

POPULAR SCIENCE

MONTHLY

MECHANICS - AUTOS - HOMEBUILDING



Who Is Building the

*BEST
BOMBER?*

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All About
18 Little Cars
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Gus Finds a

The owner of the car had long since given up in despair, but the ancient vehicle's astonishing behavior was a challenge Gus could not resist.

By Martin Bunn

THE traffic light flicked to amber. Gus took his foot from the gas and rolled to a stop just short of the crosswalk. He recognized the grinning safety-patrol boy.

"Hi, Mr. Wilson!"

Gus waved at the white-belted youngster. "Getting any more flat tires on your bike?"

The boy shook his head. "I don't ride down alleys any more since I picked up that last piece of glass." His alert glance slid past Gus, to the rear, and Gus automatically looked up to his rear-view mirror.

Then he stuck his arm out the window and waved it vigorously. The oncoming car, an old sedan, braked to a sudden stop almost on the crosswalk, alongside Gus.

The pretty driver took her foot from the brake and, with utter lack of self-consciousness, spoke to the world in general: "Can't think and drive at the same time!" She seemed surprised when Gus laughed aloud.

"That's right," Gus called. "But a lot of people try. You didn't see that traffic light at all, did you?"

"Stupid of me." She smiled back. "Trying to remember the grocery list I left on the kitchen table."

Gus Yields to Curiosity

The signal went to amber, to green, and the two cars shifted to first gear at the same time. Gus pulled away, but the woman's car stopped short in the middle of the intersection. He stepped on his brake and twisted in his seat to see if she needed help. To his astonishment, she was unconcernedly digging through her purse.

On an impulse, Gus killed his own motor and walked back to the other car, a 1936 Plymouth, he noted, in good shape for a car that old.

"Excuse me," Gus inquired politely. "Is something wrong?"

"The car won't run," the woman said brightly, "and I have to wait a minute."

Gus opened his mouth and closed it again. He watched, fascinated, while she corrected the curve of her lips with a golden capsule, clicked shut her purse and carefully checked her wrist watch.

"There!" she said. "One minute, exactly. Thanks, anyway." Her starter stirred the engine into life and with a pleasant nod she drove away, leaving Gus standing in the middle of the street.

Mystery Car Turns Up Again

It was not much later in the day when the same woman, in the same car, pulled up to the gas pumps at the Model Garage. Gus went out.

"Did you remember all the grocery list?"

She looked at Gus blankly. Then her eyes crinkled in recognition. "Oh, it's you. I didn't know you worked here. No, I couldn't remember everything. I forgot raisins, and I forgot to get gas. You better fill it up."

The gas in the tank. Gus raised the hood to check the oil. He held up the dipstick.

"Low. And it doesn't look too clean. How long since you've had your oil changed?"

She bit her lip. "I knew there was something I should have done. My husband told me to be sure to change the oil." Her eyes went to her wrist. "And I still have to go back for the raisins."

"Why don't you leave your car here while you finish your shopping? Won't take but a few minutes."

"Okay." She slid out of the seat and headed briskly toward the supermarket.

The buying of the missing raisins took about as long as Gus had expected. The

Golden Thread



*"Excuse me," Gus
inquired politely.
"Is something wrong?"*

woman came into the office of the Model Garage with a large shopping bag full of groceries.

Gus cleared a space on his counter for the groceries while she hunted through her purse and paid the bill.

"Uh—where you parked this morning—" he said carefully. "That's a pretty bad corner. If a truck comes sailing up the highway . . ." He pantomimed a crash.

She glared at him. "You're just like all the men—you think women don't know how to behave behind a wheel. I told you that the car wouldn't run. You've got to wait one minute when it stalls."

Gus raised his eyebrows. "Why one minute? Why not two, or five minutes?"

She didn't know. "The car's been doing that for the last year. My husband doesn't want to get rid of it; says it's the best car he ever had. But it got so he had to buy another car for his business—he travels a lot—because he never knew when this one was going to start acting up."

