



Few men loved life as did Alfonso Cabeza de Vaca y Leighton and few were more often accused of wanting to leave it. The dean of American motoring writers tells the real story of the man known as

PORTAGO

By **KEN W. PURDY**

DON ALFONSO Cabeza de Vaca y Leighton, Carvajal y Are, Conde de la Mejorada, Marquis de Portago, was 28 when he died at Guidizzollo, a few miles from Brescia and the end of the Mille Miglia, on the 12th of last May. Portago had been a flier, a jai-alai player, a poloist, a steeplechase rider (the world's leading amateur in 1951 and 1952), an Olympic bobsledder and record-holder, a remarkable swimmer and he was at his death one of the dozen best racing drivers in the world. He had never sat in a racing car until 1954 but he believed he would be champion of the world before 1960 and most of the time he ran against every week thought that he very well might be—if he lived.

Certainly Portago was uniquely gifted. An athlete all his life, he was not a big man, not heavily muscled, but he had unusual strength, great endurance, abnormal eyesight, a quickness of reaction that was legendary among his friends. He was highly intelligent, courteous, and very much aware of the world around him.

Gregor Grant, editor of the British weekly *AUTOSPORT*, said just before the Mille Miglia, "A man like Portago appears only once in a generation, and it would probably be more accurate to say only once in a life-time. The fellow does *everything* fabulously well. Never mind the driving, the steeple-chasing, the bobsledding, the athletic side of things, never mind the being fluent in four languages. There are so many other aspects to the man: for example, I think he could be the best bridge player in the world if he cared to try, he could certainly be a great soldier, and I suspect he could be a fine writer."

Portago's death, I suppose, proved out again the two well-worn British aphorisms: "Motor-racing is a sport at which you get better and better until you get killed" and the other, less optimistic one, "There are two kinds of racing drivers: those who get killed before they get good, and those who get killed afterward." But whether they will die at the wheel sooner or later or not at all, most men have to serve years of apprentice time before they make the big league: the racing team of one of the major factories. They drive sports cars, stock and not-so-stock, in rallies and dreary airport events; they cadge rides in scruffy hand-me-down racing cars, hoping to attract a wealthy sponsor's eye. When—and if—they are invited to Italy or Germany or France or England to sign a racing contract, they have behind them thousands

of miles of competition driven in dozens of makes of cars. This is standard, this is usual, and, with most of the other rules, Portago broke it. Driving relief in his first race, the 1,000 kilometers for sports cars at Buenos Aires in 1954, he did three laps so badly that he dropped the car from second place to fifth—because he had never learned how to shift gears! To the day he died, he had driven few makes of competition automobiles: Maserati, Osca, Ferrari. He never drove the usual sports cars, MG's, Jaguars, and so on. For personal use, before he began to compete, he usually drove American cars: Fords, something else that may have been a DeSoto, he wasn't sure. Explaining this, the last time I talked with him, he said, "Automobiles bore me, I know next to nothing about them, and I care less."

"I have no sentimental attachment for a car," he said. "I can hardly tell one from another. Sometimes I make a little scratch on a car, in an inconspicuous place, so I can recognize it the next time I'm in it, so I can remember its defects. I'm not interested in cars. To me they're a means of transportation from Point A to Point B, that, or a machine for racing."

"When I have a racing car that I'm going to drive, I walk up to it and I look at it and I think, 'Now, is this son-of-a-bitch going to hold together for the next 500 kilometers?' That's the only interest I have in it. And as soon as the race is over—I couldn't care less what happens to it."

"I think some drivers are not only indifferent to their cars, but hostile to them. They look at the car before a race and they think, 'Now, what is this thing going to do to me today, how is it going to let me down, or make me lose the race—or perhaps even kill me?'"

