

Popular Science

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Gus Puts In a Plug for the Teen-Agers



By Martin Bunn

FROM the 11-year-old sedan stepped a wisp of a man who couldn't have weighed much more than the spare tire. Hatless, he wore a fringe of white hair above a ministerial collar.

"Good morning," he said to the owner of the Model Garage. "I am the Reverend Dinwiddy. On the way here from Mill City my car began to whine. My boys think it's a dry wheel bearing."

"Can you leave it?" asked Gus.

"Yes, indeed. We'll be at the old Brace mansion. It's being torn down, and we're salvaging the paneling for my church."

"I'll bring the car over about four o'clock," promised Gus.

"That will give us ample time to load our loot," said Dinwiddy, pointing to a luggage rack on the sedan.

Stan checked the wheel bearings at Gus's request. "Look good to me, Boss," he reported a short time later.

"Guess I'll have to road-test her," Gus said, getting into the old car. On the road, all seemed normal until, at 30 m.p.h., a keening wail began. Gus stopped to inspect the radiator for loose fins or a plugged core hole. Finding nothing, he removed the fan belt. With the fan, water pump, and generator immobilized, he drove on a short way.

Stan countered with an uppercut. The youngster two-stepped backward and sat down.

The noise was even louder than before.

Back at the shop he inspected all manifold and exhaust connections, listened to the transmission and differential with the wheels running on jacks. There wasn't a whisper of a whine in any gear.

AT FOUR o'clock, Gus parked the car behind a house-wrecker's truck and approached the Brace house. The little minister staggered out under a load of oak paneling. A husky teen-ager with another load paused behind him.

"Find the trouble?" asked Dinwiddy.

Gus shook his head. "I've never run across anything just like it. Your wheel bearings are okay—and so is everything else we've checked so far."

The youth shoved past the minister aggressively and turned toward the street. The boards he carried swung around, their ends brushing Gus's shoul-



der enough to jar him. Dinwiddy gasped in dismay.

"Are you hurt? Ted is an impatient type—and hungry for supper, I think."

"No harm done," Gus assured him. "One of your boys, Reverend?"

"In a way—I am chaplain for the Mill City Corrective Home for Boys. Four of the boys volunteered to help me. Though they are considered difficult youngsters, we get along well."

"I'd like another look at your car, if you're coming back tomorrow," said Gus.

"No, not tomorrow. I promised to let the boys use my car a few hours." The little man suddenly looked worried. "They didn't say for what."

"Any day you can, then," said Gus.

STAN was near the door next morning when a chorus of yells and grunts drew his attention. Four boys were pushing Dinwiddy's car to the pump.

"Fill 'er up," ordered the biggest. He lit a cigarette as Stan put the hose nozzle into the tank neck. Gas gurgled in. At six gallons, the automatic nozzle shut off. Stan removed the hose.

"I said fill it," growled the boy.

"It won't take any more," replied Stan.

"Tank was empty, you jerk," snapped the other. "Why d'you think we pushed it in here? Gimme that!"

He lunged for the hose, cigarette in one hand. Stan straight-armed him and hung the hose on the pump. Furious, the boy swung for Stan's midriff. Stan blocked the blow, countered with a brisk uppercut. The big youngster two-stepped backward and sat down. Gus arrived, but the fight was over.

"He owes for six gallons," Stan muttered. "Wants more—but the tank is full."

A siren wailed at the corner, bore down screaming. The fallen boy got to

his feet. The four looked at each other, then ran off through the alley.

The siren died to a moan as Chief Eldon's police car pulled up. Eldon walked around the back of Dinwiddy's car, pausing a moment to bend down behind it.

"I'm looking for an old black sedan with three hefty boys," he said.

"Four pushed this car in," Gus answered. "What did the three do?"

"Could have been four," said Eldon in his mournful drawl. "One may have stayed behind the wheel. They broke open some 50-cent meters in the all-day parking lot at the railroad station less than 10 minutes ago. Nobody's around there, once the lot's filled and meter patrol's done, till the commuters come home. Our one witness says the car was bucking and barely got away. Call me if it shows, Gus."

Eldon drove off, his siren silent.

"Boss, it fits!" said Stan. "Those kids emptied the meters, then

the car conked out on the getaway . . ."

"Whoa!" cautioned Gus. "I don't know why, but Chief Eldon doesn't think so."

"Then why'd they scam like that?"

"They're from a corrective home," said Gus, getting into the car. "To them, cops spell trouble. The running is sort of automatic."

