

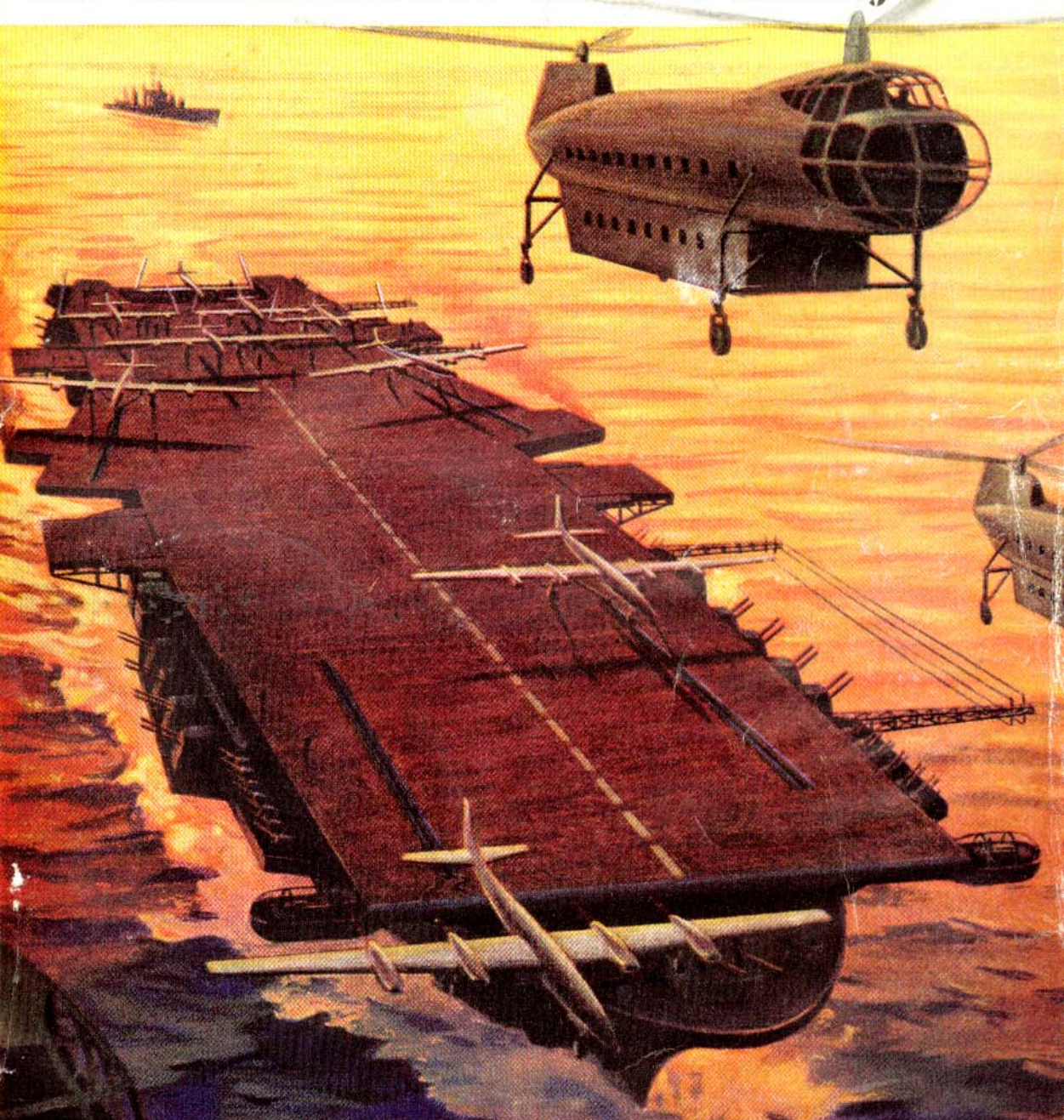
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Gus Settles Some

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Cold-Weather Blues



When frozen gas lines brought double trouble this cold morning, Gus proved that there's more than one way to get water into your gas tank.

By Martin Bunn

IT WAS just one of those things that happen from time to time. Every one picked the same morning to be late for work at the Model Garage, and they all had the same excuse—ice. Lots of ice. Every street, highway, and sidewalk for miles around was coated solid.

Gus Wilson eased his old coupe across the slick drive to the door of the shop ten minutes after the usual opening time. Stan Hicks and Greg Jones, the grease monkey, came sliding and skidding across the ice-coated highway from the bus stop.

"All the buses are way late," Stan explained.

"I didn't make it on time myself," Gus admitted with a grin, "and I'll bet we're going to have a busy day. That big drop in temperature last night turned the rain to sleet and must have made plenty of grief for our customers."

"Holy cats!" Stan exclaimed, looking at the thermometer on the door frame. "Five above."

Greg had the door rolled aside and Gus drove into the shop. "Put chains on all four wheels of the wrecker," he called to Stan. "Before we get our coats off the telephone's going to start ringing and someone'll be hollering for help."