Portago's forthright disclaimer of interest in the machines on which his career was based was typical. To the outermost limits which custom and law allowed, the 12th Marquis de Portago said precisely what he pleased and did exactly what he liked. When he saw a girl friend in the crowd lining the streets at the Rome check-point in his last race, he stood on the brakes, locked everything up, waited for her, kissed her and held her in his arms until an official furiously waved him on. The girl, of course, was Linda Christian and Portago was probably the only man in the race who would have allowed himself such a gesture. He would have done it at the risk of his life. Portago was an avowed romantic, and he had re-

marked that in another age he would have been a Crusader, or a knight-errant. He often dressed in black, his hair was black and curly, usually long over his neck and ears, clinging to his head like a skull-cap, he moved quickly and rarely smiled, he sometimes looked like a juvenile delinquent or a hired killer, but more often like what he was, a Spanish grandee. The remark that he had been born three or four centuries too late was a cliché among his friends.

"Every time I look at Fon," one of them said, "I see him in a long black cape, a sword sticking out of it, a floppy black hat on his head, riding like a fiend across some castle draw-bridge."

When he began to drive Portago was not the best-loved figure on the international circuit—nor was he when he died, if it comes to that. Lacking the technical skill to balance his bitterly competitive instinct, he was dangerous in his first races, and to most people he seemed arrogant and supercilious. He was reputed to be enormously wealthy, he was a great lady-killer, and if he was not pugnacious still he was quick to fight. Most of the other drivers preferred to leave him alone. Nobody expected him to be around for very long in any case. Many thought he was just another aristocrat dilettante who would quickly lose interest in racing cars, but the few who knew his lineage were not so sure. His mother, an Englishwoman who brought a great fortune to his father, is a firm-minded woman, and a determined lust for adventure, plus an inclination for government, runs through the Portago line. Spanish history is studded with the name. In the 16th century one of Portago's forebears, Cabeza de Vaca, was shipwrecked on the Florida coast. He *walked* to Mexico City, recruiting an army as he went. Another conquered the Canary Islands, another was a leader in the fight to drive the Moors out of Spain. Portago's grandfather was governor of Madrid, his father was Spain's best golfer, polo-player, yachtsman; he was a fabulous gambler, said to have once won \$2,000,000 at Monte Carlo, a soldier and a movie actor. He died of a heart attack on the polo field, playing against his doctor's orders. The last king of Spain, Alfonso XIII, was Portago's godfather and namesake.

Naturally enough, in the light of his background and his own propensity for high-risk sports, Portago was constantly accused of fearlessness, of clinging to a death-wish, and what-not. We talked at



Courtesy author from Portago

Even in his youth, Fon had the yen for competition. Here, after taking first prize in the 1935 horseshow at Biarritz.

"Not a smile, but a grimace of fear." This was Portago's own comment. First time down the St. Moritz run, he chopped fifteen seconds off the time of the Swiss champion.

Courtesy author from Portago



D. M. Bartley



Portago at Sebring in the 3.8 Ferrari, the car that "is against me." He drove ten hours out of the twelve, due to sudden illness of Luigi Musso. Musso fell ill again just before Mille Miglia and Portago had to take over the car.

