



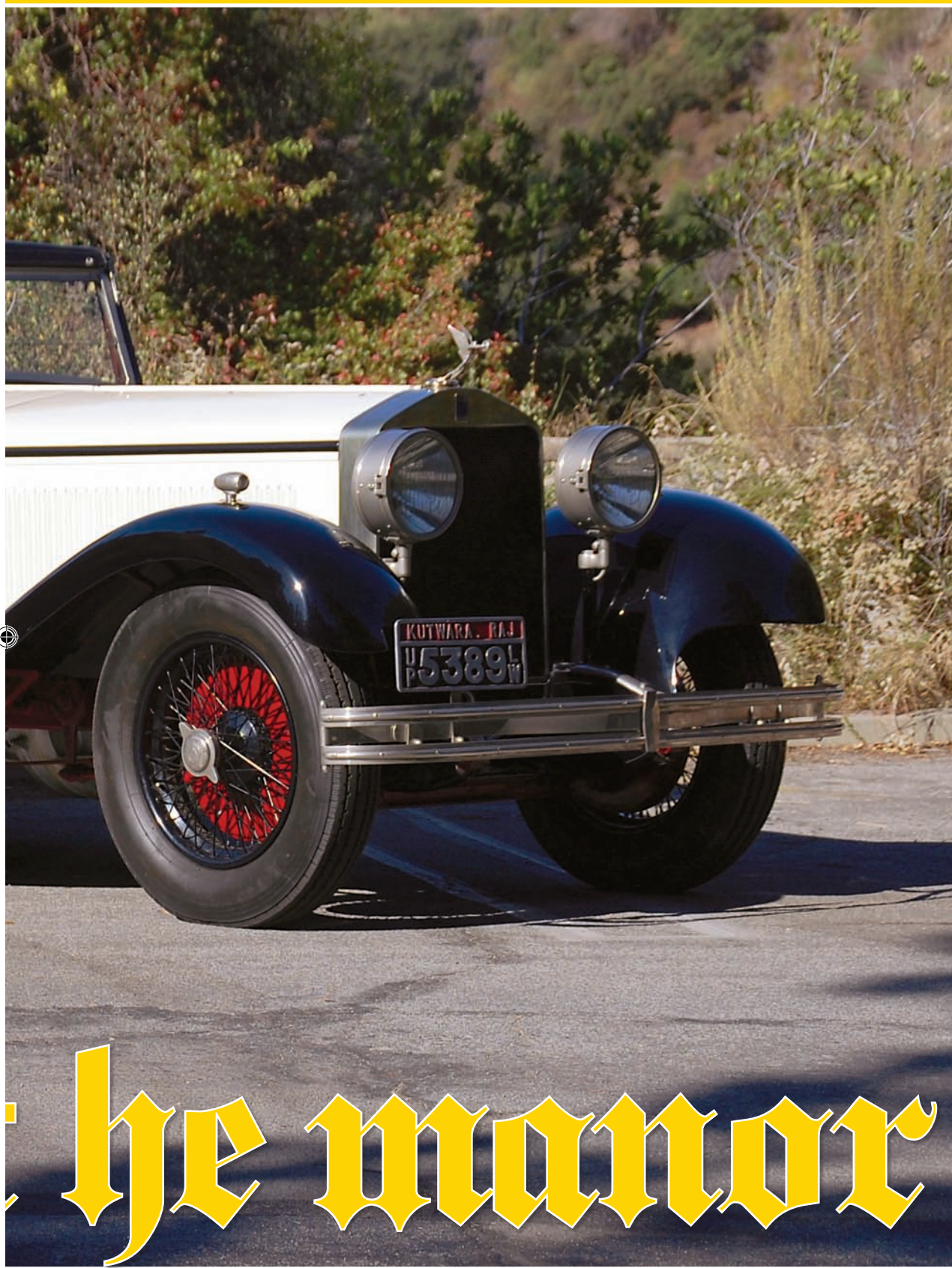
IN FOCUS



Travelling the world, a rare Italian tells a
fascinating tale of love, peace and music

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MALCOLM FOREST, COLIN WILSON

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I'VE NEVER WRITTEN A STORY before, but the editor of this magazine insists I should be the one telling this story and that no one else can quite tell it the way I can. And I guess he's right! As I have lived in many parts of the world, I have known many interesting people intimately – and have outlived many of them. I agree I do have a story to tell...

