

Of Smith & Citroens

BY JACK SMITH

Weekend Affair

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HOWARD SHOEMAKER

"IT IS THE CADILLAC of France," the Citroen mechanic told me. "You will be very 'appy."

"I hope I'm not too happy," I said. "I'm only taking it out for the weekend. I wouldn't want to fall in love."

It was a new pearl-white DS-21 with upholstery the color of a good red Bordeaux.

"Please to get in," said the Citroen man. "I show you how she work."

We got in. In a moment the whole car rose like a cake. It was adjusting to our *avoirdufois*, regaining its aplomb, the man explained.

We spun around the block. He briefed me on all the pips, levers, switches, gauges, pedals and cranks, and the knob by which one can raise or lower the chassis—even at 60 miles an hour.

"And the brake, monsieur," he said. "She is on the floor, eh? This little button. Like a *champignon*. How you say—a mushroom, yes?"

"Oui," I said. "The brake is a mushroom."

"Don't worry," he said. He gave the glove compartment a pat. "In here is the little book. You read French, yes?"

"No," I confessed. "But my wife reads French. Yes."

I drove the Citroen home. I felt like a schoolboy on his first assignation. My performance was not flawless. The DS-21 is not a vulgar wench from Detroit, insensitive to loutishness and stupidity. She must be courted, not forced.

I shifted like a bear. I couldn't find the brake. I kept waving my foot around in the air above it.

"Mushroom," I had to remind myself. "A little mushroom on the floor. Yes?"

I parked in the driveway. My wife came out and walked around the Citroen.

"It's gorgeous," she sighed. "It's so—French!"

"You are a Francophile," I told her.

Gribble popped out of his house across the street.

"What've you got there, Jack? A new car already?"

"It's a Citroen," I said. "I'm just trying it out."

He eyed the car skeptically. Gribble is a bigot about cars. He's afraid of anything foreign, especially French.

"You know what it looks like?" he said. "A clam."

"Well, it ain't no clam," I told him. "It's one of the sweetest cars ever made. You're a Francophobe, Gribble."

We left early the next day to give the Citroen a road test. I wore the red beret I had brought home from Paris.

"After all," I pointed out, "I can't very well wear it in the Dodge."

We headed out the freeway to Malibu. I was still having some trouble with the stick. We changed speeds like a bad horse.

"I'm doing something wrong," I admitted. "Get the book out of the glove compartment."

She got the book out and thumbed through it.

"Here it is," she said. "*Changement de vitesses*. Changing speeds. It says *manoeuvrez sans brutalité le levier*."

"What's that mean?"

"It means maneuver without brutality the lever."

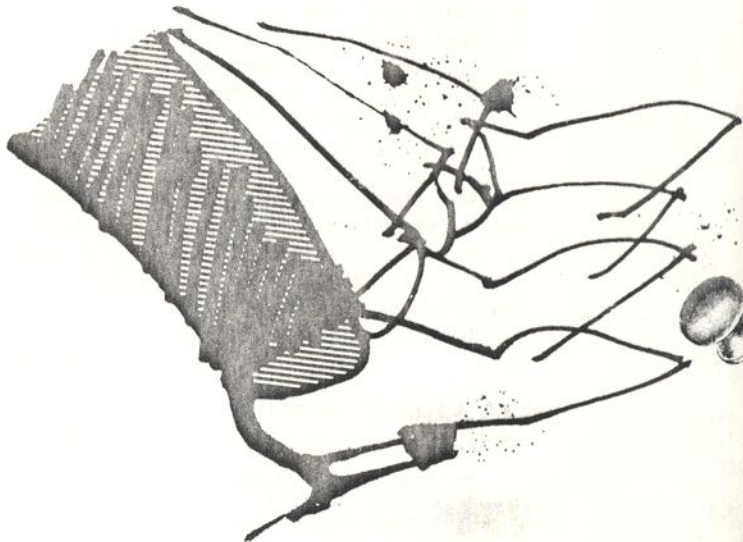
I tried maneuvering without brutality the lever. Soon I had the hang of it.

