



By Martin Bunn

MEL MOWBRAY'S voice, as it came over the wire into Gus Wilson's Model Garage, was one of desperation and gloom.

"I'm in trouble, Gus," Mel said. "My crop of tomatoes has to get to the cannery by morning, and my truck has broken down."

"What's wrong with it, Mel?" Gus asked with real concern. Mowbray operates a small farm some 20 miles from our town, and he and Gus are old friends.

"I started to move the tomatoes out of the field this afternoon," Mel told him, "and on the third load something happened to the truck. All of a sudden it started to vibrate so bad it nearly shook me off the seat."

"Any idea what caused it?" Gus urged.

"Sounds like the bearing's gone on the end of that shaft that sticks into the fly-wheel," Mel answered. "I'm afraid to drive for fear I'll ruin the truck. But I've got to move those tomatoes before morning, and I can't hire or borrow another truck—they're all tied up this time of year. I know it's a long way, Gus, but can you come out?"

"It doesn't matter about the distance," Gus put in gently. "But you know how I feel about cutting in on another shop's business. You've always had your work done at Elmer Peters' garage out your way. Hadn't you better get him on this job?"

Mel's voice sharpened. "Elmer finished a complete overhaul of my truck just a couple of days ago, and he charged me plenty for it. Whatever's the matter with it now must be his fault. I'm through with that know-it-all.

GUS Short-Cuts a Long Job

If you can't come out tonight, I'll tow the truck in to your place."

Gus glanced at the office clock. It was a few minutes to quitting time.

"I'll be along about half past six," he promised his farmer friend.

"We'll wait supper for you," Mel said.

Three quarters of an hour later Gus came to the crossroad that led to Mel's farm, steered his smooth-running old coupe off the highway's traffic-cluttered concrete, and for the first time in a couple of months heard the crunch of gravel under his tire treads. Wild flowers bloomed on the grassy banks that bordered the narrow road, birds sang, and somewhere back in the field a quail briskly reiterated, "Bobwhite, bobwhite, bob . . . white!"

Gus squinted into the glare of the low-swinging sun. "Why does a man live in a town?" he asked himself. Then he grinned. "Oh, what's the use—what would I do without a lot of cars to fool with?"

His nimble imagination went to work on the problem of Mel's truck, and by the time he had turned into the poplar-bordered lane that leads to the Mowbray house he had thought of half a dozen things that might be the matter with it.

Gus stopped his car in the barnyard. Mel, glumness written all over him, was standing there with a stoop-shouldered, hatchet-faced man who obviously was laying down the law. As Gus got out and walked toward them, he heard Mel say: "Here's the man who can fix it if anyone can."

"He'd better fix it quick if you expect to sell them termaters to me!" the sharp-faced man snapped. "I ain't goin' to tie up my whole works jest because you don't live up to your contract. If you ain't got 'em there by startin' time tomorrer mornin' I'll buy Zack Brown's crop, and you can sell your'n any place you can."

He gave Gus a hard-eyed look, stalked over to a shiny new sedan, and drove down

Mel's lane and onto the gravel road below.

"That's Duggins," Mel explained. "He owns the cannery, and he's a hard man to do business with. The price has dropped since he bought my crop standing, and he'd be glad of an excuse to get out of the deal. It would be pretty bad for me—I've counted on that tomato money."

"Cheer up," Gus encouraged. "Most balky trucks can be made to run. Where's yours?"

Mel pointed to a tomato-heaped 1½-ton truck standing at the edge of a field near several big piles of picked tomatoes. Hospitality and anxiety fought a battle in his face—and hospitality won.

"Mary's got supper ready," he said. "Let's eat. You can look at the truck later."

In the farmhouse kitchen they found buxom Mary Mowbray, her cheeks a shade redder than usual, waiting for them. Short notice hadn't kept her from setting a supper fit for any hungry man's appetite.

As Gus was finishing his second ample helping of deep-dish apple pie, they heard a car stop. A moment later a young man in a snappy summer suit and black-and-white sport shoes came in without knocking. He looked suspiciously at Gus, who recognized him as Elmer Peters, the smart-alecky proprietor of the near-by crossroads garage.

