MAX CHAMPION AND THE GREAT RACE CAR ROBBERY



ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH
ILLUSTRATED BY KATE HINDLEY

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This is the story of Max Champion and a great thing he did. Max is the hero of this tale because that is what he was, by nature and by deed – a hero.

His full name was Max George Henry William Champion, but nobody needs that many names and so he was simply called Max. He lived with his mother, who was called Molly, and his grandfather, Augustus Monty Champion, known as Gus.

Their home was at the end of a track on the edge of town. It was not a large house – in fact, it was rather small, only having three tiny rooms and an outside shack. This meant there was a bedroom for Molly, one for Max and a room that was used for everything else, including cooking and washing. Baths were taken in a tin tub behind a curtain; there was no hot tap, and so water was heated on the stove before being poured into the tub. It was all rather simple, but it was a comfortable tub and nobody complained.

Grandfather Gus lived in a small shed in the back yard. Max had offered him his room and said that he would take the shed



instead, but Grandfather Gus simply shook his head and said he would not hear of it.

"I slept in all sorts of places in my younger days," he said. "I've slept in tents and igloos. I've slept in haystacks and caves. I don't mind a shed one little bit – in fact, I think this is one of the most comfortable places I've ever slept in my life!"

The Champion family did not have much money. Grandfather Gus had a small garage, where he had worked for as long as anybody could remember. This garage was right next to the house, which meant he did not have far to walk to get to work. It was always surrounded by the

old cars Gus fixed. These cars belonged to people who could not afford newer cars, and it was only through Gus's efforts that they were kept going at all.

"If only I could buy better tools," said Gus. "Then I could fix some of the more modern cars too." He sighed. It was not easy fixing these old cars, but it was his work and he did it as cheerfully as he could. The Champion family was not the sort of family who complained about anything – they made do with what they had.

Everybody had to earn what money they could – even Max, who had a part-time job when he was not at school. Molly, his mother, worked as a sandwich-maker in a

nearby town; Max's job was to cut people's lawns. For this, he had an old lawnmower that just about worked, although it needed a lot of pushing and shoving to do anything very much. On the afternoons that he cut grass, he would come home completely exhausted by all the effort, hardly finding the energy needed to eat the dinner his mother had prepared for him.

"I'm sorry you have to work so hard, Max," his mother said. "Other boys have time to play – I wish you did."

Max told her not to worry about him. "I'm doing fine, Mum," he said. "I like my work – I really do."

She knew he was being kind and he was

just thinking of her feelings. That made her proud: her son was a hard worker and always shared what he earned. Even so, it was difficult to make ends meet, and at the end of each week there was never much money left in the jar in the kitchen where they all put their earnings.

On Saturday mornings, before he went off to mow lawns, Max helped his grandfather in the garage. He was not allowed to do the difficult things that only a mechanic could do, but he could help in other ways. He could unscrew the nuts that let dirty oil drain out of engines. He could do that quite easily, and could collect the old oil in deep trays. He could

also change the rubber blades on windscreen wipers, fill a cooling system with water and check the air pressure in tyres. All these could be done while Grandfather Gus was attending to the more complicated issues of brakes and lights and gearboxes.

Another thing Max could do was clean cars. Many of the vehicles that were brought to the garage for repair were very dirty, and needed to be thoroughly washed before being returned to their owners. Max liked this job, as there was a high-pressure hose he could use to remove layers of grime as easily as if it were icing on a cake.

"Be careful with that thing," warned Gus. "It's very powerful. Make sure that you don't damage the cars."

Max was careful, and after he had removed the outer layers of dirt, he would often complete the job with a bucket of warm water, some soap and a cloth. In this way he would coax the last of the dirt off the car's bodywork. Then he would polish so hard that the car would end up gleaming and looking almost as



good as new. The owners of these cars would marvel at the transformation.

"You've made my poor old car look brand new," exclaimed one of them. "Max – you're a real hero, you know!"

Max was modest. "I'm glad you like it," he said.

It was while he was cleaning a car one Saturday morning that he made his discovery. He was working in the garage with his mother, who sometimes stood in for Gus if he was called away to deal with a breakdown. She was not a trained mechanic, but she had picked up a lot over the years and could fix most simple things that went wrong. That morning a car had

been brought in by its owner, a farmer, who apologised for its dirty state. He had meant to clean it before he brought it in to be fixed, but had been too busy getting his pigs and sheep ready for market.

"Don't worry," said Molly. "My son is pretty good at washing and polishing. I've never known a car that he can't sort out, given the chance."

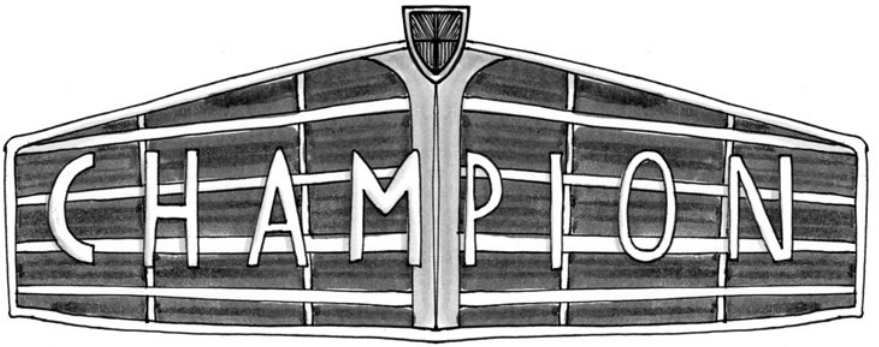
Max beamed with pleasure at the compliment. He was pleased that his mother was proud of him. And so he set to work on the car, which was so covered in mud that it was hard to tell what colour it was underneath. It could have been blue, but then it could equally well have

been red or white, or even some shade in-between.

Max applied the high-pressure hose to the back of the car, to remove the worst of the mud before he started to scrub the bodywork with his cloth. And that is when he saw it: underneath the grime was a line of raised metal lettering.

This car was an unusual shape, and Max was keen to discover what make it was. The lettering, he thought, would give him the answer.

Slowly he uncovered the half-hidden letters. First there came a C, then an H, and after that an A. Now he was interested: he had not heard of a car whose



name began with those letters, and he was keen to find out what followed. It was an M, and then, immediately after that, a P. At last it was fully uncovered: *Champion*.

Max stood back and scratched his head. *Champion?* Why would a car have that name on it – which happened to be their family name? He was puzzled, and could think of no reason to explain this strange discovery.

His mother was working on a tractor that needed new brakes, and was at a tricky stage of the repair.

"I'm busy," she said, when Max asked her to come and see what he had found. "Later on, please, Max."

"But, Mum," protested Max, "there's a car over there with our name on it."

Molly stood up straight, wiping her hands on her overalls. "Did you say *our name*?" she asked.

"Yes," said Max. "It says *Champion*."

"I think I should take a look at this," said Molly, as she made her way to the other side of the garage.

Bending down to examine the lettering,

Max's mother gasped in surprise. She turned to Max, a broad smile on her face. "Do you realise who made this car, Max?" she asked.

Max shook his head.

Molly's smile became even broader. "Grandfather Gus," she said proudly. "He made it."

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