

# POPULAR SCIENCE

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Monthly

What Will the  
'63 Cars  
Be Like? **PAGE 46**

New Facts  
About PAIN

What to Do  
When Your Outboard  
Won't Go



THE HOTTEST SHIP IN THE WORLD

# Gus Picks Up Three of a Kind

By Martin Bunn

**B**ROKEN any laws lately, Boss?" Gus Wilson looked quizzically at Stan, his assistant. "With so many on the books, who knows? Why?"

"Chief Eldon just parked outside."

Sam Eldon, a lean man in a loose-fitting uniform, whose sagging jowls gave him the appearance of a downcast bloodhound, entered the Model Garage.

"Hi, Sam. Would a cup o' coffee lighten this dark day for you?" asked Gus.

The Chief of Police tilted back his gold-braided cap. "If that tar you brew doesn't kill me. Let's try it."

Mugs in hand, they looked at each other in the comfort of Gus's office.

"Sure is a dark day when I have to ask help from an old fraud like you, Gus," began Eldon morosely.

"Always ready to help you keep the job you got by cheating on the police-school exams," retorted Gus amiably.

"Got a problem concerning a customer of yours—Silas Barnstable."

Gus grinned. "We both know Silas. What's his squawk this time?"

"Silas wants to charge young Tommy Barnes with malicious mischief on his car. Tommy had means, motive, and opportunity, so I've got to look into it."

Gus frowned. "What's it all about?"

"You know the Barnes house is next to Barnstable's, with driveways side by side. The kid works on his hot rod in his. A week ago, the muffler blew out; the car made quite a racket."

"He came in here and bought a new muffler about then," said Gus.

"I know. Barnstable came demanding that I arrest Tommy for disturbing the peace. See what I mean by motive?"

"No, I don't," said Gus. "Tommy'd hardly damage Silas's car for that."



"It's motive," said Eldon. "Barnstable just got a secondhand Plymouth six. Day after I warned Barnes, this car was in Barnstable's drive. When he went to start the engine, there was some kind of explosion under the hood. Then he noticed Tommy watching. 'Grinning like a fiend,' as Silas put it."

"Did the car start?"

"No. Silas looked under the hood. Some-

*"Sure is a dark day when I have to ask help from an old fraud like you, Gus," the police chief said.*



thing had blown off the distributor cap. He made me look at it. There was no paper, wadding, wire, or anything else from a detonator. I put the cap back on. The engine started.

"Now what I want to know, Gus," said Eldon with a lugubrious expression, "is whether you've run across any such thing that plainly wasn't sabotage?"

"Sure," said Gus promptly. "On the same

model, three or four years old. What usually makes it happen . . ."

"Stow it!" interrupted Eldon, getting up. "All I need to know is that it can happen innocently." The shrewd hound's eyes gazed at Gus. "Same model, hey? I'm going to tell Silas to shut up."

An angry horn blast brought Stan out from under the car lift as a dust-covered

panel truck rolled in to a stop beside him. "Anybody awake here?" snarled the beefy young driver.

Stan checked a retort. "Anything we can do for you?"

"We?" The youth looked around. "I suppose you've got ten mechanics, only the other nine are out to lunch? You can fix my left-hand blinker. Go look."

He jerked a thumb backwards. Going around the car, Stan saw the left tail light come on and glow steadily under encrusted dirt. As it went out, the right one began blinking.

"Got it?" asked the driver. "Right, yes; left, no. Fix it. Cop in your jerkwater town tagged me for not signaling a left turn. And I've got eight deliveries to make here."

Stan checked the wires. None were crossed at the flasher or shorting to others. "Bulb could be bad," he said.

"Just put a new one in myself. Try another flasher."

Stan did. The left-turn signal and its mate up front lit but did not blink. He tried the parking lights. Both lamps glowed under the dirt-covered lenses.

"I told you both filaments are okay," growled the belligerent youth.

Stan rechecked the wiring and flasher connections. He had found nothing wrong when Gus returned from lunch.

Stan explained the problem. "I'd say he put the bulb in upside down," he finished, "except that it's the kind of offset pin you can't put in wrong."

"Take off both those dirty lenses and look again," Gus suggested.

Stan removed them. The left lamp burned more brightly than the right. He switched off the parking lights, had the driver hold down the brake pedal. The left stop light was dim, the right bright.

"Would you take out that bulb you put in?" Stan asked the driver.

He tried. Surprised, he grunted, put a glove on his hand, and tried again. The little

glass globe didn't budge. He shook his head and glared at Stan.

"Crummy socket's shot; I had a devil of a time putting that bulb in. Why should I take it out?"

"Because you bullheaded it in upside down!" snapped Stan. "It should be impossible—the base pins are spaced to fit stepped slots in the socket—but you did it. I'll have to break the bulb to get it out."