"Hello, folks," Elmer breezed. "Can't stop to eat with you. I'm as busy as a one-armed paper hanger."

He waited expectantly for a laugh and, when it didn't come, went on: "Dad Duggins stopped by and told me your truck's down, Mel. I don't see what can be the matter; it was O.K. when it came out of my shop. That I know—I went over it myself. But I'll take a look."

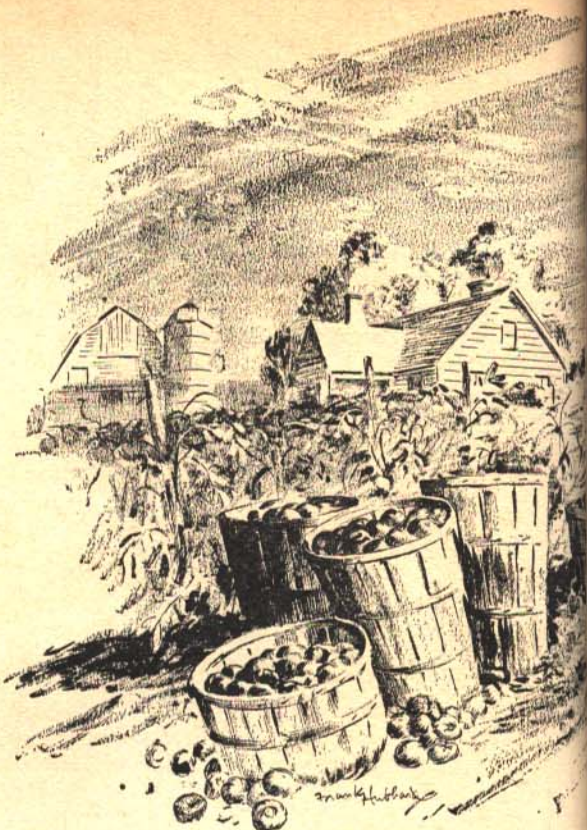
"All right," Mel agreed slowly. "Want to come along, Gus?"

As they followed Elmer out, Mel whispered: "I'd sure like to tell him what I think. Reborning the block, new pistons, new rings, new valves and guides, new bearing inserts—that overhaul cost a lot. But I don't dare; he's married to Duggins' daughter, and I can't afford a row now."

They walked over to the truck. "I left it right here in the field," Mel volunteered. "It sounded like the motor was tearing itself apart, and I didn't want to drive it out."

Gus watched silently as Elmer raised the hood and made a cursory inspection.

"Can't see anything wrong," the local garageman said. "Start 'er up."



Mel climbed behind the wheel, switched on the ignition, and pressed the starter button. The engine took off promptly, but there was a loud thumping noise and the truck shook so violently that he had a hard time keeping his seat.

"Shut 'er off—quick!" Elmer yelled, and Mel cut off the engine.