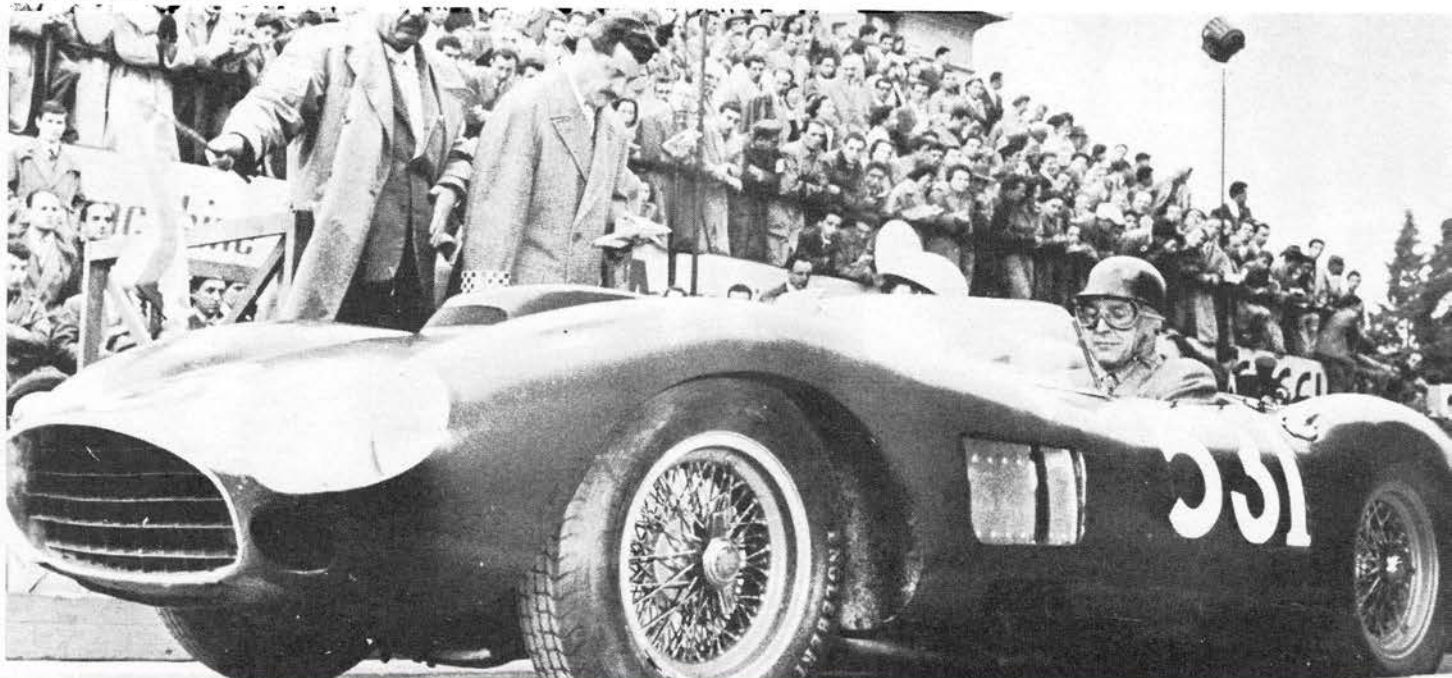
Photo by Dan Rubin



Courtesy author from Portago



Harry Schell was Portago's first co-driver, his teacher and later his best friend.



Mille Miglia 1957. Portago and Nelson ready to go off the ramp in the 3.8-Ferrari which was punched out to 4.0 liters. He hated this car and maintained that the car hated him. Actually, he had no desire to run in the Mille Miglia at all.

length about that, the last time I saw Portago. We sat in my room in the Kenilworth in Sebring. Portago had been very punctual, and had apologized for being unable to keep his promise that there would be no interruptions—he had placed a phone call to Caracas and he asked if he might tell the operator to put it on my wire when it came through. I wanted to record the interview and I asked him if he would object to a Minifon. He said he would not, and he told me about an interview recording he was making for Riverside Records, a house specializing in sports car material. We talked generalities for half an hour and then I turned the machine on. I mentioned a newspaper article that had said something to the effect that he “lived on fear.”

“A lot of nonsense,” Portago said. “I’m often frightened. I can get frightened crossing the street in heavy traffic. And I know I’m a moral coward. I can’t even go into a shop to look around and walk out without buying something. As for enjoying fear, I don’t think anybody enjoys fear, at least in my definition, which is a mental awareness of a danger to your body. You can enjoy courage—the performance of an act which frightens you—but not fear.

“I know that my first ride in a racing car frightened me. That was the Mexican road-race in 1953. I had been riding horses in competition for a long time, at least twice a week for two years, but I had to give it up because I put on some weight I couldn’t get rid of. I couldn’t get by no matter what I tried, and I tried most things: weighing-in with papier-mache boots and saddle, made to look like leather and weighing nothing, or hiding a five-pound weight on the scale so that the whole standard of weight for all the riders would go up!

“I met Harry Schell and Luigi Chinetti at the Paris auto show in 1953 and Chin-

etti asked me to be his co-driver in the Pan-American race. All he really wanted me for, of course, was ballast. I didn’t drive a foot, not even from the garage to the starting line. I just sat there, white with fear, holding on to anything I thought looked sturdy enough. I knew that Chinetti was a very good driver, a specialist in long-distance races who was known to be conservative and careful, but the first time you’re in a racing car you can’t tell if the driver is conservative or a wild man, and I didn’t see how Chinetti could get away with half of what he was doing. We broke down the second day of the race, but I had decided by then that this was what I wanted to do more than anything else, so I bought a three-liter Ferrari.