"So leave it! It lights up on the turn signal. Just make it flash."

"The flasher takes a certain amount of current to make and break. This low-candlepower filament doesn't pull enough juice to work it. You want the bulb put in right or not?"

Gus, his back turned, said nothing but mentally applauded. Five minutes later the left-turn signal worked fine.

"SERGEANT GILL speaking," said the phone in Gus's ear. "Chief Eldon asks if you'd come to the Barnstable house."

Gus groaned, but five minutes later he was at Silas Barnstable's.

Next to the chief's car stood a truck from a new cut-rate garage. Its overalled driver as well as Chief Eldon and Silas Barnstable, sour-visaged as ever, were waiting alongside Silas's car. A little apart was skinny, tow-haired Tommy Barnes, trying not to look scared.

"Meet Ed Hickson, Gus," said Eldon. "Silas wanted his own expert."

The stranger waved a hand.

"Half an hour ago," Eldon went on, "Silas happened to look out here . . ."

"Happened? I was watching, 'cause I knew he'd try again," growled Silas.

". . . He saw Tommy crawl under his car and stay several minutes. So he called me. When we tried the engine, something blew off the distributor cap. We're here to find out if Tommy's responsible."

"I'm not!" protested Tommy. "One of my chromed head nuts fell and rolled under his

### Where'd it come from?



### "Mind your p's and q's"

These stern words weren't always delivered by schoolteachers to pupils, or parents to children. They were, in fact, the customer's admonition to the English barkeeper when he served a glass of ale or bitters that he measure out the full content of the English pint or quart.

car. It took me that long to find it." He held out a gleaming nut.

"Bah!" rumbled Silas. "He reached up and did something to my engine."

Eldon turned to Hickson. "You think this cap could blow off by itself?"

"Not likely. That story about a lost nut sounds pretty thin to me . . ."

"You're not here to judge that," snapped Eldon. "Could it happen?"

Hickson shrugged. "If a breather's plugged, or there's blowby past the rings, crankcase pressure might come up the distributor shaft. I've fixed it by drilling a one-eighth hole in the cap to let the pressure out."

"But," he added with a side glance at

"Oh sure, this car pulls gas into the distributor!" sneered Hickson.

Silently Gus pulled off the distributor and, as the others watched, took off the vacuum advance. Carefully he opened this to expose the diaphragm.

"Take a real close look, Chief."

The chief did so. "Looks like a lot of pinholes in the diaphragm."

"One side of it's connected to the intake manifold," explained Gus, "so cranking the engine can send gas vapor to it. Some gets through those pinholes into the distributor. When there's just enough gas and air, the spark at the points can set it off."

"Hickson fixed that," said Silas hotly.

"What do you think I'm paying him for?"

"No, sir—the hole drilled in the cap only keeps the explosion from blowing the cap off," replied Gus.

Chief Eldon turned to Silas. "Still want Tommy booked?"

"I—uh, no. Seems maybe I'm wrong."

Gus laid the vacuum advance beside the detached distributor.

"Hey, now!" roared Barnstable. "Who's going to put my car together?"

"Maybe Gus will," said the chief. "After you've paid him for a road call."

"I'll take care of it," put in Hickson. "That'll be five bucks in all."

"Bill me some year!" snarled Barnstable. "Next time I want another botch job, I'll look you up. . . . Hey, Gus!"

Gus, on the way back to his car, paused and turned around.

"I'll pay you for coming out if you'll put on a new vacuum diaphragm," whined Silas.

Gus grinned. "Bring it in next time you're in town."

Silas turned on what he believed to be an ingratiating smile. "Now don't overcharge me because I made a mistake about young Barnes," he pleaded.

"Okay, Silas," Gus said with a sigh. "But you're the third today."

"Third? Third what?"

"Screwball," said the grinning chief.

"Stan had the first," said Gus. "Hickson with his hole-in-the-cap cure was the second. You're the third to have all the facts but insist on putting them together upside down." ■ ■



*"Well, after all, dear, we can't expect them to last forever."*

Silas. "I checked the compression on this car before Mr. Barnstable bought it. Rings are okay and the breather's clean."

"How about that, Gus?" asked Eldon. "Is he right?"

"How could there be back pressure," asked Gus, "before the engine has started?"

"Maybe cranking does it," said Hickson quickly. "Anyway, these sixes have weak distributor clips. I've had to bend 'em back to hold the cap tight."

"Let's try our luck and see if it happens again," suggested Gus.

Gently bending a curve back into the straightened clips, he put on the cap. At a nod from Eldon, Silas cranked the engine. There was a small explosion. The cap lifted, settled back under the clips.

"Lucky!" exclaimed Gus, snapping off the cap. Blue smoke drifted up.

"Smells like exhaust!" said Tommy.

"Why not?" asked Gus. "It's from an explosion of gas vapor and air."