Though I was born in 1929, in those days they didn't keep exact records of births and deaths so I can't quite tell you the day I was born. I just may have been born in 1928, but I was certainly around by 1929. In those days, birth was a little complicated. We were born with a heart and a frame. The body came later. So it is quite possible that my heart and frame were born in 1928, and that my body was joined to them by 1929. Also, I was born in the city of Milan, in Northern Italy, famous for fashion and football.

Ah, my parentage, you want to know about that? Well, one was called Cesare

Isotta and the other Vincenzo Fraschini. Yes both were men, but for our species it was not unusual for male pairs to go forth and procreate some great families: Armstrong and Siddeley, Austin and Healey, Chenard and Walcker, Daimler and Benz (though in this case a woman called Mercedes kind of butted in), Graham and Paige, Lea and Francis, Panhard and Levassor, and of course the most famous of them all, Rolls and Royce. All aristocratic names with much gravitas; my family name too is a stylishly exotic double-barreled Isotta Fraschini. Try that again – it sounds good, doesn't it?

Well, to explain my antecedents -- Isotta and Fraschini got together (in 1900) to import, sell and repair cars. Soon after they started assembling Renaults, and followed that up by launching a 24bhp car by the name Isotta Fraschini. In 1905, Vincenzo Fraschini went racing with a 17.2-litre 100bhp racer. In 1912,

engineer Giustino Cattaneo designed a straight-eight engine that finally went into production in 1919.

Luxury car-buyers wanted smooth, flexible multi-cylinder engines and there was nothing that could quite match the straight-eights for smoothness, refinement and power. The heart of the Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8 was an eerily silent 5.9-litre eight with overhead valves that developed 80bhp. In 1925, the heart grew to 7370cc for the Tipo 8A and max power went up to between 110 and 120bhp. And if you young 'uns are not that impressed by the power, remember that those engines had huge torque.

So, with a big torque heart and a mighty long frame (a wheelbase of 3.68 metres!) I was born a very healthy baby. (My heart and frame had numbers, incidentally – 1156 and 1135 respectively). Soon thereafter I received my body, a magnificent Sedan de Ville style coachwork painted in two shades



of green, like the front and back of a leaf. The top was in beige, as was the side and back of the luggage cases at the rear, which were in a beige canvas-like material of very fine quality. The front seats were in dark brown leather and the rear seats were in wool, eventually replaced with green leather. My wheels were covered with beautifully formed disc covers.

My glorious coachwork was handcrafted by none other than the famous Milanese coachbuilder of royal carriages, Cesare Sala. Along with Castagna, he bodied most Isotta Fraschinis (you see, in our time no two automobiles from the more prestigious carmakers were alike – each had a specific body style, specially ordered colours, different upholstery; even if our parents were the same, no two siblings were alike). On my hood was the Spirit of the Wind, known also as Victoire, an exquisite French Lalique crystal mascot. Elegance

and style – that was me.

I was taken delivery of by a gentleman by the name of Franco Pacchetti who I understand, had bought me on behalf of another gentleman – just 19 years old, Syed Sajid Hussain, the Raja of Kotwara, was impatiently awaiting my arrival.

I was picked up in London as a lot of money changed hands – I didn't quite understand the value of things, but I must have been worth a lot. From what I gathered later, the young raja paid Rs 73,000, worth more than a Rolls-Royce or a Duesenberg, then!

He probably wanted me due to his anti-English sentiments. Whilst explaining his ancestry to a friend when travelling with me, I overheard that the raja was from a taluqdar family, taluqdars being essentially landed gentry. Their ancestry could be traced back to 200 BC, and the raja came from a bloodline that had been fairly rebellious.

