

POPULAR SCIENCE

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Firsthand performance report on
OUR DEADLIEST BOMBER

Who Are America's
Worst Car Drivers?

McCall

Gus Tames a Grease Monkey

Was it carelessness that caused Billy Wells' car to stall? Or had someone thrown a monkey wrench into the machinery?

By Martin Bunn

GUS folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. He regarded Stan Hicks, his capable assistant, with a doleful expression.

"Man the battle stations!" he announced. "Batten down the hatches. My sister's son is going to visit us again."

Stan, visibly shaken, sat down on an oil drum. "You mean—Lister?"

"The same."

"I remember his last visit," Stan said with a tremor in his voice. "Does he still think he's a mechanical genius?"

"That was three years ago," Gus said. "By now he's probably promoted himself."

"He would be 18, now," Stan mused. "Maybe he's outgrown all that."

Gus tapped the letter. "He's arriving in a hot-rod he souped up himself, it says here."

"Why not tell your sister that you're too busy and that Lister gets in the way?" Stan asked.

Gus sighed. "I wish I could, but I just don't have the heart. She doesn't know how to handle him. Since his father died, he's been even more of a problem. She says a visit with me will be good for him—and for her. I can't turn her down."

"Too late, anyhow," Stan said, as a shriek of tortured tires announced the arrival of a chopped-roof jalopy. "Lister the Blister is with us."

An undersized youth with long hair combed to a duck tail in the back oozed out of the heap and slouched toward them. He glanced scornfully about the



Model Garage. "This place is just as crummy as ever. Looks like you could use me around here."

"Certainly can," Gus replied. "We need somebody to change oil, grease chassis and wash cars. We—"

"I don't mean that kind of work," Lister broke in. "I want to work on engines. You ought to have some new blood in your business. What do you say, Unk?"



"You're getting careless, Unk,"
Lister cracked. "You overlook little things."

"We'll see," Gus temporized. "If you can prove yourself, we'll use you."

FOR the first two or three days, Gus's nephew kept pretty much out of their hair. He did the routine jobs he was asked to do without much complaining. Then one day Billy Wells came in for a tune-up job.

"Want me to take care of it, Gus?"

Lister asked with a self-confident smile.

"I'll handle it," Gus told him shortly, wondering as he did if he were being quite fair to the boy.

"Needs a car wash," Billy said. "Maybe you could—"

"A pleasure," Lister replied sarcastically. "I'm working my way up in the business," he explained to Billy. "After I've pulled them out of a couple of tough

spots, maybe they'll believe I'm as good as they are."

After Gus had put in a new set of points, a new condenser, four new spark plugs and adjusted the timing, he turned the car over to Lister.

"And don't forget to clean out the inside," he reminded the boy. "That goes with the wash."

"Yes, sir!" Lister was wearing an enigmatic smile.

Stan took Gus aside and murmured, "I don't like it when he's agreeable."

"He can't do any harm just cleaning the car," Gus protested. "Look at the

Lister grabbed a wrench and headed for his jalopy.

"I'll take care of it," he called over his shoulder.

Stan hollered at him, "Wait up! Me or Gus will take care of—" But with a screech of rubber, the jalopy took off.

"What do you make of that?" Stan demanded.

"I'm not sure," Gus said thoughtfully.

IN A few minutes Lister was back and right behind him came Billy Wells, beaming. "Works like a charm, now," he said. "That boy is a real wonder. Glad

you have him working for you."

When Billy had gone, Gus confronted Lister. His face was serious. "What was the matter with Billy Wells' car?"

His nephew laughed. "I just tightened a couple of nuts here and there. That's all it needed. Ask the man if you don't believe me. Your trouble," he continued, spurred on by victory, "is that you're getting careless, Unk. You overlook the little things."

Jumping in his hot-rod, he drove off.

"Maybe I have been careless," Gus replied, a funny look in his eye. "Think I'll just keep an eye out for details a little more in the future."

The next morning Mrs. Chambers came in to have her car's idling speed set up. After Gus had taken care of it, Mrs. Chambers backed the car up to a pump and Lister filled her tank. He was very busy and very attentive. When he was done, Mrs. Chambers handed him the money.

Gus said, "You ring it up and bring her the change." Lister looked surprised.

"Sure you trust me?" he asked.

"I trust you with the money," Gus replied evenly.