We turned up the coast highway and sailed past Pacific Palisades and along the Malibu shore.

"It's lovely," she murmured. "Like a cloud."

"Keep that book open," I advised. "I haven't mastered it yet."

She began thumbing through the book. "This is cute," she chortled. "You know what the brake is? *Un gros bouton*



n forme de champignon. A large button in the form of—" "Yes, I know," I said. A mushroom."

I asked her to find out how to raise the chassis while traveling 60 mph. She studied the index. "This must be it. *Reglage de la hauteur au-dessus du sol*. Regulation of the height above the soil." She read the instructions, translating for me.

I raised the lever to the highest notch. Slowly the Citroen ascended. We passed a man in a blue Chevrolet. He gave us a glance of casual interest. Suddenly his eyes widened; his mouth fell open.

"He thinks we're taking off," I said.

I lowered the lever. We sank back to normal.

"There's a stop ahead!" my wife warned.

I was waving my foot around, looking for the brake.

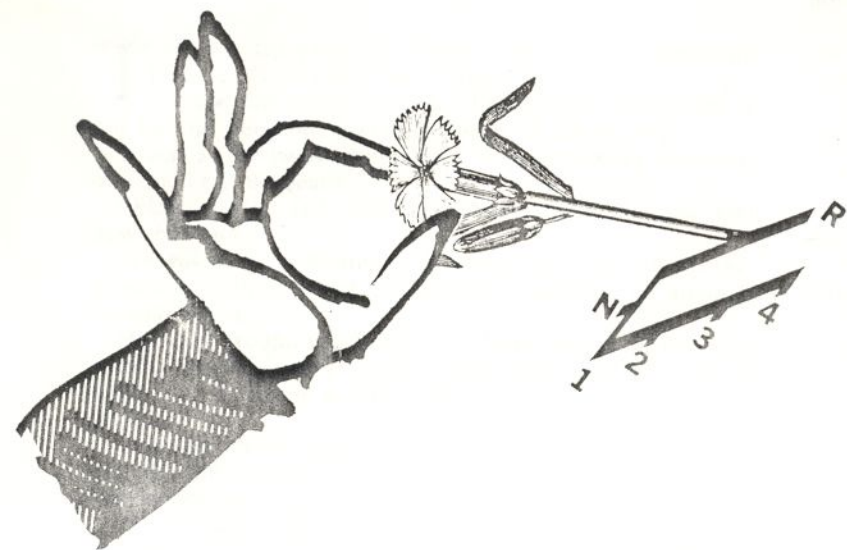
"*Le champignon!*" she shouted. "The mushroom!"

My foot found the button. We slowed like a ball on a rubber string. I realized I ought to shift down. I manhandled the stick. We lurched into third.

"*Manoeuvrez sans brutalité le levier,*" she reminded me.

At the stop light the man in the blue Chevrolet pulled up beside us. He stuck his head out and regarded the Citroen suspiciously.

"Watch this," I whispered. I raised the lever for *reglage de la hauteur*. The Citroen began to rise. The man's face went stark.



"Am I crazy?" he shouted. "Or are you going up?"

"It's not us," I shouted back. "It must be you. You're going down!"

The light changed. I touched the throttle and brutalized the stick. We shot away.

We took Mulholland Highway over the mountains. I wanted to try the Citroen on curves and bumps. I took the curves hard and steered for the rough spots. It was like a cloud.

"Notice anything?" I cried.

"Yes! You're driving like a maniac!"

By the time we hit the Ventura Freeway and headed home I was the Citroen's master. We floated along like two angels on wine-red clouds.

"Gorgeous," my wife said. "Absolutely dreamy."

I felt happy as a bird. I found myself humming. It was a tantalizing tune, but couldn't quite place it.

"What is this?" I asked, humming it again.

"*Mademoiselle de Paris,*" she said. "It's French."

"Good Lord!" I thought. "I've been brainwashed!"

"Well, how do you like the Citroen?" the mechanic asked when I took it back.

"Beautiful," I admitted. "But it's a little different from my Dodge—handling, at is."

"Oui," he said. "*Vive la difference!*"

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