I also learnt that in 1924 my new

master, the young raja, had ascended the throne when he was just 14 years old. Four years later he was sent off to the UK for higher education and after an attempt had been made on his life in 1926. In the UK he realized Cambridge did not allow students to own or drive cars on campus, so he moved to Edinburgh, where he was warmly received by a kindly poor Scottish family.

Whatever the reason, the young raja decided against a Rolls-Royce or a Bentley. He chose an Italian car designed to take on the best of Britain and France. Whilst Rolls went around claiming to be 'the Best Car in the World', we at Isotta Fraschini knew we were 'the Aristocrat of Automobiles', and so it came to pass that an Indian aristocrat with very refined taste became my master in 1929.

Raja Sajid Hussain, though, wasn't the only Indian aristocrat to own a member of my family. In time, I learnt that in 1925, the Maharaja of Patiala – who was



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a good friend of the raja – had also ordered a cousin of mine, an Isotta Fraschini, with a very special hunting body by Windovers (in the UK) who as per the maharaja's request, had lacquered the body in colours of khaki, yellow, green and blue for camouflage! The following year, the Maharaja of Baroda had got himself one of my siblings too, and in 1928 the Maharaja of Cochin purchased one. That same year the Aga Khan acquired one of my siblings, and at least two more

raja who – naturally – was excited to try me out with my many horses of power. On the first outing it must have become obvious to him that in some ways I was an easy drive, but in one way I was difficult. I was big, bony – and heavy – so to make me change directions called for a lot of effort. Those days they used to say that you could recognise an Isotta driver by the muscles on his arms!

My raja was strong, other than being tall and very handsome! And though driving me called for a lot of muscle

dab of the throttle and a jab at the brake pedal to modulate speed. Oh, yes, retarding momentum was easy with me too, because I had brakes on all four feet when most automobiles of the period had brakes on just two.

For three years we roamed the streets of Edinburgh, making an impression wherever we went. But then my raja completed his studies and it was time for him to head back to India and take on his monarchical duties once again. Bidding adieu to Scotland, I set off



were imported via Bombay.

In other corners of the world, my siblings were in the garages of the Emperor and Empress of Ethiopia, the Queen of Romania, King Faisal of Iraq and Benito Mussolini, amongst others. In Hollywood, many stars owned Isottas, including actors Rudolph Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. Magnates, dignitaries and celebrities he world over owned members of my family: even Pope Pius XI had one.

But I'd like to get back to my young

power my heart was so big that all he needed to do was to get me going in first gear, get to walking pace, and then double declutch and get into top, which was third, and from then on just floor the throttle – and I would serenely surge forward, gathering speed quickly and quietly. Before you knew what was happening I was doing about 140kph, which was a lot in those days. In fact, we would cruise all day long in third, slowing down when necessary, picking up speed when it was possible; just a

on ship, to exotic India.

In the summer of 1932 I found myself in a strange and exciting land. My new home was the beautiful Anwalhare Palace. Kotwara, the town in which the palace is located, is in the Tarai region of Uttar Pradesh – some 160km north of Lucknow – and bordering Nepal from Dudhwa National Park. The nearest railhead is Gola Gokarannath, which has one of the oldest temples of Lord Shiva (built by the rajas of Kotwara). Set amidst an undulating landscape of



ancient mounds overlooking an oxbow lake – dating back to Mahabharat times, according to legend – a road through a 500 acre forest leads to the palace. And it's on this road that my raja would take me out for flexing my – rather long – legs.

Once in a while we would go for a drive, passing by several old temples and palaces in the lush green undulating countryside, getting occasional glimpses of the swift and wide Sharda river as it flowed down from the hills of Kumaon.

partition separating the rear section from the chauffeur's cabin – would communicate with Naim via a set of buttons marked left, right, quick, slowly, turn, home and stop, which when pressed would light up the corresponding tell-tale sign in the dashboard for Naim to know what the master wanted.