“I was fortunate, of course, in being able to buy my own car. I think it might have taken me five or six years longer to make the Ferrari team if I had had to look around for a sponsor and all that. I was lucky having enough money to buy my own car—even if I’m not ‘enormously wealthy.’ In those years I was perpetually in debt.” (Portago earned perhaps \$40,000 a year as a driver; he had various trust funds, but his mother controlled the family fortune which was of American origin and is reputedly very high in the millions.)

Harry Schell and Portago took the three-liter to the Argentine for the 1,000 kilometer sports-car race.

“Harry was so frightened that I would break the car he wouldn’t teach me how to change gear, so when after 70 laps (the race was 101) he was tired and it was my turn to drive, after three laps, during which I lost so much time that we dropped from 2nd to 5th place, I saw Harry out in the middle of the track frantically waving a flag to make me come into the pits so that he could drive again. We eventually finished 2nd overall and 1st in our

class. I didn’t learn to change gears properly until the chief mechanic of Maserati took me out and spent an afternoon teaching me.”

Schell and Portago ran the three-liter at Sebring in 1954. The rear axle went after two hours. He sold it and bought a two-liter Maserati, the gear-shifting lesson thrown in, and ran it in the 1954 Le Mans with Tomaso co-driving. They led the class until 5 in the morning, when the engine blew up. He won the Grand Prix of Metz with the Maserati—“but there were no good drivers in it”—and ran with Chiron in the 12 Hours of Rheims, Chiron blowing up the engine with 20 minutes to go while leading the class. He ran an Osca in the G.P. of Germany, and rolled it. “God protects the good, so I wasn’t hurt.”

In 1954 Portago broke down while leading the first lap of the Pan-American race in a three-liter Ferrari, and won a class, an overall and a handicap race in Nassau. He bent an automobile occasionally, and he was often off the road, but he was never hurt until the 1955 Silverstone when he missed a gear-shift and came out of the resulting crash with a double compound break in his left leg.

The crash had no effect on Portago’s driving, he continued to run a little faster on the circuit and to leave it less frequently. At Caracas in 1955 he climbed up on Fangio until he was only 9 seconds behind him and finished second. He was a member of the Ferrari team in 1956, an incredibly short time after he had begun to race. He won the Grand Prix of Portugal in 1956, a wild go-round in which the lap record was broken 17 times, the last time by Portago. He won the Tour of France, the Coupes du Salon, Paris, the Grand Prix of Rome and was leading Moss and Fangio at Caracas when a broken gas line put him out of the race. After Caracas that year I asked Stirling Moss how he

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Last Mille Miglia?

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type as well as Scarlatti in the 3 liter Maserati.

From Bologna the road gives the cars and drivers a break; it is flat country and the Via Emilia running north from Bologna through Modena and Parma is the home stretch—where the cars are fully extended. Collins made Modena, then, as he reached Parma, the race ended for him. His back axle had packed up. Taruffi swept into the lead, now with Von Tripps breathing down his neck in the only 3.8 liter Ferrari. Taruffi's car was far from perfect and Tripps found he could just barely get by the wily Italian if he wanted to. Tripps passed once, but Taruffi caught him and waved him back, giving him the "caution" sign. Now they were through Mantua, the town of Nuvolari, and flat out headed for Brescia, their tachometers reading close to 9000. Portago and co-driver Nelson were also fully extended, holding third place when the catastrophe happened. Due to either a blown tire or a rear axle shaft failure, their Ferrari went out of control while roaring down a straightaway near Guidizzola. Ripping through a group of spectators, the machine smashed into a high tension pole, flipped and careened for another 300 feet before coming to rest in a ditch. At least eleven people were killed on the spot, including five children.

Gendebien went by—then Maglioli in the Porsche. Crossing the finish line less than a car length apart, Tripps and Taruffi brought Mille Miglia victory home to Ferrari. For the 51-year-old Taruffi, it was the culmination of an effort extending over the better part of his career.

