detail time and again. The same is true of Mark's next car . . . but this time in spades.

His 1931 Alfa-Romeo roadster is a fine example of the perfection of the automobile. It stands as one of the high-points of world automobile production—a real museum piece that is also tremendously exciting to drive. And unlike the Invicta, whose beautiful lines hide an ex-truck engine, the Alfa's Zagato Gran Sport racing body clothes one of the most exquisite engines ever made. Only

1750cc, the supercharged, double overhead cam Six develops 100 hp and 110 mph—exceptional performance for a streetable machine of this size in 1931. And the detailing is more than enough to make a machinist weep. Everything, *everything* under the hood is polished, and nearly everything is finned—including the manifolds and the blower ducting. The engine itself is sufficient excuse for saving the Alfa, but the body is equally outstanding. Zagato was noted, even this early, for exceptionally lightweight bodies and highly refined styling. The running boards sit high on his bodies, giving them a lithe and graceful look with lots of ground clearance, and there is more brightwork and trim than on contemporary British cars. Naturally a car like this could only be painted red, with black leather on the inside. The result is the quintessential Italian car—all verve and dash and highstrung excitement.

It drives the same way. The cockpit is tiny, with no hip room or leg room. The steering wheel is tucked right under your chin and is huge, unnecessarily large, as the steering is light, even though it requires only one and a half turns lock-to-lock. In the accepted manner of the period for racing machines, the accelerator is in the center, the brake on the right, and the hair trigger action clutch on the left. The shift lever is a long wand that connects directly to a 4-speed non-synchro box. The recommended method is to select the precise direction you want the shifter to go, and then, using moderate muscle and swift movements, slip it into gear. If you try to baby it or yank the lever, every filling in your dental work begins to hum. The engine fires up with a most incredible racket, as the supercharger is constantly engaged and howls ferociously. The valve gear makes a high-pitched whine, the exhaust note is equally exuberant, and the blower keeps it all idling vibrationlessly at 1500 rpm on the giant chronometric tach. Except for the crash box and backwards pedals, driving the Alfa is simplicity itself, with surprisingly good brakes and handling that has the same instantaneous feel as a nervous modern Formula car, although there is nowhere near the cornering ability. Mark bought the Alfa restored eight years ago and even at \$25,000 it was a bargain by comparison to other objects upon which one could spend an equal amount of money. The same is true of the next car on Mark's list, but epitomizing an entirely different facet of the motoring experience.

This is his Henley Rolls. Built by the Rolls-Royce-owned American coach-

builder, Brewster, on chassis supplied from Rolls' Springfield, Massachusetts factory, just six Henley roadsters were made, and all six survive. The most recent sale of a Henley was in January of this year at an auction in Scottsdale, Arizona where one commanded \$68,000—making this by far the most valuable car in Gibbons' collection. Some Henley models are dated 1932, while Mark's is a 1931. The chassis is the Phantom II, fitted with the standard 7668cc straight Six with cylinders cast in two groups of three. The wheelbase is immense at over 12 feet, but the overall length, because of short overhang, is about the same as a Chevelle. Still, it feels a lot bigger. It's high, for one thing. You step *up* and into the brown leather cockpit, with its two overstuffed seats, ducking under the roadster top and its distinctive sweeping curve at the rear edge of the side window. The 3-speed transmission works more smoothly than all but the best modern gearboxes, and although the steering is heavy—hard to avoid in a three-ton automobile with no power assist—it is not impossible. Even the clutch and brakes are deceptively light to the touch, considering the car's tremendous bulk. But the best feature is the engine. It is so understressed as to be docile and operates at such low rpm through such a restrictive and effective muffling system that one hardly knows it is there. The engine fires softly with a push of the starter—there's no ignition lock—as long as the timing is retarded. Then you move the levers to operating levels, and set the hand throttle on the steering wheel as low as you desire. It will idle at 250 rpm when warm, and using something as excessive as 1000 rpm to drive off from rest is akin to revving it up and popping the clutch. The preferred method is to literally *ooze* away at 500 rpm. The long wheelbase makes the big green car glide along, and its tall gear and 21-inch wheels make third good from about 5 mph to the car's top speed of over 90. Gibbons spent ten

(Continued on page 96)

**The embodiment
of the British
sports car from the
Thirties in two
very similar variations:
the 1935 Riley Imp
and the 1938
Jaguar SS 100**