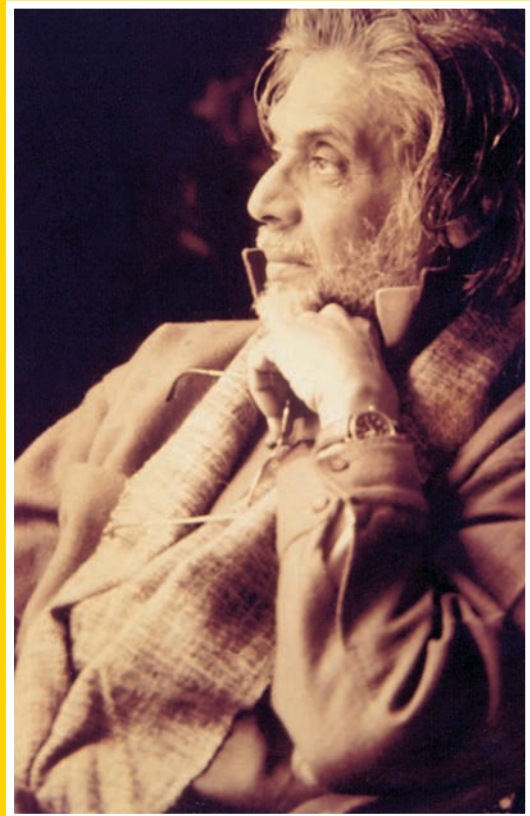
Life went peacefully and I had a relaxed time, being used sparingly for special occasions, as the raja had other cars to ferry him around. But around 1935 there was a flurry of activity, and

emperor, Sultan Mourad V. As the 33rd sultan he had a rather short session at ruling the empire – just 93 days in 1886 before being deposed on the grounds that he was mentally unsound. Mourad lived on till 1904, marrying several women and having many children, of whom Selma's mother, Princess Hadice Sultana, was the only issue of his third wife, Sahcan Kadın.

The marriage was an arranged one. And again, listening in to Selma's conversation, I suspect that her cousins,



Raja Sajid Hussain with James



Muzaffar Ali

Years later, the palace and the region would provide the picturesque locations for the raja's son, Muzaffar Ali's films such as *Umrao Jaan*, *Gaman*, *Aagaman*, *Anjuman* and *Zooni*, other than serials like *Husne Jaana*. Incidentally, I provided the inspiration for Muzaffar's film company's name, Integrated Films or IF!

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Back in India, chauffeuring duties befell a six-footer from Garhi Bhilwal, Naim. And the raja, ensconced in the rear compartment – a sliding glass

then I heard that the raja had stood for state legislative elections as an independent candidate. He went on to win comfortably, becoming a member of the legislative assembly for the state of Uttar Pradesh, a position that he kept getting elected to, till 1952.

It was in early 1937 that the raja got married to a beautiful woman from Turkey called Selma Rauf Hanim Sultana. Overhearing a conversation between the raja and her I gathered that Selma was the grand-daughter of the Ottoman

Princess Nilüfer and Dürreshevar, probably had something to do with the matchmaking, as both of them had had arranged marriages to the sons of the Nizam of Hyderabad.

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, eight-year-old Princess Selma and her mother became another victim of history, fleeing Istanbul, in 1924, for Beirut. With her father abandoning them, it became increasingly difficult for them to make two ends meet and so Selma's mother thought it best to get her



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married off, and who was better than a Muslim prince from India?

For Selma, Kotwara would have been quite a change from both the golden city of Istanbul and Beirut, acknowledged in those days as the Paris of the East, with its lavish lifestyle.

For the first few months I was jealous. My raja had less time for me. He was more interested in his new wife, who was, admittedly, beautiful, fascinating and intriguing. I was no longer the favourite, no more his beloved. I was still beautiful, but in a stately, elegant way that had most men in awe, whereas my rival was beautiful in a sensuous, softly sexy way that had most men (and some women too) desiring her. And desire, as you know, is the strongest of all temptations.

But over time I could see that things were not going all that well between the newlyweds. And then we heard the news that the princess was pregnant. As war was approaching and Kotwara didn't quite seem the best of places to have a baby, the princess was going off to

faraway Paris to do so. So, in the summer of 1939, Princess Selma left and that was the last time we saw her.