For my money, the real hero of the day was the Belgian, Gendebien; driving his Gran Turismo Ferrari, he won the Gran Premio Nuvolari—for the fastest time over the road from Mantua to Brescia. His time was a new record—even beating the 1955 Moss time of 123 mph. Gendebien ran the distance at a speed of 123.6 mph, this doesn't sound like much, but when you consider that the 3 liter Ferrari is "only" a Gran Turismo machine then one can have nothing but admiration for Gendebien.

As far as tires were concerned, only Collins had changed. Taruffi ran the whole race on the same set—likewise Von Tripps.

Ak Miller's effort was really admirable, despite the outcome. It is men like Ak and his co-pilot, Doug Harrison, that make motor racing what it is today. Without these sincere, intensely devoted people, we would have nothing. It is true perhaps, that in the current atmosphere, too many people are "out for blood", so to speak—and not enough people out for fun; but then, on the other hand, European racing is professional racing. Ak and Doug had fun. They know now what it is all about over here. It was far from being time and money wasted, despite the frustrations and numerous obstacles. They might decide to come back to Europe some day, and when they do it will be with a car designed from first hand knowledge of what it takes to win a race like the Mille Miglia.

—Jesse Alexander

Portago

(Continued from page 15)

ranked Portago:

"He's certainly among the ten best in the world today," Moss said, "and as far as I'm concerned, he's the one to watch out for."

In Cuba, just before Sebring this year, he was leading Fangio by a respectable margin when a gas-line let go again.

"I don't think anyone will be champion as long as Fangio competes," Portago told me. "If the absolute limit of adhesion of the car through a certain bend is 101.5 miles an hour the old man will go through at 101, every time. I may go through at 99, or 102—in which case there'll be an incident."

"Moss is of course better than I am, too. If I pass Moss, I wonder what's the matter with his car! But I'm learning still, I think I get a little better with every race. I hope so, anyway."

Portago ranked Collins, Behra, Schell, Musso and himself after Moss as equals. He carefully repeated his estimate of Schell: "Harry is very, very fast," and then said that he considered Schell his closest friend. They spent much time together. Both appeared to be tense, more accurately, taut, something that was not in any way allied to nervousness but was instead a peculiar expression of awareness. Like Portago, Schell walks rapidly, he turns his head constantly, he seems to be trying always to see something that is just out of sight, to hear something that is just out of ear-shot.

I said as much.

"It sounds corny," Portago said, "but I think that because racing drivers are very near to death every Sunday in the season, they are more sensitive to life, and appreciate it more. I take it that is what you meant by what you called "awareness" when you saw Harry and me walking together. Speaking now only for myself, I'm sure I love life more than the average man does. I want to get something out of every minute, I want no time wasted. You know, people say that racing drivers are dare-devils who don't care whether they live or not, and you've seen stories about me and my flirting with death and all that. Nonsense, all nonsense. I want to live to be 105, and I mean to. I want to live to be a very old man. I'm enchanted with life. But no matter how long I live, I still won't have time for all the things I want to do, I won't hear all the music I want to hear, I won't be able to read all the books I want to read, I won't have all the women I want to have, I won't be able to do a twentieth of the things I want to do. And besides just the *doing*, I insist on getting something out of what I do. For example, I wouldn't race unless I was sure I could be champion of the world."

"Can you imagine yourself driving when you're Fangio's age?" I asked him.

Portago smiled. His mouth was unusually small, and straight-lined, and his smiles were brief, but warm enough. "Never," he said. "Certainly not. In any

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Portago

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case I'll stop when I'm 35, and if I'm champion of the world, sooner."

"And then?"
"Well, I'm very ambitious," Portago said. "I wouldn't be racing automobiles if I didn't think I could get something out of it, and not only the championship..." The phone rang beside me. It was Portago's Caracas call and I handed the instrument to him. I had passed the open switchboard in the lobby an hour before, when he had placed the call, and I had overheard the operator, so I knew to whom the call was going and I knew it would be personal.

"I'll take a walk," I told him. "Call me."
"Please," he said. "Don't go. Please. Anyway I'm going to speak Spanish."

As it turned out, the call was a report that the party in Caracas was unavailable. "Forgive me," he said. "I didn't mean to be rude, I didn't mean to suggest that naturally you wouldn't speak Spanish. I'm sorry."