"Ever think of taking it to a garage?"

She gave a derisive snort. "We've had it to 20 different garages where we used to live. My husband swore he'd never take it to another one." She gathered up her groceries. "Well, thanks, anyway, for the quick service."

"What happens when it stalls?" Gus persisted. "Does it give you any warning?"

"It doesn't stall; it stops." She was definite in her choice of words. "Weeks will go by, and then the old trouble begins all over again. Summer, winter, rain, dry—just stops, at a red light, or even sailing along the highway."

Gus chewed the end of his pencil. "You know, I'd sorta like to check that car."

"Can't afford it. It is embarrassing sometimes, sitting in the middle of the street with all those horns blaring at me and men sticking their heads out and yelling about women drivers! But my husband says he

refuses to spend any more money trying to find out what makes this car stop, Mr. . . ."

"I'm Gus Wilson."

"And I'm Mrs. Frederick Baumann."

"You say you're new here, Mrs. Baumann. Live very far away?"

"A mile or two. It's too far to walk."

Gus flipped a mental coin and made his decision. He hated puzzles, anyway.

"Suppose I drive you home. I'd like to see just what I can do with your car." He held up a hand. "If I don't find out, it won't cost you a penny. If I do—well, your husband can decide whether he wants it fixed. How's that?"

Pretty Mrs. Baumann hesitated. "Sounds all right. But what's the catch? You never saw me before in your life!"

Gus grinned. "You forget that I have seen you before, parked square in the center of one of the busiest streets in town."

Mrs. Baumann laughed. "Fair enough."

When Gus returned after driving her home in his own car, Stan Hicks was just backing the Plymouth out to make room for another car.

"Put that car in the back," Gus called. "I'm going to check it over. Did it start all right?"

Stan nodded. "Shouldn't it?"

"I don't know. Listen to this, Stan," and Gus described the old Plymouth's peculiar behavior.

Stan Makes a Good Guess

Stan pondered the problem. "If it stops short without a grunt or a kick, I'd start checking the electrical end. But that's only a guess."

"It's a good one. Well, I'll see what I can find."

When the course of Stan's work brought him back two hours later, Gus was leaning on the front fender staring moodily at the smoothly ticking engine.

"Any luck, Gus?"



BEFORE automobiles had tops, the thoughtful motorist carried a "storm apron"—a tarpaulin with holes for the passengers' heads. Two-seater car, two holes. Four-seater, four holes, etc.

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Gus Finds a Golden Thread

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Gus frowned. "New points and new distributor. Checked and rechecked them. Went over the electrical system from A to Izzard. It's as good as new, and most of the parts are new. Even a new condenser. No wonder Mrs. Baumann's husband didn't want to put any more money into it."

Stan coughed sympathetically.

Why Mechanics Grow Gray

"Not a gauge in the shop shows a single thing. Battery good, cables clean. Coil new, and tests that way. No shorts, no poor contacts. The ignition switch is 'all right. This pile of trouble is just as good, electrically, as the day it came out of the factory."

"And I suppose the gas is all right, too?"

"Fuel? All lines are clear, Stan. The fuel pump is a rebuilt exchange pump, but it's all right. And don't mention vapor lock."

Stan blinked. "It's running, isn't it? Maybe you fixed it."

"Yes, it's running . . . now."

The motor stopped dead.

"Kill the ignition," Gus said shortly. "Let's see what a cup of coffee will do."

The coffee warm inside him, Gus felt a little better when he came back to the sedan. He lifted the hood and glared at the motor. He used his fingers to work the starter and the motor ran without complaint. Stan came over carrying fresh wiping cloths and an air of sympathy.

"Any luck yet, Gus?"

Gus wagged his head and absently eyed the distributor. "No luck."

And the motor stopped again.

Gus Has the Situation in Hand

For a long moment Gus remained motionless. Then his hand shot downward, like a striking snake, and back out again. He looked closely at what he had in his palm. Then he poked his arm into the engine compartment. The starter ground, and the engine caught. Gus straightened and dropped the hood with a clang of finality.

