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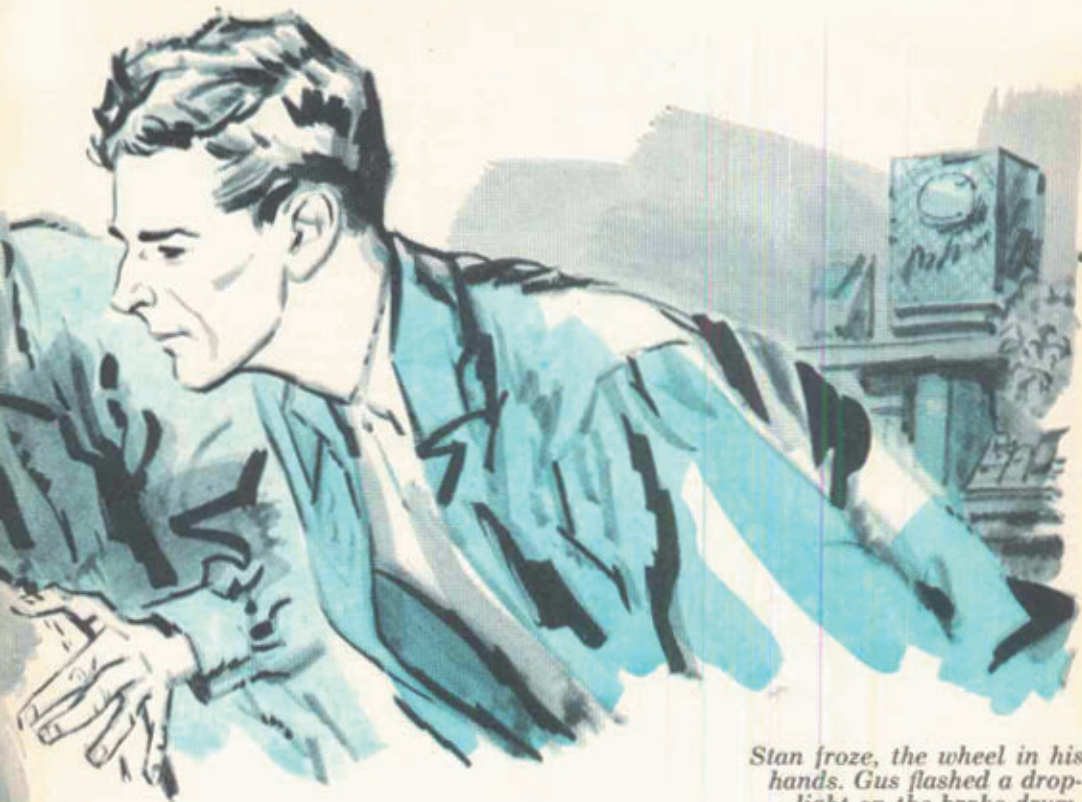
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Gus Sweetens a Sour Deal

By Martin Bunn





Stan froze, the wheel in his hands. Gus flashed a drop-light on the brake drum.

ROLLING out from under a car he was working on, Stan Hicks twisted around to look through the open shop door of the Model Garage. A car stopped at the curb, then took off again. Stan slid back under, whistling.

Walking over, Gus Wilson nudged a protruding foot until his helper emerged.

"What's the plot?" asked Gus.

"Er—no plot, Boss."

"Four mornings you've been edgy until somebody stops out there. Once he goes off, you're okay. How come?"

Stan wriggled, sat up. "It's Daisy Allen. She came in last Friday while you were out, said something was clicking up front. I drove around the block with her. Not a click."

"Is that all you did?"

"No, I checked both front wheels for a loose or broken bearing. All okay."

Gus grinned. "Knowing Mrs. Allen, I think you did fine. Why does she stop?"

Stan shrugged. "I'd hate to ask her. I figure she either imagined the noise or

heard a kid's bike clicker. But every morning since Friday she stops out there and then goes off again. Sort of bugs me."

"Okay, Stan. If she comes again tomorrow, I'll go out and talk to her."

With a glance blending pity and relief, Stan rolled back under the car.

LATE that afternoon a car Gus had never seen drove into the shop. From it stepped a gangling young man with red hair and a harassed expression.

"Hello, Herb," said Gus, recognizing the high school's auto-shop teacher. "Looks as if you made a trade-in."

"I was out-traded," said Herb Findley bitterly, "by a dealer named Wheeler." He kicked a tire morosely. "This is a clunker, a grade-A lemon, Gus. The engine won't run smoothly. Automatic transmission's probably shot. Wheeler's mechanics can't do a thing about it."

"You've got better equipment at the school shop than Zeb Wheeler has. Why don't you . . ." Gus paused.

"You guessed it," said the young teacher grimly. "I can't let my students find out I've been stung. Not and keep teaching. I've taken the car back to Wheeler three times. Now his guarantee is up and he won't even look at it."

"Well, I will," said Gus. "Maybe it's less serious than you think."

Findley shook his head. "It's the transmission, for sure. Kicks down with a bang when I slow down, shifts up with a clunk when I speed up. Took all my cash to buy the crate—I can't even afford seat covers for this worn upholstery. So if it needs a big overhaul, don't do it. I'll walk."

"Leave it and we'll see," said Gus.



NEXT morning Gus watched for Daisy Allen's car as expectantly as Stan. When it squeaked to a brief stop outside, Gus reached it in time to hail her.

"Heard you were in last week and we couldn't help you," he said.

