



PAUL BERGEN

# Stop, Thief!

BY CONVICT 087763

**T**HE LAST car I saw had heavy wire mesh on the back windows—it was the sheriff's wagon that hauled me to state prison on a 5-15-year sentence for Unlawfully Driving Away an Automobile. But during the 10 previous years I probably had my hands on more privately owned vehicles than a parking lot attendant.

I was a professional thief and as a fairly competent criminal I managed to account for 30 of the better than 300,000 autos stolen that year before I came to prison.

There are two kinds of car thief—the professional who makes his living by stealing automobiles and the joy rider. Joy riders are juvenile delinquents, drunks and occasional honest citizens afflicted with a passing urge to larceny who borrow a car just for the excitement of taking it. Chances for recovery are excellent, but joy riders are notoriously irresponsible and usually leave the car in ruins. A professional, on the other hand, will care

for your property as though it were his own—but you are not likely to see it again.

Every car thief has his own way of working. Some specialize in beating used car dealers, others prefer to hustle parking lots around factories, knowing the owner is on a shift and won't notice his loss immediately. I worked mainly around metropolitan areas where there was plenty of traffic in which to lose myself.

Like most professional car thieves, I used to carry a prop when I was working. Standing around empty-handed is apt to draw attention—something you can ill afford in my line. But a man with an armload of packages is just another husband picking up a few things for the wife or waiting for a ride. My favorite was a large shopping bag full of groceries. This also made a good screen. I could balance it on one hip as though fumbling for my keys while jimmying someone's window vent. And once I had the door open I could spill the stuff on the floor as an excuse to get under the dash and work on the ignition.

I also carried a set of car keys with a blank that would fit any ignition switch. This was only for appearances in case a cop looked in the window. Of more practical value was a transistor radio tuned to police frequency.

By working carefully, taking every possible precaution and choosing my victims with discrimination, I made a good living for many years in a very risky business. But thieves have problems like anyone else and it wasn't all big scores and piles of ill-gotten gains. There were lots of cars I couldn't touch; others I just never got away with.

However simple or difficult stealing a car may be, that is only half a thief's problem. The other half is getting rid of it. Some states simplify this by requiring nothing more than a bill of sale, an easily forged document. But you can't always do this without taking a hot car across a state line, which is a federal offense and something no thief worth his parole is about to do.

More often, I kept an eye out for cheap clunkers or newly wrecked cars that I could buy for junk prices. I kept the papers, plates and number tags from these and left the cars to rot. Then all I had to do was steal a good car of the make and model described on the papers.

Nobody ever checked to make sure the motor numbers of these cars matched the ones on the titles. If people made a habit of this I would long since have been forced into some more forthright business—like picking pockets. I kept my prices fair and found plenty of car dealers and ordinary citizens ready to buy without asking questions. Sometimes my prices

were so fair my customers must have had more larceny in them than I did.

There is no sure way to theftproof a car—if a thief wants it badly enough he can take it, one way or another. Given enough time, even an amateur can cross an ignition.

I could almost always depend on a partly open window; or a side vent, which can easily be warped open. Convertibles are easiest of all. Any thief who can't punch a small hole in the top and open the door with a piece of wire would be better off going straight.

Car owners, however, do have one thing in their favor. A thief seldom takes a car unless he is invited to do so by the owner's carelessness. By taking the right precautions, by making your car too inconvenient to steal, you can discourage thieves.

The most obvious precaution is always to remove the key. And if you must have a spare, keep it with you, not in the car. The first thing I do after opening a car is check beneath the floor mat and behind the dash. This often saved me the trouble of fooling with jumpers.

Make certain the doors are locked and all windows secured. This won't keep anyone out who really wants in, but it will discourage amateurs and may cause a professional to decide it's not worth the extra few minutes it would take to force an entry.

Valuable items such as cameras, radios and sporting equipment should be kept out of sight. By stowing them in the glove compartment or tossing a lap robe over them you will remove a powerful temptation for juvenile delinquents and ordinary sneak thieves.

Don't carry luggage in the back seat. Lock it in the trunk. This is one of the things a car thief looks for and he's apt to take a car he doesn't want just to get his hands on the luggage.

Always park in a well-lighted area, the more public the better. The presence of a number of people gives a thief second thoughts since he has no way of knowing if one of them is the owner. Make it a point, whenever possible, not to park your car by itself.

If common sense precautions are too much trouble, be doubly certain to know your license number. It will come in handy when you report your loss to the police.

No single measure will prevent your car from being stolen, but paying attention to all the little details will make it far less likely to happen. Next time you park your car try looking it over from my point of view and compare it for theft-appeal with others nearby. Car thieves always choose the easiest, safest scores they can find; if your car is just plainly too much trouble to steal . . . then it won't get stolen. ■