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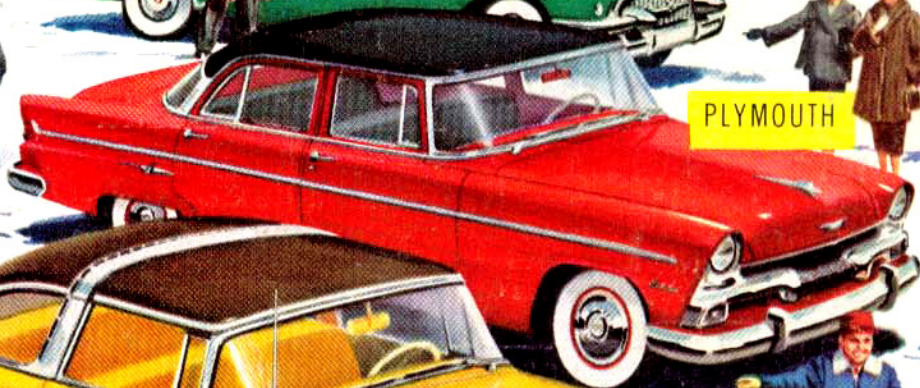
MONTHLY

1955
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SHOW

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BUICK



PLYMOUTH



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Gus Backs



The kids would be waiting for him but tonight Gus was miles away, playing real Santa Claus.

By Martin Bunn

GUS WILSON was just closing the Model Garage on the evening before Christmas when snow began to fall. The flakes floated slowly down in feathery loveliness. Gus washed up and, drying his work-hardened hands, looked out at the falling whiteness.

"If I had time," he commented to Stan Hicks, "I'd get out there and heave snowballs. As it is, I'd better hustle. I'm booked to be Santa Claus for the kids at the Kipp Street school tonight."

Stan grinned at the thought of Gus dressed up in red pants and white whiskers. At that moment a small, snow-covered car of foreign make turned in from the street and scooted beneath the partly lowered garage door. A pleasant-faced young sailor unfolded himself from behind the wheel.

"Lucky that I got in before you closed," he said, "There's something wrong with this limey heap."

Time Out for Santa

Gus cocked an ear to the roughly idling motor. He hoped that there was nothing seriously wrong, since he would be pinched for time to get ready for his ordeal as Santa Claus. Stan, Gus knew, was shining himself up for a special date.

"Sounds a little rough," he commented.

"Maybe that's all," the sailor said, "but I can't afford to take any chances—not tonight, with the garages closing for

"Look, sailor, I'm stuck here for a couple of hours. I have to do a Santa Claus act..."

into Christmas



Christmas Eve, and me with a hundred miles yet to go. Around midnight I figure to be playing Santa Claus for my kid—haven't seen him for a solid year."

Gus nodded sympathetically. "Now about your trouble."

"I drove this heap right out of a used-car lot down in the city," the sailor said. "Hurry to get home—didn't eat. I nosed down into the curb at the restaurant up the street a couple blocks, and couldn't back out. Only wanted a sandwich. Guess I never had the car in reverse before."

"Couldn't back out from the curb!" Gus exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that someone sold you a car that won't go in reverse?"

"Right," the sailor said. "Doesn't have enough poop to back away from the curb. Restaurant fellow helped me push her back into the street so I could get going forward."

Little Car Behaves Perfectly

Gus got in the car, a tiny imported sedan, put it in reverse and backed it up smartly. He ran it back and forth. A foolish look came into the sailor's eyes. "Seems all right now," he said. "Maybe I'd better shove off."

Urgently wanting to close up, Gus had half a mind to let him go. After all, he told himself, this motor had less than 40 horsepower, and that street at the restaurant was high-crowned. It would take power to back from the curb there. But the brakes felt as if they'd been set up a little too snug. And that rough idle sounded as if one plug was cutting out.

Gus thrust his heavy shoulders be-



"Just didn't know anyone else to call, Mr. Wilson. I was hoping maybe I'd be home by midnight..."

neath the hood, ran his screwdriver over the plugs, located the weak sister and replaced it with a new one. Then he cleaned and set the others, checked the points and gave the idling screw a quarter turn.

Gus Eases the Brakes

Working with calm speed, Gus raised each end of the car with the floor jack; the rear brakes *were* dragging a bit, and he backed them off. He put a hand to the brake pedal, to check floorboard clearance and stroke length. He started the motor, listened to it approvingly, ran the car back and forth a few times on the garage floor.

"You can roll now, sailor," he said. "Take that hundred miles easy. Never mind the pay. Just call it from one Santa to another."

"Thanks a million, pal," the sailor said. "And Merry Christmas, too!"

Looking after him, a sense of unease came to Gus, but he shrugged it off. He went down the street to the restaurant and ordered a double hamburger.

"You been working late, Gus?" the proprietor inquired.

"Yeah. Had a last-minute customer. A sailor with a little foreign car. Did you see him?"

"Sure. That car wouldn't pull the hat off your head. I had to help push the thing away from the curb."

"That's what he told me," Gus said. "I wonder how a man feels when he hasn't seen his wife and kid for a whole year."