"Oh, but you did, Mr. Wilson. Now I know how to stop the click."

"You do? How's that?"

"Well, if I drive to Middleton by the main road—that's where my club has its charity drive this month—it clicks at every traffic light. So I come down Bell Avenue, as I did Friday. After I stop here, it doesn't click any more."

Gus cleared his throat. "Mrs. Allen, why should coming here make it stop?"

Daisy Allen smiled, a pretty picture of confusion. "I don't know. But of course you do, so I'm not worried."

"Uh—of course. Doesn't it click when

you're driving home from Middleton?"

"Only down that long hill from the clubhouse. But I don't mind that."

"I do," said Gus. "How about leaving the car here today?"

"I'd love to! I'll do some shopping and ride over with Mrs. Taine later."

"I'll drive you downtown," said Gus, "and listen for clicks on the way."

CLICKLESSLY, Gus drove the car back to the Model Garage wondering whether he had made a fool of himself. Stan looked as if he was sure of it.

"All the same," said Gus, "you yank those wheels and see if a brake-drum bolt is rubbing. Clean out the bearings to look for a split or broken roller."

Stan shook his head. "Boss, I didn't hear it, you didn't hear it, and if she did it must be her head rattling."

"Want to go up to her house tomorrow and drive her here to make sure?"

Stan hastily jacked up the car.

FINDLEY'S car behaved just as he had said. It shifted up with a jolt, kicked down with a sharp jerk before coming to a stop. Gus had just put it

on a lift when the phone rang.

"Gus?" said Zeb Wheeler. "Findley walked by, so I asked him about his car. He says you've got it there."

"Only for a look," returned Gus. "If it needs a transmission overhaul, I suppose he'll do it in the school shop."

A grunt came over the wire. Gus could almost hear Zeb thinking; if Findley's plight became known to his students, every parent in town—and many used-car buyers—would soon be aware of it.

"Of course you know it's the transmission?" Gus threw into the silence.

"Was okay when I sold it," said Zeb quickly. "The car runs, doesn't it?"

"Like a scared rabbit with the hiccups," retorted Gus. "But your guarantee's run out, so why worry?"

There was a short pause. "Don't want to be hard on a customer, Gus. You fix

it, and I'll pay up to 20 bucks—but no big overhaul, see?"

"What've you done so far?"

"Cleaned plugs, put in new points and condenser, adjusted the carburetor—oh yes, and put in a new wiper hose."

Something tugged at Gus's memory. "Expect that to fix the transmission?"

Zeb snorted. "A piece of hose between the intake manifold and some tubing on the firewall was spongy. My mechanic thought it was leaking air, making the engine idle rough. But it didn't help."

Gus took a plunge. "Zeb, I haven't even looked under the car yet, but you send over new seat covers and I'll fix it for what Findley can pay."

"All right. It's a deal, Gus."

"And, Zeb—you never replaced a windshield-wiper hose on that car."

"Eh? What you mean? Sure we did."

"No you didn't," said Gus, "because that year's model has electric wipers."

also killed the vacuum in the vacuum section of the modulator, which is supposed to regulate fluid pressure according to torque demands. Without vacuum, it couldn't, so you shifted with a bang."

Findley shook his head. "And me the one who tells students to think a job through. I knew about the modulator line, but took it for granted they'd renewed all of it." Suddenly his glance fell on Daisy Allen's car. "Say, that bus gave me a turn this morning."

"Me too," said Stan, who was putting the wheels back on Mrs. Allen's car.

"Coming to Bell Avenue I heard a clicking that made me think I had still more grief. But it was this car close behind."

"Sure it was this one?" asked Gus.

Findley nodded. "I saw that plastic parakeet over the windshield when she stopped alongside me. Then I could tell the clicking came from her right wheel."

Stan froze, the wheel in his hands.

Gus picked up a droplight, went over and flashed it on the brake drum. Smoothly worn, it showed no ridges or scuff marks.

Gus angled the light in different ways. Suddenly he pointed to a thin, thread-like line starting under a nut and traced it out to the braking surface.

"A hairline crack," he said. "Each time the wheel turned—with the brake on—the lining stubbed against it."

"Why didn't we hear it?" asked Stan.

Gus grinned. "Because she came down twisty Bell Avenue, where you have to brake hard and often. By the time she got here, the drum was so hot it expanded—and closed that thin crack."

"That's one to tell my class," said Findley, going to his car. "Say, where did these seat covers come from?"

"A gift from Wheeler," said Gus. "All you owe me for is some hose and a carb adjustment." He nodded toward Daisy's car. "Your consultation fee on *that* wipes out my consultation fee on *this*." ■ ■

What is this?



ANSWER: It's a one-piece, seam-less, translucent, polyethylene, traffic-light housing. What else?

MOROSELY triumphant, Stan found Gus under Findley's raised car an hour later.

"I checked and repacked the wheel bearings, Gus. They're good. No sign of a bolt, nut, or shoe rubbing any place."

Gus rubbed his nose with his thumb knuckle. "Maybe Mrs. Allen *was* hearing things. Put the wheels back on."

Smugly satisfied, Stan went off as Herb Findley entered the shop.

"There's your big transmission job," said Gus, holding up a four-inch length of oil-soaked vacuum hose.

Findley stared. "Wheeler said he put on new hose. And I believed him!"

"He thought so, but his mechanic only changed a piece from the manifold to a line of tubing. This part, from the other end of that line to the transmission modulator, was cracked wide open. It let air in, making the engine run rough."

Gus let the lift down and added, "It