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Gus Throws Cold Water on a Problem

By MARTIN BUNN

Somebody'd given little Miss Harper a bum steer. Could Gus straighten her out?

The familiar voice of Stan Hicks, rather than the call letters coming over the two-way radio in the Model Garage tow truck, made Gus Wilson reach for the microphone.

"What have you got, Stan?" Gus asked, his eyes on a truck trailer on the rain-swept roadway ahead. "Can it wait?"

"Not if you're near exit 17, Boss," answered his shop helper. "There's a customer waiting for a tow there, mad as a stood-up bride."

The truck trailer swerved out and around another, a comet's tail of splash-back behind it. Gus shifted the mike.

"Who is it and what's he want?"

"Mr. Pedersen. He says the new VW clutch we installed conked out again. He can't get up the exit ramp with it, and another car nearly hit him. He wants to be towed in."

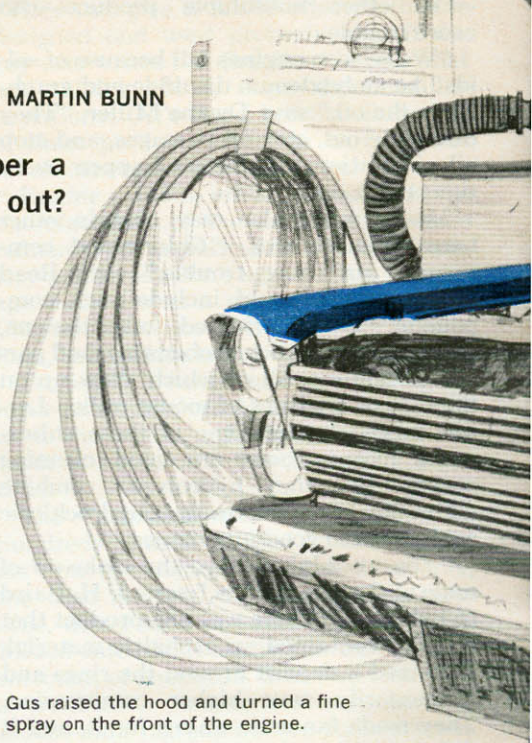
"Exit 17 coming up. Thanks, Stan."

Moments later, Gus turned onto the steep, curving ramp. Halfway up, two cars stood on the shoulder. He pulled ahead of the foremost one, a red Volkswagen, and with shoulders hunched against the downpour walked back to it. The driver looked up with a mixture of truculence and surprise.

"Well, at least you got here fast," began Pedersen, a swarthy man with no hair, and a long jaw. "That clutch you put in's no good—it began to act just like the old one a couple of days ago. Wouldn't get me up this hill, even in low. While I was trying, that dame nearly ran into me. You owe me a tow and a clutch job."

"Sure nobody's hurt back there?"

"Maybe her feelings. I asked her why she didn't just swing around me—there was room enough. But no, she just come barreling up and barely did stop."



Gus raised the hood and turned a fine spray on the front of the engine.

"I'll hitch up your car soon as I see whether she needs help, too."

Pedersen grunted, slouched down in the seat, and lit a cigarette.

Gus couldn't see the driver of the '66 Ford at first, she was hunched so far down behind the wheel. Even when she sat up her head barely came above it. About 40 years old, she had soft blue eyes in a small, heart-shaped face.

"You all right, ma'am?" asked Gus.

"Thank you, yes," she said in a calm but dispirited voice. "I didn't expect to find a car almost stopped ahead of me. All I could do was brake!"

Gus glanced at ruler-straight skid marks, still visible despite the rain.

"Sometimes it's easier to *steer* out of trouble," he remarked. "But if you lock your brakes, you can't. Wheels that can't turn, can't steer."

"Yes, of course. But I couldn't have turned fast enough. Because it's so wet



ILLUSTRATION BY RAY QUIGLEY

the car is steering hard again; I just don't have the strength. All I *could* do was try to stop."

"You mean the steering wheel turns harder at some times than others?"

"Only when it's wet and splashy, as it is now," she answered. "I'm almost home, though—and I'll go on. I was resting a bit from the—the shock. Once it's dry, the car will steer fine again."

"Okay, ma'am. Better check that soon, though. Anything wrong with the steering could be dangerous."

Returning to his truck, Gus soon had the

VW hooked behind. Pedersen got in the cab with him.

"How long before I get my car back?" he demanded as they drove off. "As a salesman, I've got to have wheels. You ought to pay for a rental car, while you make good on a bum job."

"What makes you think it was?"

"What do you call it when a new clutch goes bad in a week?"

"We cleaned the flywheel surface, installed a new driven plate, and put in a new release bearing," declared Gus. "It seems you've ruined two clutches in short

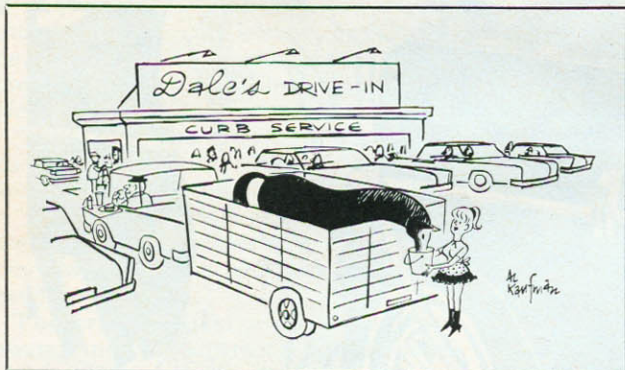
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order. Maybe you're riding the pedal."

"You kidding? I've known better since I was a kid. Yesterday I noticed the pedal didn't come up as high as the brake. Even on the level, the engine'd buzz while the car crawled. But then the pedal came up again and I forgot about it, till I was on my way home today. The pedal was down again and I got stuck. But I darned well don't ride it."