"Stan, will you run out and pick up Mrs. Baumann? And you can give her a message for me when you get there."

"What's the message?"

"Just say her car is fixed—for good!"

Twenty minutes later, Stan was back with Mrs. Baumann. Gus gave them both a cheery greeting.

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Gus Finds a Golden Thread

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"Your friend here—" she gave Stan a flash of brilliant white teeth—"tells me you have my car fixed already. What was wrong?"

"You know what an oil breather cap is, Mrs. Baumann?"

She looked blank.

Stan crowded closer as Gus raised the hood and pointed. "This is it, down by the lower left side of the motor." He reached in his pocket. "And this is what's in it." He held out a long black thread.

Gus Attempts to Explain

"No, don't touch it. Wait till I wipe the grease off," and he pulled the length of thread through a clean cloth.

The thread changed magically from a dull dirty black to a shining red-gold.

"Pretty, isn't it?"

Mrs. Baumann put out a tentative finger. "Yes, quite pretty. What is it?"

"This is part of the packing inside the oil breather cap—wire mesh, like the scouring pads you use in your kitchen. Now, your car is in excellent shape, but it's old, and one of these long wire threads had plenty of time to work itself out of the breather cap, which in this model is not too far from your distributor." Gus looked at her. "This right here—see?—that's the distributor. This sends out the current in the proper dose and sequence to operate the motor."

"Current?" Mrs. Baumann was puzzled. "I thought cars ran on gasoline."

Mrs. Baumann Finds It Heavy Going

Stan winced, and Gus pretended not to notice. "So they do, so they do. Now, this long thread worked quite a way out of the breather cap. Normally, it would hang vertically alongside the breather neck, right here," and Gus pointed again.

"As the months and the years went by it accumulated quite a coating of oil and dirt, and hanging where it was, between the breather neck and the motor, it got to be about as invisible as anything in plain sight could ever be."

"Very interesting," Mrs. Baumann observed. "But what made the car stop?"

"Occasionally the forward movement of the car or the air blown back by the fan—this is the fan—would flick the hanging thread right over here, to the lead-in wire on the distributor. Bang—no current."

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Mrs. Baumann gazed dreamily in the general direction of the engine.

"You know what a short circuit is, Mrs. Baumann. The thread, or the wire, because of its sticky coating of dirt and grease, would cling just long enough to the vital spot here," and he pointed once again, "to completely kill the function of the distributor. Then the thread, without the fan blast to hold it in place, would swing back to where it normally hung, impossible to see."

Mrs. Baumann elucked admiringly. "You certainly have sharp eyes, Mr. Wilson."

Gus grinned. "To tell you the truth, I just happened to be looking right at the distributor when that long thread licked out. I thought I was seeing things."

"Well, I think it's just wonderful!" she said. "Now, what do I owe you?"

Gus Settles for a Cup of Coffee

"I hadn't thought about that," Gus said slowly. "I didn't actually install any parts, and to charge you for *all* the time I put in . . . Look, Mrs. Baumann, we're in business here at the Model Garage with the best equipment, the best in gas and oils. Suppose you let us remind you when you're due for an oil change or lubrication, and you can concentrate on remembering your grocery list. Tell your husband, when he gets home from his business trip, that he can buy me a cup of coffee and I'll explain to him what was wrong with the car. All right with you?"

It was all right with her, and they were all laughing when Mrs. Baumann deftly backed the old sedan out of the Model Garage. When she was about to pull away she tooted the horn and Gus went over.

"Thanks again, Mr. Wilson, and there's something else I should thank you for. When you mentioned my husband and the cup of coffee, I just remembered I haven't a drop of coffee in the house. That means another trip to the store right now!" And the Plymouth pulled away. END

Next Month: Gus takes a gamble.

Not Guilty

THE woman tourist posed for a snapshot in front of the fallen pillars of an ancient temple in Greece. "Don't get the car in the picture," she warned, "or my husband will think I ran into the place."—*Fireman's Fund Record.*