A few months later I overheard conversations that mentioned that the princess had given birth to a stillborn child. And that she had decided not to come back to India. And that it was over between the princess and the raja. The raja was devastated. Then came news that the princess herself had died.

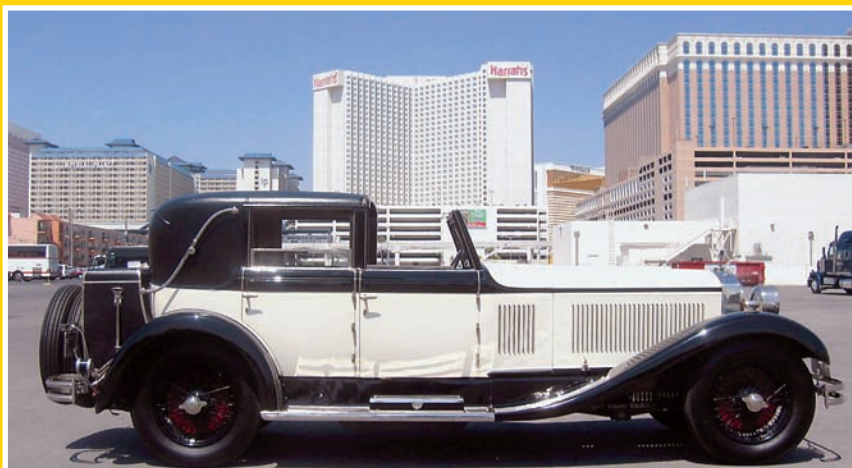
It took almost two years to convince the raja to marry again and give building a family another shot. In 1942, the raja married Rani Kaniz Hyder, the daughter of Nawab Mohammad Hasan Khan, the exiled nawab of Muradabad. And, sure enough, I was called on to be the groom's *vahan*, the royal carriage. Yes, I had picked up some words of Hindi and Urdu in the meantime...

But after that little bit of excitement it was back to the garage as the raja used other cars increasingly over the years. When Muzaffar, the raja's first son was born on October 21, 1944, he came home a few days later with me. But with

the induction of the princely states into the Union of India in 1948, the raja decided to shift base to Lucknow and so I found myself spending days doing nothing at all in the garage at Kotwara. Those were lonely times for me...

And then I heard that the raja had heard that the child from Princess Selma who was presumed dead was not dead at all, that she had survived her mother and that she had been taken care of by foster parents and that she was fine and healthy and in a convent! I also heard that the raja had tried very hard to get custody of the girl – yes it was a daughter – but had been fobbed off with a whole lot of lies, that the girl had been hidden, and that all kinds of complicated intrigues had been resorted to, to keep her away from him. Matters that were way beyond my understanding: you know, human beings are more complicated creatures than cars!

Time passed and life moved on for the raja. And I languished in a garage. Then in 1962, Kenizé, the daughter of the raja and Selma suddenly arrived in Lucknow.





And there I was back on the road, albeit briefly, a somewhat wizened old lady, sallow and rickety with the lack of care. But I managed to trundle around town. But with Kenizé going back to Paris soon after, I was back in the garage.

Finally, in 1967 it was resurrection time for me. Muzaffar Ali, the eldest of the raja's three sons, heard that The Statesman newspaper was planning on organizing a vintage car rally in Lucknow, like the ones they were holding in Delhi and Calcutta. And Muzaffar thought that an old gal like me still had enough spunk to impress people.

So he brought along some mechanics and helpers to Kotwara, and had me towed all the way to Lucknow. In Lucknow, the operation began to get me back on my feet, and I must say that they did a good job. In 25 days I was ready for action and none too worse for wear at the start of the rally. I got my long legs stretching again and lo and behold, there I was, cruising at 110kph!

By the end of the day my new friend, Muzaffar, was a happy young man: we

had won the trophy for the Best Performance and Maintenance for a vintage car made before December 31, 1930! True, I was 38 years old already – not a nubile young thing any longer – but I was still very healthy. I had travelled just 19,000km in all these years, not counting the boat ride I'd made from Scotland to India. And though many photos of mine were taken, one really nice one was by a 12-year-old enthusiast called Debashish Chakravarti.