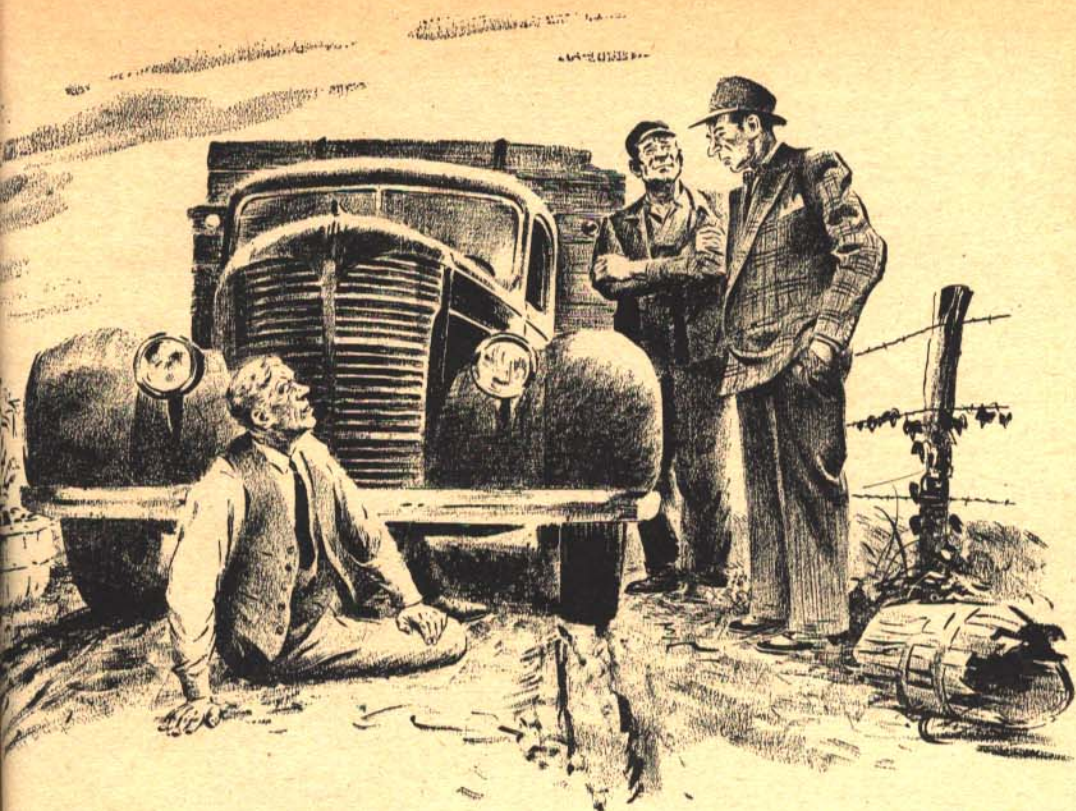
"Whatever it is, it's right here under the seat," Mel told him. "I can feel it."

Elmer scratched his head and looked helpless. "That's a new one on me," he admitted. "It must be a bearing burned out. I'll have to take the motor apart to find out. Probably ain't our fault, but if it is, I won't charge you a cent, Mel. You tow her over in the morning. Don't try to drive her."

"Can't fix it tonight?" Mel asked.

"Not a chance," Elmer answered airily. "My mechanics have gone home, and I can't do it myself. Gotta take my wife to a social at Dad Duggins' place."

Gus, who had been staring silently at the truck engine, decided that the time had come to take a hand.



Gus wriggled out from under the engine. "What's happened to the pan under the front end?" he asked.

"It could be," he cut in, "that the trouble is something easier found and fixed than a burned-out bearing."

Elmer turned, with a sneer. "You an expert on truck motors?" he demanded.

"I've had a little experience," Gus admitted. "Switch on the engine, Mel."

"You're apt to ruin it," Elmer warned. "I won't be responsible if you do."

Mel looked at the young man, and then at Gus. He stepped on the starter button. The loud thumping began immediately.

"Listen!" Elmer yapped triumphantly.

Now, Mel's truck has two fan belts. Gus pointed at one of the pulleys. On each of its revolutions the belt going round bulged out sharply at one spot.

"So what?" Elmer asked scornfully.

"I'll show you what," Gus told him. "Cut the engine, Mel."

Instead of going at the fan belt, Gus got down under the front end. After a minute, he wriggled out again and got up.

"What's happened to the pan under the front end of the engine?" he asked.

Elmer turned red. "It was badly rusted, so I didn't bother putting it back," he explained. "Wasn't any use, anyhow."

"Oh, no?" Gus said. He got a screwdriver from the toolbox and gently pried a piece of a twig the thickness of a pencil from under the belt. "Start her up again, Mel," he said.

This time there was no vibration. Mel grinned. Elmer's mouth sagged.

"Just one of those things, Mel," Gus laughed. "You must have run over some brush, cut off this piece with the fan belt, and had it forced into the pulley V-groove. It couldn't have happened if that pan had been put back after the overhaul."

He stifled an impulse to chuckle at the look on Elmer's face. "Well, you're all right now, and I've had some of Mrs. Mowbray's apple pie. You drive that load of tomatoes over to the cannery, and when you get back I'll help you with more. . . . You'll be seeing your father-in-law this evening, Mr. Peters. Tell him he'll have plenty of tomatoes to get started on in the morning. Mel *wouldn't* want him to worry." END