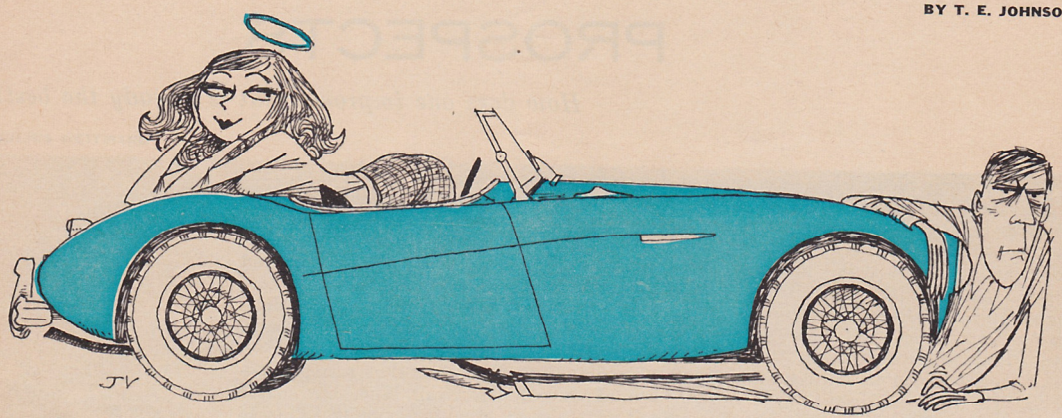
THE HEALEY HALO

Has a girl in a filmy nightie ever told you *that you look like Fangio?*

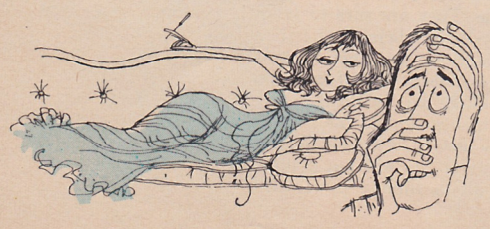
BY T. E. JOHNSON



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAY VANCE

MY WIFE is a most extraordinary woman. During the 12 years of wedded blitz we have shared, she has never given me an unhappy moment, or I might add, a moment's peace. She is swift at slipper fetching, wields a superb hand in the kitchen, and balances our precarious budget with a pay check that is generally the least, to say the most. This knack for artistic housewifery and economy makes her idiosyncrasies easier to bear. Though charming and witty, she is not the rosy wonder a bachelor conjures up in his pre-marriage visions. She is as wholesome as a martini, as simple as a labyrinth, and as reserved as a flash flood. It is actually a minor wonder that we are allowed to remain resident in our quiet suburban neighborhood. Take the time she studied East Indian culture, complete with the sari and caste mark bit; she wouldn't let anyone in the house without his first removing his shoes. Our neighbors went along with it, but the plumber declined and offered to bust me in the mouth for good measure. Volumes unlimited could be filled with her frantic foibles, but I think the most vivid and terrifying to me would be Volume H — H for Healey.

Chapter one began last year, on a perfectly ordinary Saturday morning. There I was, drinking beer and working on the patio roof, when she came leaping across the dichondra, shouting some gibberish about a used-Austin-Healey-roadster-yellow-black-top-for-sale. Since I had been drinking more and working less, I took her ravings with a grain of salt. I damned near choked on it, for I soon got the full repertoire of the female mind's improbable gymnastics. To my horror, she had become infected with a contagious madness and was in the last stages.



I have often tried to explain to her the folly of living beyond one's means and have gotten results, mostly bad. But, having been able to talk her out of a mink coat and a do-it-yourself chateau, I thought quashing this Austin-Healey pipe dream would be a cinch. Explaining to my wife that a tiny yellow car, *used*, is worth some $2100 (I don't make that much quarterly) would challenge even the most glib of lads.

Still, I tried. At our house we have a most democratic system of government: we candidly discuss each matter before I put my foot down and she stands adamant (on it). Of course, when I told her she couldn't have the car the usual bloody revolt ensued, and I spent the remainder of the day and evening tinkering unhappily, but unbowed, in the garage. My determination grew wobbly along with my stomach when I realized it was midnight and I had missed out on my dinner, espresso, and other domestic privileges known to man. I weakened and cautiously returned to Little America.

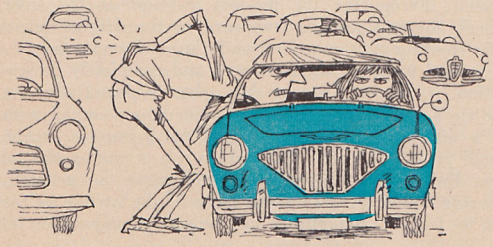
Finding her propped up on the couch with pillows, clad in a pale green nightie, I assumed she was willing to establish rapport. She was, and, drunk with victory, I dropped my guard and allowed her to get through to me with that look that turns my knees to SAE 5-W. She said huskily, "Don't you think that Healey would look great painted a deep blue-green, and has anyone ever told you that you look just like Fangio?"

Instead of belting her one as I should have, I shouted wildly that she couldn't have the car even if we sold the children into slavery, and who the hell was Fangio? With that, she cast me the condescending look of attendant to inmate, explained who the hell Fangio was, and stalked ceremoniously from the room (locking the door behind her). I can assure you that in the business world I am a veritable tiger, but in my wife's hands I am unashamedly putty.