But the first call wasn't by phone. It arrived personally and noisily. Gus was slipping into his coveralls when a raucous chorus of horn blasts sounded outside the shop. Gus told Greg to see what all the noise was about.

"There's a lot of cars out there," Greg reported a minute later, "and they're all fighting."

"This I gotta see," grinned Gus, starting

for the door. "Cars fighting with each other."

"I mean," Greg amended, "the cars are all tangled up and the people are fighting."

On the ice-glazed driveway, at divergent angles but linked together by hooked bumpers, stood four cars. In a little cluster stood the drivers—three men and a woman. They were pointing and loudly accusing one another of causing the tangle. One of them was the buxom and talkative Mrs. Miller. Another was Silas Barnstable, the town's most active tightwad. He actually works at it. The other two Gus didn't know.

"What goes on?" Gus demanded, shouting to make himself heard.

The four suddenly stopped arguing and turned to look at Gus. Silas was first to take advantage of the moment's silence.

"It's her fault," he yelled, jabbing a skinny forefinger at Mrs. Miller. "Joe Dunphy, here," he indicated a droopy-mustached individual, "was pushin' my car into your shop and she cut in ahead of me."

"I did not!" snapped Mrs. Miller.

"You did too," Silas went on. "And you busted my bumper. I'll stand you a suit in court, derved if I won't."

"Mr. Barnstable!" Mrs. Miller drew herself up, her voice dripping ladylike scorn. "How can you make such a ridiculous statement? I'm the one who should be suing. I was pushing my brother-in-law's car—oh, Mr. Wilson, you don't know my brother-in-law, George Trotter. George is married to my sister, Amanda—you remember her. She visited me three summers ago and while she was here you worked on her differential, or something. They live in Akron, Ohio, and they just came here for a visit and—now where was I?"

George looked as if he wished he had stayed in Akron.

"You were just about to sue Silas," Gus

told her, "but before we get this case all the way to the Supreme Court, let's get in out of the cold."

Stan brought a pail of sand and scattered it over the slippery driveway. Then he helped Gus and the three men untangle the snarl of bumpers.

"No damage other than a scratch or two," Gus remarked. "Seems to me the courts won't get any business out of this after all."

"It's lucky for her," Silas grumbled, carefully examining the bumper of his old car.

"Now let's see," Gus said. "Mrs. Miller was pushing Mr. Trotter's car, and Mr. Dunphy was pushing Mr. Barnstable's. . . . All right, Mrs. Miller, ladies first."

Mrs. Miller and Trotter managed to maneuver his car into the shop. Joe Dunphy, obviously happy to be rid of the whole business, pushed Barnstable's old bus into the garage, backed out, and drove on his way. Stan shoved the door closed after him.

Gus backed up against a radiator and fished around in his pockets for his pipe and tobacco. "Well," he asked, "what seems to be the trouble?"

"I been robbed, that's what the matter is," Silas snarled.

"What, again?" Gus asked in mock surprise.

"You're derved right. Robbed," Silas said.

"You're the most robbed man I ever heard of," Gus added. "Who did what to you this time?"

"Some crook sold me gasoline with water in it," Silas howled, "and now my gas line's frozen. It's a sin and a shame the way a man gets cheated left and right these days. I'll sue 'em in every court of the land, even if I do have to pay a lawyer."

"You're sure bound to sue somebody today," Gus grinned. He knows that before Silas will buy even a gallon of gas, he shops around all the cut-rate pumps to see which one is a fraction of a penny cheaper. "You can't expect to get decent fuel for what you pay," Gus told him, "but I doubt if even the stuff you buy is actually watered. And what makes you think your fuel line is frozen, anyway?"

"Couldn't be anything else," Silas said. "The motor wouldn't start this morning—not even after I poured hot water over the carburetor. There's plenty gas in the tank but when I unhooked the fuel line to the carburetor there wasn't any a-tall."

"Do you keep this car in a garage?"

"Outdoors," Silas answered. "Naturally I

ain't gonna pay the outrageous prices they ask for garages these days."

"Naturally," agreed Gus.

"Now look here," said Silas. "I'm in a hurry—a big hurry. There's a sale of overcoats down in the city and I want to get there before all the good ones are gone."

"Keep your shirt—or coat—on," Gus told him. "I'll look over your car in a few minutes." Mumbling to himself, Silas retired to a warm corner.

Trotter spoke up: "I guess my trouble's the same as his—frozen gas line. I'm a salesman. I make a lot of short trips and then leave my car standing while I see customers. Whenever it gets good and cold I have trouble. When I come out after making a call, sometimes I can't start the motor. And if it does start, it runs badly and pops back through the carburetor."

"Ever have it worked on for this trouble?" Gus asked.

"Yeah, I've had it in several shops. They all found the fuel line frozen up but none of 'em could find where the water came from."