He tried the starter; there wasn't a pop of response from the engine. Together he and Stan pushed the car aside.

AN HOUR later a timid step entered the shop. The Reverend Dinwiddy's thin hair seemed to bristle with anxiety.

"Do you know where my boys went?"

"They didn't say," answered Gus. "A workman coming back to the Brace house after lunch saw my car here. He also told me of the parking-meter thefts. I must confess I'm a little worried about the boys."

"I don't think they robbed those meters," said Gus. "But you can ask them yourself, because here they come now."

Stan joined Gus and the minister as the boys sheepishly approached. The tall one held a clenched hand out to Stan.

"Here's one-eighty for the six gallons. Sorry I slugged you."

"Okay," grunted Stan. "We're even."

The smallest boy turned to Dinwiddy. "The workmen at the house said you came here to look for us. We heard about the meters. It wasn't us, Rev."

"We just wanted to surprise you," put in a third boy. "We borrowed your car to give it a good tune-up. We bought a condenser and new points and plugs and drove over here to put 'em in. Worked behind that

fence the wreckers put up, so you wouldn't see. Only we never did time the engine, 'cause it run about a minute and quit."

"We figured we was out of gas," finished the tall boy, "because your gas gauge don't work. But just after we got some, that cop sort of bugged us . . ."

A car screeched to a stop at the curb. It was Chief Eldon back again. Taut as guitar strings, the four boys seemed on the verge of flight.

"Only the wicked flee where no man pursueth," said Dinwiddy with a twinkle in his eyes. "Stay put."

"Want me to see whether I can find your trouble?" Gus asked the boys, as

Where'd it come from?



Ship's Time

In the days of Columbus, watches were unknown. To keep time aboard ship, hour-glasses were used. It was the job of young boys to turn the glasses, each of which ran for half an hour, and to report to the captain that they were on the job by sounding bells. In this way, a half-hour became one bell, an hour two bells, and four hours (the end of a watch) eight bells. The day began with eight bells for midnight and continued in cycles of four hours each day.

Eldon sauntered over and saluted Gus.

Four heads nodded. Gus inspected the distributor cap, rotor, points, and condenser connections. All were in order. He switched on the ignition and flicked the points with the coil wire held near the block. A spark flashed.

REPLACING the distributor cap, he pulled a plug cable free and held it near the block. A spark snapped

the valves lifted under the plugs, they hammered the electrodes over, until the spark gaps were closed. That shorted out the spark, and the engine stopped."

"Could you put in the right plugs, Mister?" the big boy asked. "We'll pay."

"I'll swap plugs with you," offered Gus. "We can regap yours good as new."

As the boys started removing plugs, Gus took the Chief and Dinwiddy aside.

"Satisfied, Chief? They couldn't have driven from the station with those plugs."

Eldon scratched his neck. "Who said they did? I came to tell you we caught the thieves."

"Oh," muttered Gus. "Tell me something else. Somebody must have reported seeing the boys push the car here. The description matched, so you rushed over. What told you it was the wrong car?"

"Nothing as fancy as your shorted plugs, Gus," said Eldon dryly. "I just felt the tailpipe. It was stone cold."



across as he cranked the engine. Maybe it was fuel failure, after all, Gus thought.

But the automatic choke was properly closed, and an odor of raw gas testified that some fuel was reaching the engine. Again Gus pondered the possibility of ignition trouble. That didn't seem likely either, since he'd just proved there was a hot spark right up to the plugs.

New plugs, too—now that, he suddenly realized, could be the trouble. He unscrewed one and looked at the tip.

"You know what plug this engine's supposed to take?" he asked a boy.

"Sure, a J11. But they didn't have that number, so we took the nearest to it—J12Y."

"That's one way to figure," remarked Gus. "It just happens to be wrong. You see, these plugs have extended tips. They go too far into the cylinder. Every time

NEXT morning, the Dinwiddy car stopped again outside the shop.

"About that noise," Gus asked the minister. "I meant to ask you—do you hear it when you're driving home?"

"Only on the way here."

"Know what I think?" mused Gus. "When that roof rack isn't loaded, the wind whistling through its channel members makes them vibrate and whine."

The minister pointed to the bare car roof. "That's what I came to tell you. Yesterday I took off the carrier, and the noise disappeared. Then last night I was working on my sermon and Saint John gave me the answer."

"He was a mechanic, too?"

"Not quite," replied Dinwiddy. "But he gave me the text of my sermon: 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof.' I saw a great light," he finished, chuckling. ■ ■