As you have surmised, I did relent, but not without a condition to the surrender. I promised her on my honor as

a Scout that I would finance the balance on the car if she could make and save $500 toward the price. She agreed and peace was restored, but my rash promise brought me more upsets than the aforementioned cold war. Now, I am a man used to a house full of pleasent hysteria, but the metamorphosis of my wife was so marked that my former attitude of *c'est la vie* crumbled like that unfortunate house of cards. I discovered a frightening new determination in her. She modeled clothes, washed cars, wrote for the local paper, slung hash, and squeezed her every ounce of earning power. She mentioned one night that she had enough jobs to keep her busy until next Sebring. A little research revealed that this was a substitute for "next spring," a term she had used before she became an enthusiast's enthusiast.

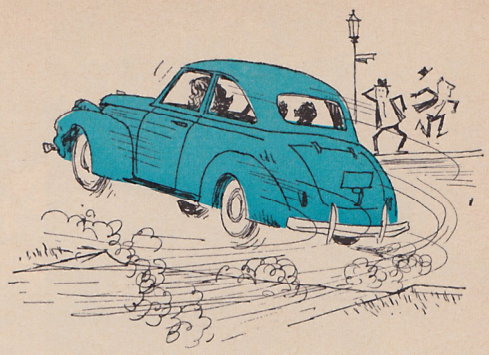
During her employment period she devoted most of her spare time to the study of Carship, and I soon detected a new language being spoken around the house. She kept me in a running conversation on the mechanical operation of automobiles, and to a man whose greatest automotive achievement has been keeping a '51 Ford pickup running, some of her questions were utterly bewildering. Mealtime was worse, as I was trapped. I had to eat, so I had to listen. If I wasn't being interrogated about the internal-combustion engine, I got a steady diet of Ferrari, Maserati, Osca and little-known information about other vicious-looking racing-type cars. Also, she took to wearing British walking shorts, and though she has a flawless rump, her knees are quite the knobbiest. Sandwiched between tweed shorts and long wool socks, they once caused me to holler "Hail Britannia" at her. I got a boxed ear for my trouble.



Months passed, and my wife guarded her pennies like a publican. She finally reached her goal, and we began the most fatiguing period of my life. We rubbered around foreign car agencies till I had to see a chiropractor, and two nights a week, without fail, we drove out to a little dive on Beverly Boulevard for beer and sports car movies.

I must admit that I had a liberal education in the field by then and had almost decided to stop fighting and join the closely knit coterie of small car owners.

However, a couple of incidents nearly changed my mind and made me something of a leper with my male neighbors. There was that black Monday when the Ivy League engineer lads were waiting for their ride in front of our house; I had already left for work. My wife appeared in the doorway, waved gaily, and put our sons in the car. She backed her ancient two-door out of the garage, turned it around and reversed into the drive, shutting off the motor (I mean engine). She got out and stood quietly next to the car for a moment, then, jiggety-jig, jumped into it, fired it up and roared out of the driveway! Later I was to learn that this was "her best Le Mans–type start yet"! But the story was first revealed to me by Jack Lieberman, B.E., as



he handed me a bill from his tailor. He had panicked and jumped the fence, his coat meeting with disaster on the business end of the pickets. I apologized, of course, privately wondering where the rest of those Le Mans–type starts had occurred that this was the best of. (I really did not wish to know.)

The second incident, though not so dangerous, did manage to make me a leper second class. I looked out the window one morning and spied my wife and Jack engaged in heated and animated conversation. He was livid as my wife turned on her trim heel and strode back to the house, sporting a look of triumph. Though a Lieberman by birth, Jack is the Jones of the neighborhood whom all and sundry seem to want to keep up with. She had just told him in plain words what she as a small car enthusiast thought of his new Buick, beginning with bloated bolsters and ending with the fact that he had no business driving a bus without a chauffeur's license. It did nothing for the already poor Ted-Jack relationship.

Yuletide came and none too soon, with good humor and forgiveness in its wake. Jack came over one morning, bearing a bottle and an ear-to-ear smile. He inquired of my wife whether she had got her skate yet. She bristled, but replied politely that she hadn't found the right one. Chuckling, he bade us step to the window, and there in his circular drive we spied the most dramatic Mercedes 300-SL you ever saw. Herb asked the little woman in Machiavellian tones if she would like to race; she declined, but smiled as only the makers of converts can.

The day before Christmas she found the right car, practically the twin of the little yellow germ that started this whole thing. It needed a little work, but with my wife's help I got it in good condition in no time at all. My father, who is in the painting business, gave it many coats of black lacquer (she decided that blue-green was too hokey). With the addition of a new top and white leather upholstery, the wondrous Healey was nearly restored. My wife was in heaven. Her birthday falls right after Christmas, and her doting parents presented her with four new tires and a set of wire wheels. She was in heaven again, and this look of rapture dances in her eyes whenever she drives her little black gem.

I hate to admit it, but I think having the Healey is the best thing in the world for her. She has calmed down, and is no longer *completely* unpredictable. On its account she has learned some very important lessons. She says, "Women would do well to learn a little more about their all-purpose lorries (get that) and limousines than where the gas goes in," and she does not hesitate to air her views publicly, to my chagrin.

She even found out that a boys' club in town would have to disband for lack of a sponsor. She is now chief cook, chaperon, timekeeper, and all-around defender of the Sir Guys car club. Proud of her? You bet I am, she wears that Healey like a halo, and on her it looks good!