I told him that he was right, in any case. "We were talking about what you intend to get out of automobile racing," I said. "I had the impression that you thought of it as preparation for something."

"I do," Portago said. "I haven't told this to a great many people. You see, Spain has had no new national hero for many, many years. That is what the championship of the world means to me. When I give up racing I'm going to Spain and go into politics."

Later, from Paris, Portago sent me a photograph of himself and Fangio and the Pretender to the Spanish throne. But on it he had written, "With Fangio and Don Juan, the future King of Spain."

The rumor that Franco intends the restoration of the Spanish monarchy has been knocking around the world's chancellories for several years. Portago seemed very sure. For all I know, he may have had superior information.

His frank statement of the purpose to which he intended to put the championship amused me. A few minutes before he had been strongly critical of another driver who has some public business ventures: "He's commercialized himself so much," Portago said, rather disdainfully.

Still, one never expects consistency in anyone who gets his head above the ruck. Consistency is one of the marks of the drudge. Portago was of course a cynic and I have no doubt he thought himself skilled in the management of other people—reporters included. If he did, it was a new idea for him, a product of the past two years, because he conceded that he had during most of his life been very shy, highly introverted, and that he had occasionally covered it with action that could be interpreted as rudeness. Certainly he was enormously perceptive, and conversation with him was easy and pleasant. He obviously knew that real conversation can concern itself only with *ideas*, not *things*, and I think that like all first-rate minds, his natural preference was for ideas; he knew that it is necessary to listen, and he

could be forthright, even in response to rough questions.

Portago was married in 1949 to the former Carol McDaniel, a South Carolina girl. They have two children, Andrea, six, and Antonio, three. Two hours after he had met Carol McDaniel Portago told her he intended to marry her. He had discovered even earlier in life that women respond to daring as to nothing else—to daring, to indifference, to arrogance and certainty and sensitivity, and in one sense at least women were more important in his life than anything else.

"The most important thing in our existence is a well-balanced sex-life," he said to me. "Everybody knows this is true, but nobody will admit it—of himself, that is. But if you don't have a happy sex life you don't have anything."

"It's the first thing the historians suppress when they write the lives of great men," I said, "And it was often an astonishingly big factor in their lives."

"Of course," Portago said. "Look at Nelson, look at Napoleon."

"Well, look at George Bernard Shaw," I said, "Who gave it up altogether, and married on condition his wife would never mention sex to him."

"A freak," Portago said. "A very untypical writer. Look at Maupassant. A prodigy, in more ways than one. Well, as for me, making love is the most important thing I do every day, and I don't care who knows it."

Portago was willing to maintain his opinions under most circumstances, whether by debate or a right cross. I had heard that he had once challenged a man to a duel, but he denied it. He had fenced rarely, he said. He was taught boxing by Edmund Nelson, who died with him in the Mille Miglia. Nelson was a British ex-boxer who was just out of the Merchant Marine and working in New York's Plaza Hotel when Portago, still in his teens, resided there. It was Nelson who taught Portago bobsledding—the first time Portago went down the St. Moritz run he went down steering, and he took 15 seconds off the time of the then champion of Switzerland—and it was Nelson who said, "I know Fon says he'll live forever, but I say he won't live to be thirty."

It is not on record that Portago lost many fights. He was always in condition. He ordered milk at most of the world's best bars. He smoked constantly, but never inhaled. His reactions were freakishly fast, beyond normal to an extent that even he apparently didn't appreciate. He once remarked after a car had spun with him, "It went very slowly. There was lots of time to think." Another time, speaking of steeple-chasing, he said, "When your horse falls after a jump you look around for another horse to hide behind."

Recently in Paris Portago stepped off a curbstone as a Citroen went past, much too close, Portago felt, to the feet of the lady he was with. He flipped a cigarette at the driver so quickly and so accurately that he hit him in the face with it. The man got out and Portago knocked him down twice. He handled his own defense in the consequent law proceedings and was thoroughly trounced by the plaintiff's attorney.

