

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Better than Sex

After being cuckolded by Richard Burton, the Hollywood star, James Hunt (1947-1993), world champion of Formula One, declared, perhaps understandably, racing was “Better than sex.” He wasn’t the only one to think so. Around the same time, Gary Gabelich (1940-1984), Land Speed Record holder, claimed that rocketing across Bonneville at 650-plus mph was superior to sex. And decades earlier, in the 1920s and 1930s racing’s wildest femme, Mademoiselle Helle Nice (1900-1984), known as the “Bugatti Queen”, who raced baby blue Bugattis and Italian red Alfa Romeos on the “goldfish bowls’ of Montlhery and Brooklands; and at Langhorne and Casablanca; and who held the world speed record of 123 mph; maintained that the race track certainly beat the bedroom.



And well she knew because she seduced counts, barons, Legion d’ Honors holders, even commonplace garage mechanics, and dirt track race drivers. It didn’t matter who they were, so long as they had spark. “Monsieur five minutes,” she sneered at an one of her exhausted young lovers. The Bugatti family, her backers, warned she’d never become a great driver until she gave up men, but this she wouldn’t do. What Helle most liked to do was have several love affairs cooking at once.

A quartet of wild women enlivened the Paris of the 1920s, and they were Mata Hari, German spy shot dead by a French firing squad; Martha Hanau, slick bilker who crooked her fellow Parisians out of 155 million of their francs; Isadora Duncan, American dancer who also

believed in taking multiple lovers, and who was strangled, not in a Bugatti, as is frequently reported, but an Amilcar; and Helle.

Helle's passions, outside of racing and men, were modeling, cabaret dancing, climbing up the towering walls of Mt. Blanc, bobsledding, downhill skiing, walking the high wire, and taking off all her clothing to show off her perfect body, which was her true calling. Modesty was unknown to Helle.

She sold nude picture postcards of herself up and down the Champs-Elysees and once walked naked across a tall tightrope with a white dove perched on her shoulder.



Almost chronically crisis-prone, Helle got into racing literally by accident. While skiing high in the French Alps, an avalanche crashed down and buried her, badly tearing the cartilage of one of her knees. Her occupation had been dancer but she was 30 years old – an antique age for any dancer, let alone one hobbled by a game knee. So she searched around for something else to do and discovered racing.

The Bugatti family, who decorated the noses of their Grand Prix cars with silver elephants, gave her a supercharged Model 35C, rakish with wire wheels, and good for 130 mph. After quickly mastering the art of heel 'n' toeing, Helle won her first all-femme race, defeating the rich American Lucy O'Reilly Shell, the first woman to establish her own Grand Prix team.

Racing made Helle lots of money - it turned her into the Bugatti Queen - she had jewelry, furs, tooled around in a big Hispano-Suiza touring car and etcetera. By the 1930s, word of her fame and notoriety had reached America, where huckster Ralph Hankinson, the fly-by-night inventor of an outrage, "auto polo" , invited her to the dirt track races he promoted up and down the east coast.

Helle accepted the invitation; and, believing she deserved only the very best, and that even the very best wasn't good enough for her, she set off for New York sailing first class aboard the Ile de-France. Arriving in New York, she scorned the \$4-a-night-room reserved for her and checked into the city's most expensive hostelry, the Savoy Plaza, racking up a horrifying bill that make Hankinson scream in outrage as he was picking up the bill! And although Helle won none of Hankinson's races at Langhorne she almost certainly had brief, furious flings with two of his best drivers, Billy Winn and Herman Schurch, both later killed.

In 1936 she took her Alfa to South America and the Grand Prix of Brazil where she got into a brutal crackup not of her own making. Six spectators died, she was in a coma for three days, and afterward, suffering from frequent amnesia; she had no memory of what she and the Alfa had done. This was her last race,

Commoção cerebral
PROVENIENTE DO CHOQUE!
 O ESTADO DE SAUDE DA VOLANTE
 FRANCESA MELHORA, AS PRIMEI-
 RAS HORAS DE HOJE

Correio de S. Paulo

13 de Julho de 1936

HELLE NICE, FERIDA!
 FLAGRANTE PHOTOGRAPHO DA VOLANTE FRANCESA, NO LOCAL EM QUE CAIU, APÓS SER COUSPIDA DO CARRO



Photo inédita, inédita de "Correio de S. Paulo"

The ending of Helle was sad. She had been a queen, but she died a penniless pauper. Her choice of lovers, never great, at last caught up to her, when she let one of them invest all her savings - three million francs - in a purported gold mine in the Canary Islands. It was a swindle. She lost her jewelry, her furs, big Hispano-Suiza touring car and etcetera. Not only did her savings disappear but so did the lover. Poverty struck, and existing in a jungle of cobwebby attics and dank basements, she was subsisting on an addiction to Gauloise smokes (even though she was under commission to Lucky Strike) and pain pills from the Rio

crash. Helle seldom ventured outdoors; and when she did she always packed a loaded revolver, hoping she'd come upon her double-crossing lover and demand the reckoning.

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