

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Car, adventures of 'The Saint' lead to desert

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The Aston Martin Lagonda cost \$150,000 in 1985, much more than a house in the desert when the newspaper described it as a special car for special customers. Now available in the United States, "the stunningly designed car made its debut in 1976 — a high-style, high performance model that set new automotive standards. The interior was as startling as the hand-formed aluminum body. Multicolored digital readouts monitored a dozen functions, from speed to ambient temperature inside and outside the car. You switch from English to metric values by pushing one of the touch sensitive circles on a panel near the steering well. Touch other circles and the hood unlocks or headlights pop up." Decades later these features seem standard but imagine them in 1976 when most cars had crank-up windows.

"The new Lagonda, delivered to the U.S. for the first time last year, is a great highway cruiser. It is not as silent as a Rolls—you are aware there is a powerful engine in the 4,700-pound car. Top speed on the European version is over 140 mph. The U.S. model with its exhaust emission control hits 126-130."

The Lagonda was clearly a car for the most dapper and daring of gentlemen, guys like James Bond. But long before Bond, there was another ultimate gentleman, fictional character, Simon Templar, "The Saint."

Written by Leslie Charteris, the series of Saint novels were published from 1928 to 1963. Eight stories were adapted to film between 1938 and 1942 by RKO including "The Saint in New York," "The Saint Strikes Back," "The Saint in London," "The Saint's Double Trouble," and "The Saint Takes Over." Simon Templar was a bit of a rogue, devilishly debonair, highly educated, even more sophisticated.

Charteris himself wasn't far removed from his character. Born in Singapore to an English mother and Chinese father, he had an exceptional education culminating in studies at Kings College, Cambridge. He relocated to the United States



Leslie Charteris and his wife Leslie in 1938, likely at Rogers Ranch.

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in 1932, where he continued to publish short stories and got a job writing for Paramount Pictures. He naturally found his way to Palm Springs. (Charteris was excluded from permanent residency in the United States because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was particularly pernicious in California, and prohibited immigration for persons of "fifty percent or greater Oriental blood." As a result, Charteris was forced to continually renew his six-month temporary visitor's visa. Eventually, an act of Congress personally granted him the right of permanent residence in the United States, with eligibility for naturalization, which he later completed.)

Charteris was good-looking, had a high-brow English accent, wore a monocle and was living in Palm Springs, when Faith Baldwin, famous romance writer, arrived in 1937 in Palm Springs to do research for a new book. She encountered many locals during her visit. The eventual book, "Enchanted Oasis," was published in 1938. Many villagers were said to have gnashed their teeth having recognized themselves and others, including Charteris, her the pages.

Charteris himself also used the desert

as the setting for "The Saint in Palm Springs." Simon Templar is played by suave George Sanders in the film. Sanders was also a regular visitor to Palm Springs (and was interestingly married to both Zsa Zsa and Magda Gabor, both of whom were fixtures in the desert social scene).

In the film, Simon Templar is asked to protect a man trying to transport a cache of rare stamps from New York to Palm Springs. On the train west, Simon meets soon-to-be guests at the same hotel. There, the stamps are stolen. Simon employs his pal, pickpocket "Pearly" Gates, to steal belongings from every other hotel guest. The stamps are found in a pillbox, but Pearly doesn't recall from whom he lifted the box. Simon sets a trap for the thief at the hotel, and then again at Joshua Tree National Park, and solves the crime, also revealing the mastermind behind it.

Both George Sanders and Leslie Charteris had issues with The Saint pictures; Sanders because he disliked playing the same role again and again, and Charteris because of the liberties taken by the screenwriters with his stories.

The RKO production of eight films so-

lified Charteris' career, but the serialization on television, in 50-minute episodes featuring Roger Moore as the gentleman spy, made The Saint a household name. "Whether Moore is stealing government secrets or leading ladies' hearts, he's ultra-suave as he walks a thin line between lawful and unlawful activity." Moore's debonair persona made him the natural replacement for Sean Connery as Bond, James Bond, agent 007 in the 1973 movie "Live and Let Die."

Charteris was truly part of the desert community. He rented a house in Las Palmas, was a judge for the Desert Circus parade and served on philanthropic committees. The Limelight News noted, "Distinguished authors who have made their home in the Village for several years will be honored at a tea and book exhibit, sponsored by the board members of the Welwood Murray Memorial Library. Among the famous authors whose books are to be displayed will be Edgar Rice Burroughs, Leslie Charteris, William Price, Harry Bedford-Jones, and Harold Bell Wright. Others are Smeaton Chase, Arthur Henry Gooden and Monroe Leaf."

Charteris spent half a century as either writer of or custodian of Simon Templar's literary adventures, one of the longest uninterrupted spans of a single author in the history of mystery fiction, equaling that of Agatha Christie's novels featuring her eccentric detective Hercule Poirot. The Saint was more exciting than Poirot, more of a swashbuckling gentleman than incisive intellectual solving mysteries.

Gorgeously attired, perfectly poised, always getting the girl, The Saint naturally drove a fabulous, yet fictional car, called a Hirondele. The car was emblematic of the man. Charteris was once asked about the model for the Hirondele and how he conjured it up. He casually answered, "Oh, my own Lagonda. It really was Simon's kind of car."

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