"I hate to fight," he told me. "I'll do anything honorable to get out of a fight, but I get into situations in which there is no way out. I was with some friends, they were shipping people, and a man called them 'a bunch of bloody pirates.' I'm afraid I hit him. Another time I suggested to a man on a dance-floor that it might be nicer for everybody if he put his cigar away when he danced. He'd already burned a friend of mine with it. When I started to leave the place, later, two of this cigar-lover's friends stood in my way and wouldn't move. What could I do, once I'd asked them please to let me by? I lowered the boom on them."

We talked of a good many things that don't much matter now, in the time that we sat in that room. It had rained hard during the night, but the sun was steaming it off now, and outside we could hear cars slowing for the corner around the hotel that led to the circuit. Two team Maseratis came past, the mechanics who drove them blipping their engines incessantly.

"Genuine Italian-type sports cars," I said. "Suitable for summer touring."

Portago grinned. "This is an easy course in one way," he said. "There's only one genuine fast bend in it. But the flat corners, the way it ruins brakes. . . . A race I don't like is the Mille Miglia. No matter how much you practice you can't possibly come to know 1,000 miles of Italian roads as well as the Italians, and, as Fangio says, if you have a conscience you can't drive really fast anyway. There are hundreds of corners in the Mille Miglia where one little slip by a driver will kill 50 people. You can't keep the spectators from crowding into the road—you couldn't do it with an army. It's a race I hope I never run in."

"I have a quotation in a story, a piece of fiction that won't be published until this summer," I told Portago, "something that I thought at the time I wrote it you might have said: that of all sports, only bull-fighting and mountain-climbing and motor-racing really tried a man, that all the rest are mere recreations. Would you have said that?"

"I couldn't agree with you more," Portago said. "You're quite right. I've thought of bull-fighting, of course, but the trouble is that you must start when you're a child, otherwise you'll never really know the bulls. And the only trouble with mountain-climbing for me is the lack of an audience! Like most drivers, I'm something of an exhibitionist."

Portago and I had promised ourselves a certain length of time. We had run an hour past it when he stood up and I shut off the wire recorder. We shook hands and said good-bye. I saw him three times more, very briefly, before the '57 Sebring was over and everybody had dispersed. In April he sent me a note from Paris to say that he had won at Montlhery beating sports cars with a *gran turismo* car, and breaking the lap record. He said he was going to run in the Mille Miglia and at Monte Carlo.

I did a draft of the story and sent a copy of it to him in Paris, as I had offered to do—but not before we talked. I'm not sure he ever saw it, because I heard from him next from Modena. Finally, the day

before the race, a cable came from Brescia, asking if I could use his first-person account of the race. Obviously he intended to live through the Mille Miglia now, although earlier he had written to Dorian Leigh, an internationally famous beauty with whom he had had a close relationship, a note that had suggested premonition: ". . . As you know, in the first place I did not want to do the Mille Miglia. Then Ferrari said I must do it, at least in a *gran turismo* car. Then I was told I had to do it in a new 3800 cc. sports car. That means that my 'early death' may well come next Sunday . . ."

He told a reporter that he was intent only on finishing, that it was important to him to come back to Brescia "safe and sound," an obvious reference to the fact that someone was waiting for him. But when he got out on the road, Nelson hunched enigmatically beside him, Portago began to go, and he was fourth at the first check-point. When a broken half-shaft put Collins out at Parma, Portago began to try for second place, and he was straining for a sight of Von Trips' car, lying second to Taruffi, when the tire blew at something between 125 and 150 miles an hour on the straight at Guidizzollo, and the 3.8 Ferrari, a model he loathed, lifted its wheels off the road and left him helpless. The car killed him, it very nearly destroyed his body, it killed Edmund Nelson too. When I heard that he was dead, I looked for a note he had sent from Paris: ". . . I don't plan to return to the States until October. Please let me know where I can get in touch with you in New York as we must get together at least for a couple of lunches . . . All the best, Fon." Later I heard one good thing: The magazine *Sports Illustrated* had asked Portago to write a piece about racing and he had done so. In Cuba he had asked the journalist Diana Bartley to read it over for him and make any changes she thought would improve it, but Miss Bartley did very little with the piece, and it was, as it was printed, pretty much as it came from Portago's typewriter. It was an attempt to state the motivation, and something of the philosophy, of a driver, and it was an honest and lucid piece of writing. It was published the week of the Mille Miglia, and Portago read it in Brescia and cabled New York to say that he had seen it, liked it, and that he would be happy to do more for the magazine in the future.

