

Gus and the Harmonic Pixie

Braving wind and storm on a peace mission, he brings harmony to two screws "harmonic balancers."

By Martin Bunn

"HEY, boss, take a look!" Stan Hicks called from the door of the Model Garage shop. "This is going to be something."

In spite of the lateness of the season, the day had been still, hot, and sticky, as if a summer thunderstorm were brewing. Gus mopped his perspiring face and went over to the door to look out. The late-afternoon sky had turned the color of tarnished brass overhead, and to the west was a dense, black curtain.

"Boy! Ain't it a—" Stan managed to get out before his voice was drowned in an ear-splitting clap of thunder that trailed away to sullen mutterings. In the dead silence it left, the office telephone rang with jarring sharpness. Then Joe Clark called crisply: "For you, Gus."

Gus went into the office and picked up the instrument. The voice that answered was edged with conscious authority.

"P. X. Jones speaking," it announced. "My car is stalled. Send a competent mechanic immediately. Good-by."

It makes Gus bristle to be ordered around, especially by someone he doesn't know.

"Wait a minute," he replied with some irritation. "Who are you, anyway?"

"P. X. Jones, I told you," the voice repeated pompously. "The person who operates this establishment tells me that you are trustworthy with cars. I must have mine back in running condition at once."

"Where are you?" Gus demanded.

"Just a minute," and the man at the other end of the wire paused. Then his voice came back. "They tell me it's known as Lucy and Bill's. A sort of hamburger joint."

"I know the place," Gus assured him. "When this storm that's coming up is over, I'll be right out to help you."

"Oh, I can't wait." P. X. Jones's voice took on a pleading note. "This is really urgent. I have to get down to Washington."

Before Gus could answer, a lurid glare licked the office walls, and another bolt of lightning blasted open the sky. The office phone went completely dead with the roar. Gus stared at the silent receiver.

"Oh, well," he told himself, "it *could* be as important as he says. Anyway I can't do more than get wet."

"Here she comes," Joe said as big raindrops began to spatter the concrete apron at the gas pump. "She's going to be a lulu."

Gus went back to the shop door. "Get your slicker," he told Stan. "There's a car stalled at Lucy and Bill's—a hurry-up job."

He got into the wrecker and drove out of the shop. Stan closed the garage door and climbed in beside him. The wind-driven rain streamed on the windshield faster than the blades of the wipers could clear it off.

Gus switched on the parking lights and drove cautiously through the storm. The highway ahead was a dim, wavering gray ribbon except when the glare of lightning made the wind-bent trees stand out vividly.

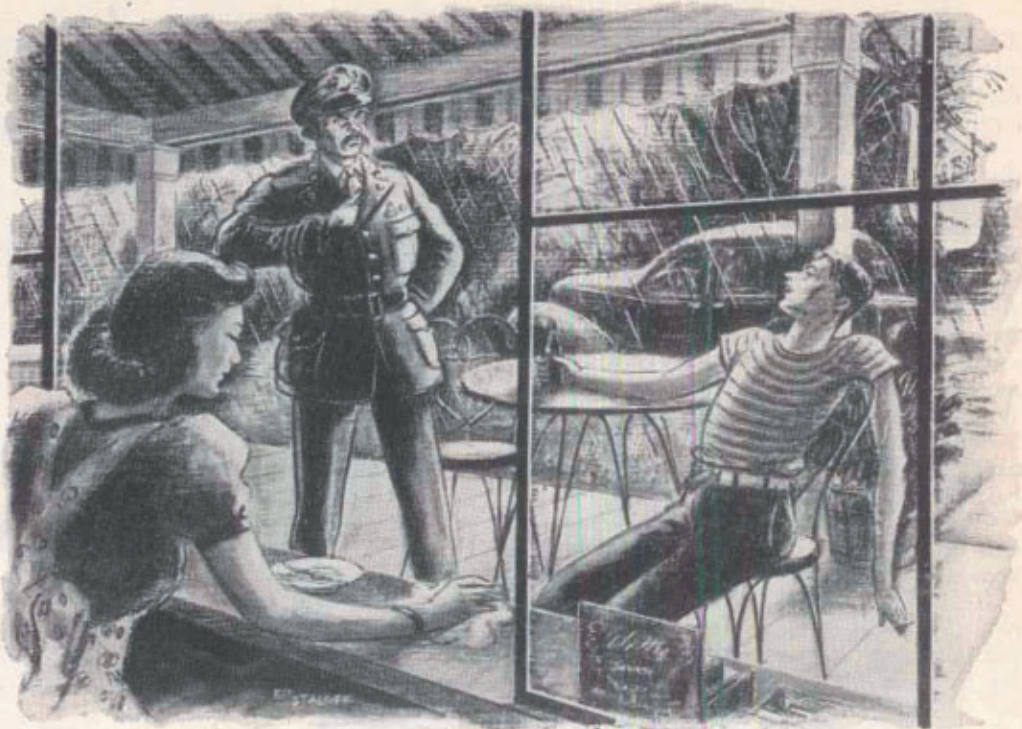
It took a full 15 minutes to drive to the roadside eating and juke-box place run by Lucy and Bill, but by the time the wrecker had reached it, the storm was about spent and the western sky was beginning to lighten. The only car in the parking place was an eight-year-old sedan. On the veranda were a pompous, walrus-mustached individual in uniform and a short, sly-faced fellow. The uniform was nothing Gus had ever seen before. It consisted of a brown tunic and dark-green trousers topped by a military cap. An enameled emblem on the cap looked to Gus like a fat pigeon with a sprig in its beak.

As he and Stan walked up in the lessening rain, the short fellow waved airily. "Tell them who you are, Pixie," he suggested to Walrus, who was pacing up and down.