"How about the gas?" Gus asked.

"Can't be that," Trotter answered. "I always buy the best."

"When did you find it frozen this time?"

"Early this morning," Trotter said, "I ran down to the railroad station to pick up a bag. My car had been in Gracie's—Mrs. Miller's—heated garage overnight. The motor started all right then. When I got back from the station I left the car outside while I ate breakfast. When I came out it ran for a moment and then quit. It wouldn't start. Gracie told me about you and pushed me over here."

"Need your car today?" Gus asked him.

"Well, I ought to make a few calls."

"I'll drive you," Mrs. Miller offered. "We'll have fun."

Trotter gave her a look, and Gus, thinking about the icy streets and Mrs. Miller's driving, could almost see him shudder.

"I'll probably have your car ready by this afternoon," Gus told Trotter.

As Trotter left the shop with Mrs. Miller, Silas came out of his corner.

"Hey. . . . How about my car?" he grumbled. "I told you I was in a hurry."

Gus didn't answer him. He got into Barnstable's car and stepped on the starter button. The starter whirred but the engine didn't fire. Gus got out and loosened the drain plug in the bottom of the fuel tank. He sniffed the liquid that dripped onto his hand.

"There's water in your gas, all right," Gus



Gus turned the stream of water on the gas tank for half a minute. Then he unscrewed the cap.

said. He disconnected the line from the fuel pump to the carburetor and found it dry. Then he took the fuel pump off the car. In the trap there was water and ice. Gus told Stan to clean and wash the pump in gasoline.

"I could have done that myself," Silas grouched.

"Why didn't you?" Gus asked him.

Silas ignored the question and went on: "What I want to know is how the water gets in the tank if, as you say, those crooks ain't selling me watered gas."

Gun unscrewed the cap of the gas tank and studied it carefully for a couple of minutes. He took a piece of clean rag from his workbench drawer and wadded it tightly into the filler hole of the tank. Then he screwed the cap in place.

"Greg," he called, "hook up the hose and bring it over here." Greg handed the nozzle to Gus, who turned the stream of water on the gas tank. After half a minute he shut off the water, unscrewed the cap, and took out the rag. It was soaking wet.

Gus laughed and held the cap out to Silas. "How much did you pay for this? A dime?"

"A dime?" Silas cackled. "No, sir, I got it at a cut-rate place for a nickel."

"Why, you did even better on that than I thought," Gus said.

"Just because I got a little laid aside, I ain't gonna waste my money paying you fellers fancy prices for these things."

"No, I guess not," said Gus. "You'd rather waste it buying junk that gets you in trouble. You bought this leaky cap for a nickel. It let water into your tank every time a hard rain came along. And then the water froze every time the weather turned cold. A good fuel cap would have cost you 40 cents. Now you've got to buy another cap and you've

got to pay me a buck for this trouble-shooting job. Figure it out yourself."

Silas figured it out quickly and his face turned a bright red. "You gimme that old cap," he said. "I'll get my nickel back from that crook. If he don't give me it, I'll sue."

"Here we go again," Gus shrugged.

After Silas had driven out of the shop, Gus put Stan to work checking the tank of Trotter's car, while he himself took off the fuel pump. It not only had water in it, but also a surprising amount of dirt and sediment. Gus cleaned it and put it back on. He was just drawing up the bolts when Stan came up.

"Nothing wrong with *his* gas cap," the young mechanic reported. "It's got a good gasket and clamps on tight. But there's water in the tank all right, and it's dirty as blazes too. I drained out the water and got a handful of mud with it. You think somebody—kids maybe—put dirt in?"

"Could be," said Gus thoughtfully. "The pump had more than its share too, so we better blow out the line. That's probably where the ice was, and we'll clear out the dirt too. . . ."

It was done, and the first churning of the starter promptly drew clean gas into the pump bowl, whereupon the engine took off lustily.

"That does it, boss," Stan yelled. "Want me to park it outside?"

Gus was about to say it might as well stand in the warm shop, which wasn't crowded. But an uneasy feeling refused to disappear.

"We fixed it," he growled at last, "but we didn't *solve* it. . . . How did the water and dirt get in?"

"Gosh, I dunno," said Stan helplessly.

"Nor do I, but I'm going to find out."

Gus walked around the car, flipped open the fender door over the filler cap, and thrust a trouble light close. After a moment he got under the car and peered up at the same spot.

"Okay, Stan," he said on emerging. "Get under there now and finish the job."

Stan, much mystified, peered into the same place. When he got up, his face was red.

"Guess I did it again," he mumbled. "But who ever saw the hose coupling between the filler spout and the tank pull loose like that?"

"We did," Gus retorted, cheerful once more. "Maybe the clamp wasn't pulled up tight at the factory. Anyway, the wheel slung dirt or water up into the fender and it funneled down into the loose hose neck. But as you said, who'd think of that?"

"Only you, boss, only you," responded Stan.

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