An hour later, dressed in his Santa Claus outfit, Gus was watching the kids put on the school pageant. He stood far back in the rear, where the kids couldn't see him. His enjoyment of the show was mildly shadowed by nervousness over the Santa Claus act. Thing to remember, he told himself, was to say Ho! Ho! Ho! every now and then. He was worrying

the thought when Miss Davidson, one of the teachers, touched his elbow.

"You're wanted on the phone, Gus," she whispered.

Gus walked into a side room and picked up the phone.

"Hello," a worried voice said over the wire. "I've had a time getting you. Fellow at the diner said you'd be at the school now. I'm Jimmie Wilder—the sailor with the little car. I missed a turn out here. I'm not ditched or stuck—just can't back up. I'm phoning from the Sam Reynolds farm."

Glancing at his wrist watch, Gus felt a sinking sensation. The Reynolds farm was several miles out, and in 45 minutes he had to be up on the stage.

"Look, sailor," Gus said desperately. "I'm stuck here for a couple of hours. I have to do a Santa Claus act at

the school, and I'm due on soon."

"Just didn't know anyone else to call," Wilder said, an infinite weariness in his voice. "I was hoping maybe I'd be home by midnight . . ."

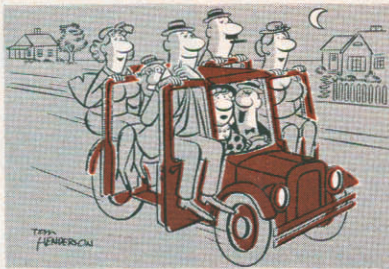
Wrong Diagnosis

Gus was mentally flaying himself. He knew, right down in whatever prompts a mechanic's hunches, that an erratic spark plug and slightly dragging rear brakes shouldn't have stopped that car from backing from the curb.

"Stay where you are, Wilder," he said into the phone. "I'll be right out."

As Gus pulled away from the school, his tires throwing snow and gravel, he caught a glimpse of the worried face of Miss Davidson looking after him from the school door. Gus made fast time. As he wheeled into the Reynolds yard, the sailor ran down the farmhouse steps to meet him.

"Good going, mister," he breathed. "I'm about a mile down the road. Took the wrong turn. Trees and brush. Can't



"You would have to open your big mouth and ask if anyone wanted a lift home!"

Gus Backs into Christmas

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turn around and she won't back up." Under Gus's coat, he caught a glimpse of red. "Hey," he said, "you really *are* Mr. Santa Claus tonight, aren't you?"

The little car stood on a side road that led steeply down from the highway to a gravel pile the highway department had put in reserve for the winter. Gus parked on the highway shoulder, put out flares, walked down toward the car with a small tool kit in his hand. Softly falling snowflakes fluttered in the flash beam like moths.

The bumper of the car was hard against the steep side of the gravel pile. There was no room to turn around, but no reason, as far as Gus could see, why the car couldn't back out.

On This Night—No Easy Way Out

"I could tow you out, sailor," Gus said grimly, "but I won't. There could be a lot of uses for reverse gear on a night like this in a hundred miles."

Gus started the motor, put the car in reverse, eased up on the clutch. The motor took hold of the load, started to move the car back, and stalled. Good Lord, Gus thought, even this little engine should have more power than this. He tried several more times to back out, but each time the motor killed when it took the load. He got out, raised the hood, and worked the throttle linkage. The motor opened up from idle to high speed with a throaty roar.

Gus turned his flash on his wrist watch. He had just 25 minutes to get on the schoolhouse stage. He felt a rising of panic, shook it off. No man, he thought, could think clearly with his wind up. Calmly he pulled out his pipe, lit it.

Once again he got in and tried to back the car out. When the motor died he leaped out, thrust his head beneath the hood, nostrils expanded. He detected the faint but unmistakable odor of ozone, that distinctive smell that indicates electricity in the air.

"Aha!" Gus called. "You try backing her out, Wilder."

Gus flicked off his flashlight beam. This time as the engine died Gus saw a flash of spark at the rear of the engine block.

"Try her again," he said, playing his flash on the spot.

With the next try in reverse, Gus saw the little motor twist on its mountings under the strain. With the car on a downgrade, the back end of the block tilted just enough so that the oil-gauge pipe came against one of the primary circuit connections of the coil on the fire wall, short-circuiting the ignition. Gus bent the pipe forward a couple of inches. Then he put down the hood and leaned inside to speak to Wilder.

"Don't tell that kid of yours, sailor," he said, "what a dumb mechanic you ran into down the line. You can roll now."

A big grin came over the sailor's face. He shifted into reverse. Under the guiding beam of Gus's light, the little car backed stoutly up the grade to the highway.

"Thanks a million, mister," Wilder said, leaning out, the snowflakes falling on his face. "The kid will be asleep. Think I should wake him up, or just fill his stocking and let it go until morning?"

Only Minutes to Curtain Call

"If it were me," Gus said, "I'd wake him up. A year is an awfully long time to a kid."

"You said it," Wilder remarked. He shifted gears and was gone.

Gus stood there a moment, looking after him. His coat was sprinkled with snow, giving him the look of a shaggy bear. Then he was running to his car, dousing the flares, getting under way. As the car shot forward, he glanced at the dashboard clock.

"Eight minutes," he said aloud, "to make three miles and get on that stage. Santa Claus may be a few minutes late, but *those* kids see their fathers every day."

END

NEXT MONTH: Gus absolves the little green men.