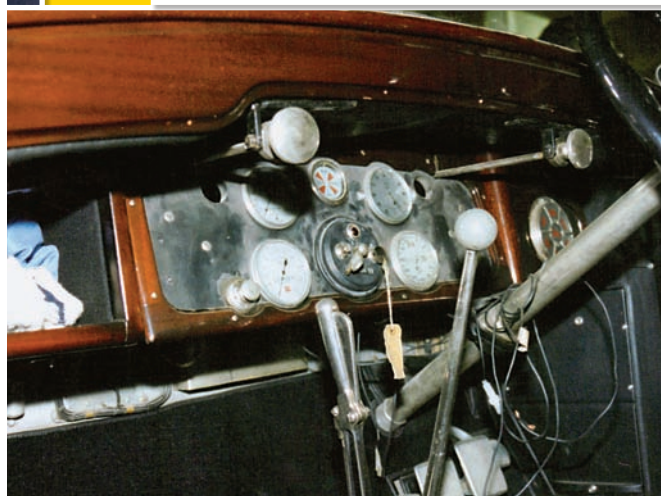
Now it was Muzaffar who was my guardian. The raja was happy to see me back on the road but was more engrossed in his social and civic activities: he was at that point the State Welfare Commissioner of UP and on February 4, 1968 he presided over an All India Shia Political Conference in Lucknow. Muzaffar then took me to Delhi in March 1970 to participate in The Statesman rally there. After that I was sent off to Calcutta where I spent the next two years of my life in the garage of Tom Roy, another scion of a royal family, that of Santosh, a princely state that is now in

Bangladesh. There I had some very interesting and classy garagemates and I must say that that was the first time I realized that there were other elegant ladies from yesteryear just like me out there in the wide world.

In 1972, Muzaffar had to let me go. And I don't blame him: I was getting on in age, a little cranky, a little cantankerous, and like many middle-aged ladies of standing, somewhat high maintenance. And Muzaffar had to get on with his life – he couldn't quite mollycoddle me forever, could he? Six years later his first film *Gaman* would be out, establishing him as one of India's finest moviemakers.

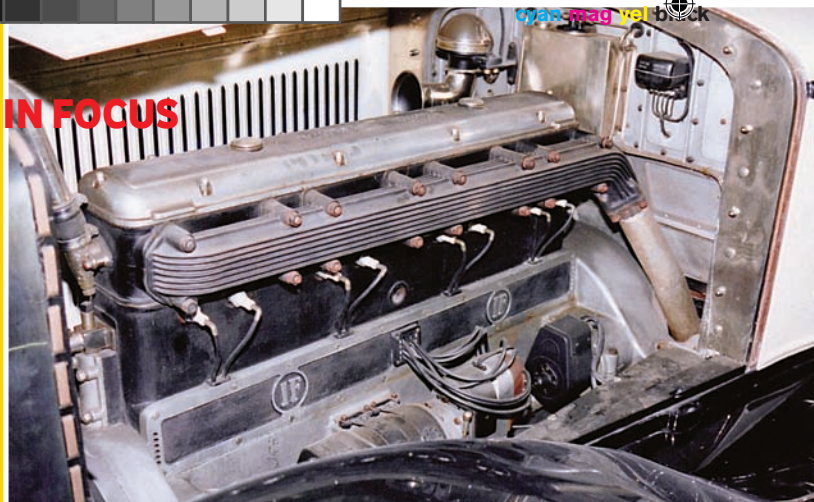
A Brit called Ian McRoberts became my new guardian. I was back on a ship, heading back to good ole Blighty four decades after I had left its shores.

Soon after I arrived I found myself settled into a garage in Hellingly, East Sussex, with quite a few other upper crust automobiles. My new guardian was a certain Peter Grant. Peter was very different to the men – and women – I'd



Colin Wilson and Al McEwan

IN FOCUS



known till then. For the first 45 years of my life I had known mainly rajas, ranis, rajkumars and princesses, all with family genealogies that spanned centuries. Peter, on the other hand, was a self-made man. Starting off as a sheet metal worker when he was only 13, he became a delivery boy, stagehand, doorman and bouncer, then graduated to minor acting roles. Peter had done it all, before he became the founder manager of a rock act called Led Zeppelin.