While the boy was inside, Gus walked quickly to the back of Mrs. Chambers' car. His practiced eye took in every detail. Suddenly he saw something very



"I was beginning to think we'd never find a place to park."

way he's going over the front seat. He's even getting after the dirt up under the dashboard."

BILLY Wells called for his car that afternoon and drove it away. Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang. Stan took the call. As he listened, his face began turning red. He nodded a couple of times and tried to say something, but the person on the other end wouldn't let him. Finally he was able to get out: "Okay, Billy, okay. We'll be right down to take care of it. Well, I'm sorry, Billy. I can't imagine what happened. Yes. Right away."

He turned to Gus and Lister, who were standing in the doorway.

"Billy Wells. Something wrong with the tune-up job. Coughed and sputtered all the way home. Now it won't start."

Gus took a long puff on his pipe. "Well, I'll be—"

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Gus Tames a Grease Monkey

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wrong. He stooped down and in the wink of an eye he had set it to rights. He looked up to see if Lister had noticed, but the boy was intent upon making change at the register.

AFTER Mrs. Chambers left, Gus filled his pipe, lighted it and sat down on an oil drum. "Come over here, boy," he called to Lister. "I want to talk to you."

"I'm busy right now, Unk," Lister replied. "I'll—"

An unaccustomed glint came into Gus's eyes. Almost to his own surprise he heard himself roar, "Come here!"

Lister came

"She's not going to call," Gus told the boy evenly.

Lister flushed, caught off guard, looked at the phone and then back at his uncle. "Wh-what do you mean?" he stammered.

"I mean your little rescue act is off. Mrs. Chambers is not going to stall half a mile down the road."

"B-but I never—"

"Oh, yes you did. You counted on her doing that because you stuffed a wad of cotton waste in her exhaust pipe."

"Why would I do that?"

"I'll tell you why!" Gus was having a difficult time keeping his temper under control. "You knew that if the exhaust pipe was blocked off, the exhaust gases would back up and cause the motor to overheat. Then you would hop to her rescue and play boy genius again. But it didn't work. I saw the wad of waste there and pulled it out."

Lister was combing his hair nervously.

"Stop that!" Gus exploded. The defiance began to seep out of the boy. His hands hung limply at his side. It was as though he were skewered on the point of his uncle's anger. "Furthermore," Gus continued angrily, "I know what you did to Billy Wells' car. You took off the terminal nut that holds the hot wire on the ammeter, so the wire hung by a hair. That made the ignition cut in and out. When the lug fell off the terminal, the engine wouldn't start. I called and asked him where you had worked."

Gus got up and paced the length of the garage. At the far end he turned. His voice was a little softer, but still stern. "You know something, boy? I

think you would make a good mechanic. You know a lot more about engines than I gave you credit for. But I don't understand why you want to use your knowledge to make trouble. Why, Lister?"

"Uncle Gus..." The boy struggled for words, but they wouldn't come. He turned and ran for his jalopy. He took off slowly—without the usual dash.

Stan Hicks pulled himself slowly out from under a pickup truck. "Why that sniveling sneak," he exclaimed. "Good thing you caught on to him when you did. He might have ruined your business. Well, I guess we've seen the last of him."

"Guess so," muttered Gus. All traces of anger were gone. "I wish I could have done something for the kid."

The afternoon dragged on. Gus went about his work listlessly. At closing time, as he was locking up the Model Garage, Stan called, "Look who's coming back." Gus turned just as Lister drove up.

The boy got out and walked up to Gus. "I know you're mad at me," he began hesitantly. "I don't blame you. But I couldn't leave without—well, without saying good-by."

"Good-by," Gus said awkwardly.

"I want to tell you something," Lister continued doggedly. "You said something to me this afternoon that I'll always remember. I don't mean the chewing out. I had that coming. But you said I was a good mechanic. You know, Uncle Gus, that's the first time a grownup has told me I was good for anything since my father died." He stuck out his hand shyly. "Thanks, Uncle Gus."

Gus took the boy's hand. "Do you mean that, Lister?"

"I sure do, Uncle Gus. It means a lot if you think I'm a good mechanic."

GUS cleared his throat. "Say, Stan Hicks is due for a vacation next week. Would you like to take over for him?"

"Do you mean it?" Lister's face lit up like a beacon.

"What do you say, Stan?" Gus asked.

"Okay by me."

"Just one thing, Lister," Gus said. "You'll have to get that haircut."

Lister grinned. "It's a deal, Uncle Gus! First thing in the morning!" **END**

NEXT MONTH: Gus makes the grade.