

GUS Wins

FRED SPRATT, the portly chief of our town's Volunteer Fire Department, rushed into the Model Garage shop out of breath and with a scowl on his normally placid face.

"It's an outrage!" he yelled as he caught sight of Gus Wilson. "It's the lowest, rawest, dirtiest trick I've ever—"

"Take it easy—you'll blow a gasket," Gus cautioned. "What's eating you?"

Spratt's red face turned purple. "I'll tell you what's eating me!" he roared. "That double-crossing millionaire, W. Gilmore Westebrooke, is starting a ringer in the fire-engine race carnival!"

"Oh, that supercharged V-8 chemical wagon he's given Pleasantdale," Gus guessed. "It's still a piece of fire apparatus—"

"Fire apparatus, my eye!" Spratt howled. "It's a racing car with a trick red body bolted on. That's what it is!"

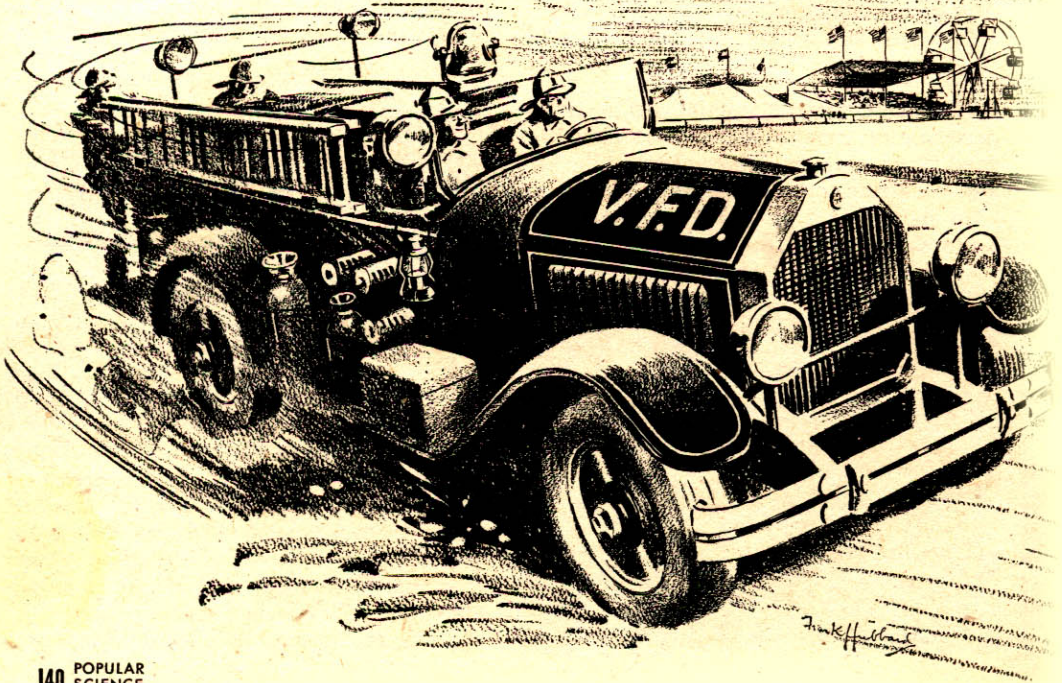
Gus grinned. "Oh, it's not as bad as that, although maybe it isn't quite as rugged as a working fire buggy ought to be. But as soon as it's gone to a few fires it'll qualify under the conditions of the race, and that leaves us just one thing to do."

"What's that?" Spratt snapped. "You tell me!"

Gus's grin widened. "We can tune up our truck so she'll go faster." He smacked his big hand down on Spratt's fat shoulder. "Syd Randall's been driving our old wagon to fires for a long time, and I've been nursing it just as long, and I know its engine still has plenty of power and pep. We've got two weeks before the carnival. You tell the boys to bring the truck here as often as possible."

The day of our Volunteer Fire Department's annual carnival ranks with Christmas and the Fourth of July. In the morning the visiting fire companies roll into town with sirens screeching and bells clanging, and in the afternoon there is the firemen's parade from the firehouse on Railroad Square to the Fair Grounds, with half a dozen bands blaring away. Then there's the barbecue supper, and after that the carnival—an evening of fun, spectacular exhibitions and com-

By **MARTIN BUNN**



Against a Sure Thing

petitions under floodlights, netting a profit to meet some of our V.F.D.'s needs for the year.

But the climax comes in the afternoon—the fire-engine race between our department and Pleasantdale's. It grew out of a rural conflagration to which both departments were called. A never-decided argument over which made the better time induced Josiah Hadley to put up a big silver challenge cup for an annual race between them.

The first contest for this trophy was a road race that almost resulted in a bad accident, so the race was switched to the Fair Grounds. Because the unbanked turns of the old half-mile trotting track make car-to-car racing dangerous, the event is run in two two-mile heats against time, the truck with the fastest average being the winner.

For seven years Syd Randall's expert driving and Gus's ability to keep our aging truck tuned up as good as new had given us the race, and we got into the habit of regarding the Hadley Cup as a permanent ornament in our firehouse. Then Westebrooke, a playboy who makes fire fighting his hobby, was elected Pleasantdale chief.