Except for the final seconds after he lost the car, seconds that must have seemed so long to him, Portago's last hours were happy ones: Once he started running he would have set aside all premonitory fears, he was doing what he wanted to do, and doing it far better than the form-chart said he possibly could. He was surely thinking, as he screamed down the Valley of the Po toward Brescia and the finish, that he might conceivably win the race.

Most men die regretting the errors they have made in the multiple choices that life forces upon us, and Portago knew, in the fraction of time in which he could think about it, that error was killing him. Motor-racing, like every other human endeavor, rigidly reserves the ultimate reward for those who are talented, lucky—

continued on next page

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Portago

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and totally devoted. Portago was enormously talented, he was luckier than most, but he did not have, in the fullest measure, the vital ability to concentrate obsessively upon a single purpose. The gods, in which he did not believe, or fortune, or fate or something else for which we have as yet no name, somehow guards those who do own this thing. Portago knew what it was, as many men do not, he often spoke of it—". . . you must have the mental strength to concentrate absolutely . . ."—but he could not maintain it as rigidly as, say, Phil Walters used to do, or Stirling Moss does today. He did not want to run in the Mille Miglia. A wiser man might have stayed out, even if it required an illness of convenience. He had not made even one practice circuit of the course, but he tried to out-drive men who could not remember how many dozens of times they had run it. Perhaps saddest of all, he over-ruled the Ferrari depot at Florence when he was urged to take two new tires for the run to Brescia.

In a sense, though, none of these things were mistakes, because actually Portago had no choice. There was no caution in him. A refusal to count odds was the essence of his nature. Usually he won, but he was intelligent and he knew that averages would almost certainly trip him ultimately. Knowing this, he still preferred to accept the hazard. That was his nature, the core of his being, and he could do nothing to alter it. Had he been cautious, we would never have heard of him. Portago's determination to take what he wanted out of the world, on his own terms and no matter what the price, present or potential, made him what he was: the absolutely free spirit.

"If I die tomorrow," he told me the day before Sebring, "Still I have had 28 wonderful years."

I cited to him the Spanish proverb, "In this life, take what you want—but pay for it."

"Of course," he said. "Of course, that's exactly it. You must pay. I remember someone who wrote about the British in the

first World War, about the terrific mortality rate among young officers who had to lead bayonet charges against fixed machine-guns, and most of them, or many of them, were aristocrats in those days. They had a life expectancy at the front of 30 days or something like that. And this man, he was a journalist, I can't remember his name, said, I remember, 'In war, the British aristocracy pays for the privileges they enjoy in peace-time.' You pay . . . you try to put it off, but you pay. I think, for my part at least I think the game is worth the candle."

Portago was not a great racing driver, although it is certain that he would have been, had he lived, and that is not alone my opinion, but the judgement of men much more expert. He was not an artist, he left nothing of beauty behind him and nothing of use to the world. He moved no mountains, wrote no books, bridged no rivers. He saved no lives, indeed he took innocents with him to death. He could be cruel. If he wished to indulge himself he would do it, though the act hurt and humiliated others who had done him no harm or in any way earned his enmity.

Yet it would be a flinty heart that did not mourn his death. At the very least, he was an adornment in the world, an excitement, a pillar of fire in the night, producing no useful heat or light, perhaps, but a glory to see nonetheless. At most he was an inspiration, for, with the mere instruments of his life set aside—the steeple-chasing, the motor-racing, wealth, women, world-roaming—he proved again what cannot be too often proven: If anything at all is meant for us, we are meant to live life, there is no folly like the folly of the hermit who cowers in his cave, and a dead lion is a greater thing than a live mouse.

The accomplishments of the 28 years of Don Alfonso Cabeza de Vaca y Leighton may make only a small monument for him, or none at all, but he knew what greatness knows, and for that reason we are the poorer for his going.

—Ken W. Purdy



Despite lacerated arm, cut to bone in bobsled accident three weeks earlier, Portago nearly won GP of Cuba, holding off Fangio until a fuel line broke.