Okay, now I have you sitting up, right? Yes, Peter was 'The Man who Led Zeppelin', as the title of a biography on him by Chris Welch says, the man who was really behind the huge success of one of the greatest rock bands of the 1970s. A lumbering giant of a man – he was six-feet-four-inches tall, and almost as wide – Peter was aggressive, foul-mouthed, heavy-handed and intimidating, and in almost every way so very different from the men and women I had known before. But he did have a heart of gold. And his sense of loyalty and commitment to his people was way beyond reproach. He took very good care of me and entrusted me to Nigel Arnold-Foster at Basset Dawn Engineering, who mechanically restored me

during 1974-77. Around that time my body was removed and stored until 1988, when it was restored and repainted to ivory and black, the colours that I'm in even today.

Till 1983 we rarely saw Peter as he was away touring with the band but with the official break-up of Led Zeppelin in 1980 and the folding up of his music label Swan Song by 1983, Peter kind of retired, and from then on he was mostly at home. Though he had become a bit of a recluse – what with the problems of his marital break-up, diabetes, alcohol and drugs – Peter did move around occasionally, and when he did, he would take one of us for the ride. And though I had quite a few illustrious garagemates – a Porsche, a Jaguar MKII and two very elegant straight-eight Pierce-Arrows, amongst others – I was still the queen of the manor.

In the meantime, I had both good news and bad news. In 1987, Kenizé, the daughter of Raja Sajid Hussian, who if you recall I had met briefly in 1962, published a book in French, 'De la part de la princesse morte' (or 'Regards from the Dead Princess') under the nom de plume of Kenizé Mourad, where I figured on many occasions as she recounted her

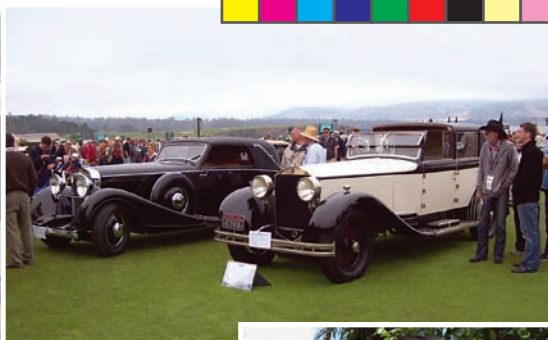
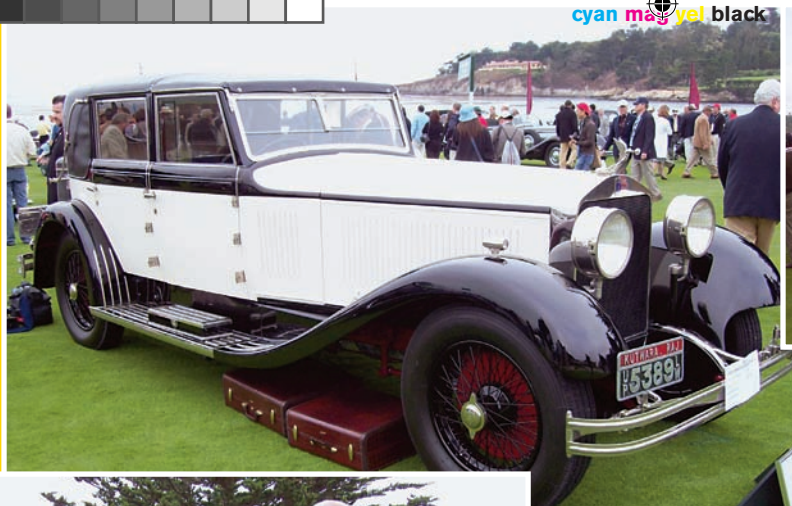
mother's story: Princess Selma's life in Istanbul, then Beirut, her marriage to Raja Sajid Hussain, her life in Kotwara and Lucknow, and then her return to Paris, her daughter Kenizé's birth, Selma's affair with an American and then her untimely death in 1941, when she was not even 27 years old. Described as an Oriental 'Gone with The Wind', it's a must read, I was told.

