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*This Can Happen
to YOU*

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Detective X-Ray Billings could pry secrets from everything but his car.

Gus and the Private-Eye Caper

By Martin Bunn

THE late-afternoon highway traffic was heavy. Gus Wilson came to a stop behind the middle-aged convertible that headed the outside lane of cars waiting for the light to turn green.

Sitting idle for a moment, he noticed that the driver of the convertible, a fat man with a red face and a redder neck, was staring fixedly at the car alongside his in the inside lane—a cream-colored roadster that featured white-sidewall tires and plenty of gleaming chromium. He also noticed that the swarthy, hatless occupant of the roadster was watching the fat man out of the corners of his eyes. Thin lips beneath his eyebrow-narrow black mustache were twisted in a curious smile.

As the signal winked from red to green, the roadster shot ahead. The convertible stood still. Half way across the intersection the roadster's driver looked back. From



between scornfully protruded lips he ejected a loud and contemptuous "Phooey!"

Impatient horns honked, but the convertible didn't move. Its driver pushed his dusty derby farther back on his head and stamped on the starter button. After half a minute of resultless effort he turned around and yelled to Gus: "Hey, mister—I'm stalled. Gimme a push, willya? Make it a fast one—she won't take ahold 'til she's up over twenty."

Gus nodded and eased his front bumper against the convertible's rear one. With an eye on the speedometer, he began to push. When the indicator climbed to 22 he felt

the convertible pull away. It swerved into the inside lane and when Gus came abreast the fat man shouted: "Thanks, mister. My darned ole motor stalls 'most every time I have to stop at a light, and I gotta ketch that roadster that was alongside me."

STANDING in his shop doorway, Gus was enjoying a between-jobs pipe and breath of air when a convertible with its top down swerved off the street, shot up the Model Garage driveway, and braked to a spine-snapping stop. The engine continued to roar.

The derby-hatted fat man whom Gus had

Nick produced a roll of bills and peeled off a ten-spot. "O.K. So it wasn't the carburetor," he said.



assisted a week earlier climbed out. "You Gus Wilson?"

"That's me," Gus conceded.

The fat man fished a card from a pocket of his rumpled coat. Gus read:

XAVIER RAYMOND BILLINGS

Investigations

Confidential—Comprehensive—Conclusive

"That's me," said the stout detective. "Call me X-Ray. Everyone in the investigative game does—from my name and because I always see through things. Say, you look sorta familiar. Wait a minute—I never forget a name or anything else . . . You're the feller gave me a push at that traffic light the other day."

Gus grinned. "Catch up with that fancy roadster?"

X-Ray shook his head glumly. "The feller who was drivin' it is a private eye, too. Right now we happen to be workin' on the same caper—that's what we call a case in the profession—only for the opposin' parties. He's one of them know-it-alls, and ever since I been having trouble with my car he's been kiddin' the pants offa me."

"What's the matter with your car?"

"You saw what's the matter with it, up there at the crossroads," X-Ray grumbled. "I can't hardly ever get the motor started without someone giving me a push, and then it stalls every time I let it idle. It'd be stalled now, only I left the throttle out . . . Take a look at it."

"Drive it into the shop."

X-Ray buck-jumped the convertible through the doorway and got out, leaving the engine racing.

"How long have you been having trouble?" Gus asked.

"Well," X-Ray admitted, pushing his derby even farther back, and scratching his head, "she's been sorta hard to start, and apt to stall on me, for quite a spell. But it's only the last couple of weeks that she's been actin' up real bad."

"Have you done anything about it?"

"Sure I have! When she began stallin' all over the place, I figured it was the spark plugs, so I checked 'em. It looked like they'd burned until there was twice as much gap as there ought to be, so I cleaned and adjusted 'em."

"What happened?" Gus queried.

X-Ray shook his head sorrowfully. "I did that job the night before you helped me

get started at the traffic light," he said. "You saw what happened . . . Well, there's a feller boards with the wife and me—I ain't mentionin' any names, you understand—who thinks he knows a lot about cars. Ever since I been having trouble he's been saying there's something wrong with my carburetor, and I've been telling him he's nuts. The day after you helped me out he borrows the service manual for my model, and brings it home with him. It says that my carburetor has a low-speed jet and a low-speed air-admission system with some very small passages in it, and that any little particle of dirt in those passages will mess up the way the motor idles."