The mustached fellow took something from a wallet and bowed from the waist.

"My card, sir," he said, presenting an oblong pasteboard to Gus. Stan snickered, but Gus managed to keep his face straight as he read: "The National Confederation for International Harmony. P. X. Jones, Grand Harmonic Balancer."

P. X. Jones bowed stiffly again. "At your



On the veranda were a pompous, walrus-mustached man in uniform and a sly-faced fellow.

service, sir," he said, "and at the service of all suffering humanity."

"Well—er—thanks," Gus muttered uncertainly. "Now, about your car . . ."

P. X. Jones gestured toward the car. "Fix it, my good fellow," he ordered. "It's urgent. Much depends upon my reaching Washington without further delay."

The sly-faced man stopped Jones as he started toward the sedan. "Hold on, Pixie," he said. "You can't afford to get your uniform wet—you gotta wear it tomorrow."

Gus, grinning now in spite of himself, asked: "What's the matter with your car?"

"We stopped here," Jones explained, "on the insistence of Mr. Fundy, my public-relations expert, to get a bite to eat. When we returned to my car—"

Fundy interrupted. "Don't forget to tell him you left the motor running," he prompted. "When we got back it had stalled."

Jones frowned. "My attention," he said, "was on matters of higher importance."

"Then the starter wouldn't turn the motor over," Fundy cut in.

"My first thought," Jones went on, "was that the starter had jammed—that had happened before. I put the car into reverse, and Fundy and I pushed it forward. That freed

the motor so the starter would turn it over. But it scraped and squealed."

"Sounded like a couple of tomcats under the hood," Fundy put in. "Scared old Pixie so bad he cut the motor right away."

"I consulted the proprietor of this place," Jones said with dignity. "He thought it was a broken piston or crankshaft trouble and suggested I call you."

"Fix it as fast as you can, will you?" Fundy requested. "We have to get out of Washington early enough tomorrow to get back by evening."

"You won't have much time there," Gus said.

"We don't need much time," Fundy explained. "Anyway, Pixie's a night watchman, and he's got to get back on the job by 6 o'clock. Tonight's his night off."

Jones turned an embarrassed red. "My services to the Confederation," he explained, "bring me no financial return."

"Except your bite out of the annual dues. And when you pass the hat at meetings," Fundy amended.

The Grand Harmonic Balancer let that one go by. "There being no salary attached to my high office," he went on as if he hadn't heard, "it is necessary that I earn my

living otherwise. I prefer to do it as a night watchman. Then I have ample time to reflect on the tragic state of the world and to formulate plans for its betterment."

Gus's head was beginning to spin. "Well, that's—er—dandy," he said soothingly. "Suppose we try your starter again."

The rain had stopped while they were talking, and they went out to the sedan. Its back seat was occupied by a big camera and tripod. Pixie got in and stepped on the starter. After a couple of attempts, the motor took hold, but from under the hood there came a high-pitched, squealing racket. Pixie cut the ignition quickly.

Gus lifted the hood, and his eye first caught the combined pulley and harmonic-balancer unit mounted under the fan.

"Wonder if Pixie took his high-sounding title from that," he thought, "or if he even knows there's such a thing on his car."

He had Pixie start up again, and the motor ran with the same squealing noise, but this time it appeared to Gus to be coming from the harmonic-balancer unit. "Let her idle," he told Pixie and watched as, after a few revolutions, the engine stalled.

Gus felt the fan belt and inspected the generator closely. Grinning, he took the aluminum cover off the balancer unit. A small bolt dropped down on the drip pan.

"Get me a wrench, Stan," he called to the Model Garage grease monkey. Then he replaced the bolt under the generator, tightened it, and put back the cover of the balancer unit. "Now try it," he told Pixie. The motor took off promptly and ran smoothly.

GUS and Stan watched the sedan drive away. "I wonder what Pixie's doing in Washington that's so important," Gus said.

"Oh, I found that out—I asked Fundy," Stan laughed. "He's going down to have his picture taken—wants it on the steps of the Capitol, with the dome in the background, so he can use it on posters to advertise his racket, Fundy says."

"Well, of all the . . ." Gus exploded. "So that's why we took a wetting!"

"Fundy says he isn't sure if Pixie is a grafter or a nut," Stan went on. "But he's getting paid thirty bucks for the picture-taking job. Say, Boss, what was the matter with that bus? You just looked under the hood and located the trouble right away."

"I didn't just look at the engine—I listened to it, too," Gus reminded him. "Do you know what a harmonic balancer is?"



"Get your slicker," he told Stan. "There's a car stalled at Lucy and Bill's—a hurry-up job."

"Why, sure I do," Stan said. "Pixie's one."

"They have them on cars, too," Gus grinned. "It's a gadget to neutralize torsional vibration of the crankshaft."

"Was that the thing you took the cover off of when the bolt fell out?" Stan asked.

Gus nodded.

"But how did you know a bolt was jammed in it?" Stan persisted.

"It sounded to me as if the noise came from the balancer unit. I noticed that the fan belt was slack, and when I felt the generator, it was loose on its mounting and a little out of place. Then I checked it and found the bolt that holds it at its swivel point was missing."

"Oh," Stan said. "So you figured the bolt had fallen into the—harmonic balancer."

"That was the tip-off," Gus went on. "If the bolt had slipped down and got wedged between the balancer and its cover, it might not actually lock the motor, but it could jam it hard enough to stall it when it was left idling and make that racket when it was turning over faster. That was really what happened. When I took the balancer cover off, the bolt fell out. All that was left was to put it back in the right place."

"So with one harmonic balancer back in working order," Stan grinned, "the other could go on harmonizing—and getting his picture taken."