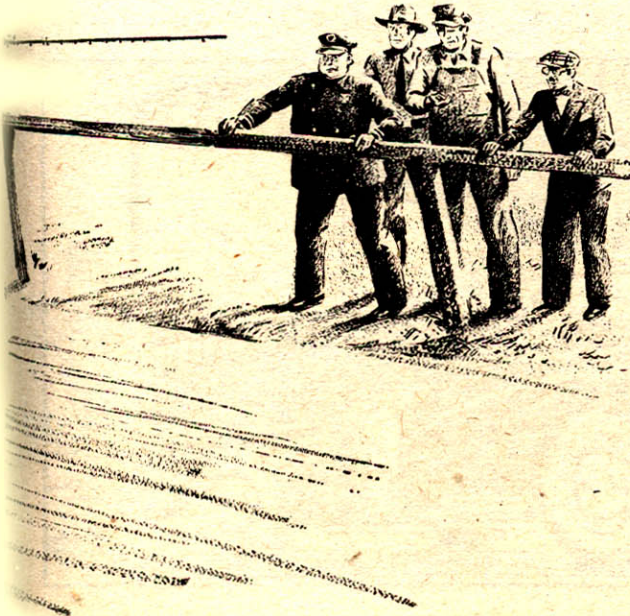
His new chemical wagon was obviously acquired just to take the Hadley Cup, and stories about its speed began to circulate. Doc Marvin told that it had overtaken him while he was doing 70 on an emergency call. State Trooper Jerry Corcoran watched it once and estimated it hit at least 90. We all figured the Hadley Cup was lost to us by a sneak play. All but Gus—he just grinned and spent his evenings overhauling and tuning up our old truck until, late the night before the carnival, it was adjusted as accurately as an expensive watch.

"The old gal will go as fast as ever," he told some of us who had come around for a final look. "All I hope, Fred, is that you won't have to take her out tonight."

"Not even if the Mayor's house burns," Spratt assured him. "You've done a swell job, Gus. But I'm afraid we're sunk against that ringer of a camouflaged racing car. I hear Westebrooke is going to drive himself."

"He's good, too," Gus remarked. "Ought to be—he's rich enough to spend all his time practicing. But Syd is good, too." He yawned, and we took the hint and went home to bed.

Syd capitalized on being first around the unbanked curve and took it fast. His wheels bit deep, tossing up a spray of dust and mud.



AFTER the lesser events of the day, the grandstand was packed for the climax, the Hadley Cup race. Gus was in the crowd of officials in front of the judges' stand.

"You all know the rules," the referee barked. "Two two-mile heats against time from a standing start. Shortest total time wins. Vehicles to carry their regular equipment and full crews. Winner of the toss goes first in the first heat and last in the second."

Spratt won the toss. There was a roar of cheers as our old truck rolled to the starting line. Gus went over to speak to Syd Randall, a mild-mannered man who clerks in a grocery store but who is a second Ralph De Palma when

he gets his foot on an accelerator. "Take it easy on the turns, Syd," he advised. "The track looks dry, but under the surface it's as soft as mush."

Syd nodded. "I'll watch," he promised. "Those turns will be cut up something fierce after we've been round a couple of times."

"Ready, Randall?" the starter shouted. Syd nodded. The flag swept down.

Our crew yelled. The crowd roared. So did the engine as our truck shot away from the starting line and thundered to the unbanked turn. Syd capitalized on being first around and took it fast. His wheels bit deep, tossing up a spray of dust and mud. The crowd gasped, and then it yelled. Syd was safely around and streaking up the backstretch. Another gasp as he hit the second turn; another curtain of dust and mud; another sigh as he got safely around.

"Easy—take it easy!" Gus begged under his breath. Syd seemed to hear. He slowed on the turns on each of the three other laps; then gave her the gun down the homestretch for a finish that had everyone yelling. His time was posted—1:59 $\frac{3}{10}$.

For 10 minutes tractor-drawn scrapers smoothed down the cut-up turns. Then the Pleasantdale chemical wagon was driven to the starting line and given the flag. Westebrooke played safe on the turns, but his car was so fast that he easily made up for it on the stretches. Even our townsmen cheered when his time went up—1:55 flat.

There was another wait while the turns

were manicured. Then Westebrooke raced his second heat. He was even more cautious on the curves, but his time was 1:55 $\frac{3}{10}$. Gus was near him when he got out. "The turns were so soft I had to crawl around them and waste half my speed," he explained. "Well, Randall can't take them any faster."

"Can't he!" Gus muttered. He hurried over to the improvised service pit. "You've got to do 1:50 $\frac{9}{10}$ to win," he told Syd. "I'll fix it so you can take the turns fast."

He took a tire gauge from his pocket, kneeled at the left front wheel, removed the valve cap, and let out 10 lb. of air. Then he did the same thing to the left rear tire, after which he told Stan Hicks, the Model Garage mechanic, to increase the pressure of each right tire by 5 lb.

"O.K., Syd," he said. "That's an old dirt-track trick. The partly deflated inside tires give you a tendency to bank left and overcome part of the curve sway. Give her all she'll stand without turning over!"

The truck roared away and went into the first turn much faster than either driver had attempted it before. There was a gasp from the crowd, and Gus Wilson's mouth tightened, but the truck didn't turn over. Four times around, a thunderous, heart-stopping rush for the finish wire—and Gus heaved a mighty sigh.

There was a tense wait. Then the time went up—1:50 $\frac{9}{10}$! The Hadley Cup was still ours—by a tenth of a second!

Even our townsmen cheered at the time made by the speedy Pleasantdale chemical wagon—1:55 flat.