The bad news was that of the death of Raja Sajid Hussain on February 3, 1990.

More was to follow. On November 21, 1995, Peter Grant suffered a fatal heart attack. He was just 60 years old. I felt orphaned twice over.

On February 16, 1996, I had a visitor – an Isotta Fraschini expert, Colin Wilson, who came along with the person who had been taking care of me, John Gould, and an American expert, Al McEwan, to take some photographs. And then, on December 2, 1996, I, along with most of my garagemates, were auctioned off by Brooks (now Bonhams).

Soon, I was on a ship again. But this time to a new country, to another continent altogether, to the US of A; and not just some small obscure town, but to glamville itself, Las Vegas! There I was lodged at the Imperial Palace. No, not in



Malcolm Forest

one of the 2,640 rooms of the hotel, but at the Auto Collection, which, you may know, is a famous automobile museum, though in reality it is essentially the world's biggest classic car showroom with hundreds of cars on display, and even more on sale.

Despite the fact that we had hundreds of visitors every day, it was a little sad. I was just one of hundreds of magnificent dames, many with double-barrelled aristocratic-sounding names like mine: Rolls-Royce, Hispano Suiza, Mercedes-Benz, Pierce-Arrow, Talbot Lago. Others were single-barrelled, but big bore nonetheless: Duesenberg, Bugatti, Auburn, Cadillac, Ferrari, Delahaye. I was just one of many. I felt neglected, like I was in an orphanage, despite finding other members of my family, including one that was famous for having acted in the Hollywood film 'Sunset Boulevard'.

In 2008 I was selected to travel to Pebble Beach to participate at the world famous Concours d'Elegance event. There I realized that I had changed hands; a new guardian had been found for me. Was he or they going to be as special as my earlier guardians? Furthermore, I was destined to live in a classic vehicles stable with climate

control system in colourful Colorado. I was worried.

But when I met Malcolm Forest, a curator of the classic cars entity that would care for me, I knew I was in good hands. Malcolm, who is half Brazilian and half American, is an ingenious, eclectic and versatile personality who is right at the centre of the Brazilian cultural scene and has been a producer, presenter, speaker, mediator, historian, theatre director, actor, narrator, writer, composer, singer and interpreter...

A celebrity in his own right, Malcolm has something of the crusading spirit of Raja Sajid Hussain, the artistic talent of film maker Muzaffar Ali and the personality and creativity of Led Zeppelin's Peter Grant. Plus something else that reflects his Brazilian sensitivities and causes. And he's an authority on my Isotta Fraschini family, taking care of another sibling too. Though the relationship is new, I feel it's going to be another long, gratifying one.

And I think it's going to be an exciting one too. In November I had visitors at my temporary home at Tired Iron Works in Los Angeles, and one of them was an Indian called Sunil Bajaj. He took some photos of me, sent them off to his

friend, the editor of this magazine, who then got in touch with both Malcolm and Muzaffar, and proceeded to put them in touch with each other. Others from my hoary past were contacted too and each had a tale to tell: Kenizé Mourad about her father's passion for me, Debashish Chakravarti about my elegance, Tom Roy about my magnificence and Colin Wilson about his correspondence with the late Peter Grant.

But I suspect there may still be a bigger tale to tell in the future as Malcolm and Muzaffar and other actors in my story get together one day. And yes, I would love to travel once again. Wouldn't it be wonderful to go and see Brazil? Wouldn't it be great to revisit Scotland and England again? And wouldn't it be absolutely fantastic to make a nostalgic trip to India, to Kotwara and the days of the future passed? PS: Contact Malcolm Forest, my curator, at isottacars@gmail.com. I would really love to hear from you! If you have any photos of me, or know of spare parts I can use – as you probably noticed, I am over 80 – that's even more of a reason for you to write me. And by all means, come and visit me and some of my family at www.isottafraschini.com.br 