"We'll check it out," promised Gus.

Pedersen asked to be let out downtown. Gus hauled the VW to the Model Garage. It was six o'clock and Stan had closed up.



Early next morning Gus turned his attention to the Volkswagen. Its back seat sagged under salesman's cases and catalogues. The car was dirtier than a week ago, its ashtray overflowing, scraps of paper, mud, and gravel on the floor.

The clutch pedal stood visibly below the other, and had no free play at all.

"Just like I said, ain't it?"

Gus turned to face Pedersen.

"The symptoms are," replied Gus.

"Then I better go get a rental, and come back for my samples and stuff."

"Mind sticking around a bit?" asked Gus, unfolding the dulllest blade of an old pocketknife. "Who're your customers?"

"Builders, developers who're putting up split levels all over the county. This little bus saves me money, but I can't keep buying clutches for it."

"Watch," said Gus. "Just in case—"

In the glow of a trouble light, he inserted the blade between the pedal shaft and floorboard, then slowly pulled it up. Several white bits flew out. Repeating the action, Gus brought up still more. The pedal sprang up even with the brake.

"That's gravel," said Gus. "Your feet carried it from those building sites you visit, and some of it wedged the pedal tight. Your car was clean last time I worked on it, or I'd have warned you this can happen. I've seen it wreck clutches on other cars. A few minutes of slipping can ruin the facing."

"I'd cleaned out the car just before I brought it in that time," confessed Pedersen sheepishly.

Getting in, Gus started the engine, and set the hand brake hard. With the throttle open to a modest road speed, he shifted into high, and let out the clutch. The engine promptly stalled.

"No slip now," he told Pedersen. "Unless it develops chatter, you may as well go ahead and use the car."

"Good. Looks like I put my foot in it with that gravel. I guess I'm the guy who pays for the tow."

Returning from a trip downtown shortly after, Gus found Stan had a '66 Ford high on the lift.

"A Miss Harper who brought this in said she'd talked to you yesterday," reported Stan from under the car. "She got your name off the wrecker. I been looking," concluded Stan with the grin he reserved for the vagaries of female customers, "for the reason it steers hard suddenly if it starts to rain."

"Find it?" asked Gus.

"No. The power steering works good. I checked valve-spool centering, fluid level, and pump pressure. There's no twisted or broken linkage, wheel caster is okay, and nothing's badly worn."

About four o'clock a car stopped outside. The driver, a tall well-dressed woman, walked into the Model Garage.

"I'm Mrs. John Wells," she told Gus with a coldly assured air. "My sister left her car here this morning—that one. I drove her to work and am on my way to bring her back now. Have you found the trouble she complained about?"

"No, the car seems to steer normally."

Her thin lips tightened. "I thought so. She came home upset, but we finally got

the truth out of her about that near accident. She tried to explain it by saying the car suddenly became hard to steer. I tried it myself this morning. Of course it wasn't so."

Her voice fell confidentially. "My sister has been confined with a nervous breakdown, but she talked the doctor into letting her return to a normal life. She even got a job, and bought herself this used car. But she shouldn't have tried it. After this, I think she'll have to go back. If she sticks to that story, the doctor may ask you about it."

"She chose the car well," remarked Gus. "Seems in good shape, and power steering makes it easy to handle."

"Exactly! So how could it suddenly become hard to steer in wet weather?"

Mrs. Wells sailed out on a sea of self-satisfaction.

Gus frowned, staring thoughtfully after her. Then he got into the Ford and started the engine. He tried the steering wheel; it turned silkily from stop to stop. Gus drove it to the wash rack, raised the hood, and with the engine running directed a fine spray toward the front of the engine.

Dropping the hood, he got in and tried the wheel again.

Sometime after five, Mrs. Wells marched in again with the woman Gus had met the evening before. For a moment he found it hard to believe it was she. Her lips and hands trembled. The blue eyes darted about as if in search of refuge.

"She doesn't believe me, Mr. Wilson. You tell her," ordered Mrs. Wells.

"Well, I made one last check," replied Gus, "duplicating the conditions you mentioned, Miss Harper. Just as you said, steering suddenly became very hard—almost impossible, if you weren't particularly strong or had to turn fast."

The tall woman drew a sharp breath.

"That's not what you—how could that be? I don't believe it."

"I'd swear to it," said Gus coolly.

"Could you—would you explain it so that we can understand?" pleaded the smaller woman, her eyes now on Gus.

"Well, being under the hood with a hot engine, the belt that drives your power-steering pump eventually collected a slight oil film, besides wearing smooth on the pulleys. It was a bit loose, too, though it worked while it was dry.

"But when road spray hit it, that oil-and-water mix made it slip. It couldn't drive the pump hard enough to develop the thousand-pound hydraulic pressure needed to boost steering effort. Suddenly you had no help. At the low ratio of power-steering systems, the wheel became very hard to turn, just as you said. I cleaned the pulleys and put on a new belt," concluded Gus. "That's it."

"Thank you," said the small woman. "Thank you very much—for everything."

"You know, Boss," said Stan when he and Gus were alone, "most women couldn't care less what we do to patch up their cars. This Miss Harper was really interested. I wonder why it meant so much to her."

"It could have been," returned Gus, "because we were patching up something a lot more important." P 5



Mystery car gets a test

Road-testing a new car is a problem. Although the manufacturer's test track can tell engineers much, there is no substitute for a real road. But they can't drive secret models through the streets where everyone can see them. Here's how NSU of Germany solved the problem with their new Wankel-powered sedan: They put it in a moving van and drove it into the woods. At nightfall, out rolled the car for road-testing. For a driver's report on the new sedan, see page 90.