"Well, that makes me wonder if maybe he could be right, so we take the carburetor apart and clean it. When we put it back, the motor is worse than ever.

"I tell this feller that he's nuts, but he still claims that the carburetor must be clogged—only we didn't know enough to find it. Finally he talks me into taking it to a carburetor specialist. After two days it comes back lookin' all clean and pretty. But when we get it on the car, what happens? The motor won't start! And when I get it started on a fast push, it dies as soon as I try to make it idle. My friend still says it's carburetor trouble, and I claim it's something else—only I don't know what. By that time we're both sore, and we put a ten-buck bet on it. Then a neighbor who's been kibitzing on the job says I'd better bring the car over to you . . . Find out what's the matter with her."

"O.K.," Gus agreed placidly. He got into the convertible and pushed the throttle knob in slowly. As he cut the engine down, it coughed and quit.

Gus got out, raised the hood, and snapped off the distributor head. He removed the rotor, and after a brief inspection looked up at X-Ray. "You win," he told him. "It isn't the carburetor."

X-Ray slapped a massive thigh. "Ten bucks! That'll learn him!" His face clouded. "Hey, mister—can you prove it?"

"Sure. Just take a look at this—"

"Hold everything!" X-Ray yelled. "Where's your 'phone? He'll never pay me that ten bucks unless he sees you prove it!"

Following the direction of Gus's nod, the fat man lumbered into the office. "He'll be here in a few minutes," he reported when he got back.

Gus grunted, went over to the convert-

ible, and started doing something to its distributor. Just as he finished a man wearing a polo coat and no hat came into the shop. Gus was surprised to recognize the driver of the flashy roadster who had been so contemptuous of the stalled X-Ray.

"Nick Butler—he's in the investigative game, too," X-Ray introduced. "Go ahead—prove it wasn't the carburetor."

"All right," Gus agreed. He cranked the engine over slowly until the breaker arm rested on the lobe of the cam. With a feeler gauge and point wrench he set the points at the correct .018" gap. Then he replaced the rotor and distributor cap, got into the car, and merely touched the starter button. The engine took off instantly. When he throttled it down it idled smoothly.

Nick produced a roll of bills and peeled off a ten-spot. "O.K.," he said. "So it wasn't the carburetor. But it couldn't have been the distributor, either—there was a good spark once the engine got running."

Gus again took the cap off the distributor, and removed the rotor. "Take a look at that," he said. "Only the lobes of the cam are shiny—its flats are dull and dark. That showed me that the fiber block on the breaker arm—I just replaced it—had worn so much that the points barely opened when the cam turned. If X-Ray had put a touch of petroleum jelly on the cam, and checked his point gap once in a while, he would have saved himself a lot of grief—and if the two of you had checked the ignition system instead of having the carburetor overhauled

because the trouble *seemed* to be in it, X-Ray would have saved himself money. The condition got worse until, at low speeds, the cam didn't lift the arm enough to break the points apart cleanly and get a spark. Then the engine wouldn't start or idle. At high speeds, though, the cam flicked the arm fast enough to give it momentum that threw it clear."

Nick nodded. "You did a nice job of detecting for a pair of dumb dicks," he said. Then he turned to X-Ray. "Subject X is going to meet Subject Z tonight," he said. "You tail him, will you?"

"I can't," X-Ray growled. "I gotta take the wife to the movies. You do it."

"I got tickets for the fights, down in the city," Nick objected. "You can go to the movies any night."

"Match you for it," X-Ray said.

Nick lost, and went out scowling.

"I thought you fellows were working for opposing parties," Gus said.

X-Ray grinned. "We are," he admitted. "But if both parties get the info they're paying for, what difference does it make who gets it? I figure that cooperation gets a man further than competition—live and let live, that's my motto!"

END

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"I thought you were working for opposing parties," X-Ray grinned. "We are."

