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GUS chases a jinx

By MARTIN BUNN

JOE CLARK'S voice came from the office of the Model Garage: "Hey, Gus! Telephone!"

Gus Wilson was busy in the shop with a valve-grinding job, and anyhow he dislikes telephone conversation. "You take it," he called to his partner. "Ask 'em what they want."

"No you don't!" Joe shouted. "It's Doc Foley, and he says he wants to speak to you personally."

Grumbling, Gus went to the office phone and said "hello."

Dr. Foley's voice came over the wire. "I'm sending you a new customer, Gus—a man named Fred Conroy."

"Thanks, Doc—we'll take good care of him," Gus said. "Good-by."

"Hey—don't be in such a tearing hurry to hang up on me!" Dr. Foley protested. "This fellow I'm talking about is an unusual sort of customer. For the past couple of months he's been jittering around on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He's a salesman who's working on commission and not making much of a go of it. He has to do a lot of driving, and his car seems to have gotten on his nerves. It makes a half dozen kinds of perfectly fiendish noises. Sounds as if everything's the matter with it. When I asked him why he didn't get it fixed up he said that he couldn't afford to. But don't

worry about his bill; he's honest, and if he can't take care of it within a reasonable time, I will. I figure that if you can chase some of those noises it will be a big relief to his frazzled nerves. I think it's an experiment worth making."

"All right, Doc—I'll take care of him," Gus said. "Good—"

"Now, wait just a minute, can't you?" the doctor snapped. "To get him over to your place I gave him a note to deliver to you—he doesn't know what's in it, but you can read it to him. Oh, one thing more. Don't get nervous if he begins to talk a little wildly. He's got a screwy sort of yarn about his engine stopping every time he comes to a traffic light. Well, I guess that's about all. Good-by."

"Hey, Doc!" Gus yelled. "You wait a minute! I'm an automobile mechanic, not a psychiatrist! I'm not going to —"

But Dr. Foley had hung up, and when Gus called his number his office nurse said he'd gone out.

Ten minutes later Gus's head was jerked up from his work by an ear-piercing shriek of brakes, and he saw a small and shabby sedan come to an abrupt stop just outside the open shop door. It started jerkily again with the whine of a slipping clutch, and stopped inside the shop. A nerve-torturing squealing came from under the hood.

A tall, thin man who was crouched tensely over the steering wheel straightened himself up and got out of the car. Gus noticed that

he was middle-aged and unprosperous looking, and that he blinked at him nervously. "You Mr. Wilson?" he mumbled as he produced an envelope from a coat pocket. "I've got a note for you. Dr. Foley asked me if I'd drop it off here."

Gus took the envelope. "Switch off your engine, why don't you?" he said. "Maybe there's an answer, and . . . Quite a squeal you've got under that bonnet."

Fred Conroy reached into the car and turned the ignition key. "That noise is driving me crazy," he said gloomily. "There's something almighty wrong with my motor, but I can't—I don't feel like letting myself in for a big repair bill right now."

Gus went over to the car, raised the hood, and cocked his head as he listened for a few seconds. "Sounds bad, but it doesn't mean a thing," he decided. "So far as that squeal goes, there's nothing wrong with your engine. The noise is made by your fan belt being glazed and is amplified by the metal hood. Fixing that up won't take five minutes. Well, let's see what Doc Foley has to say."

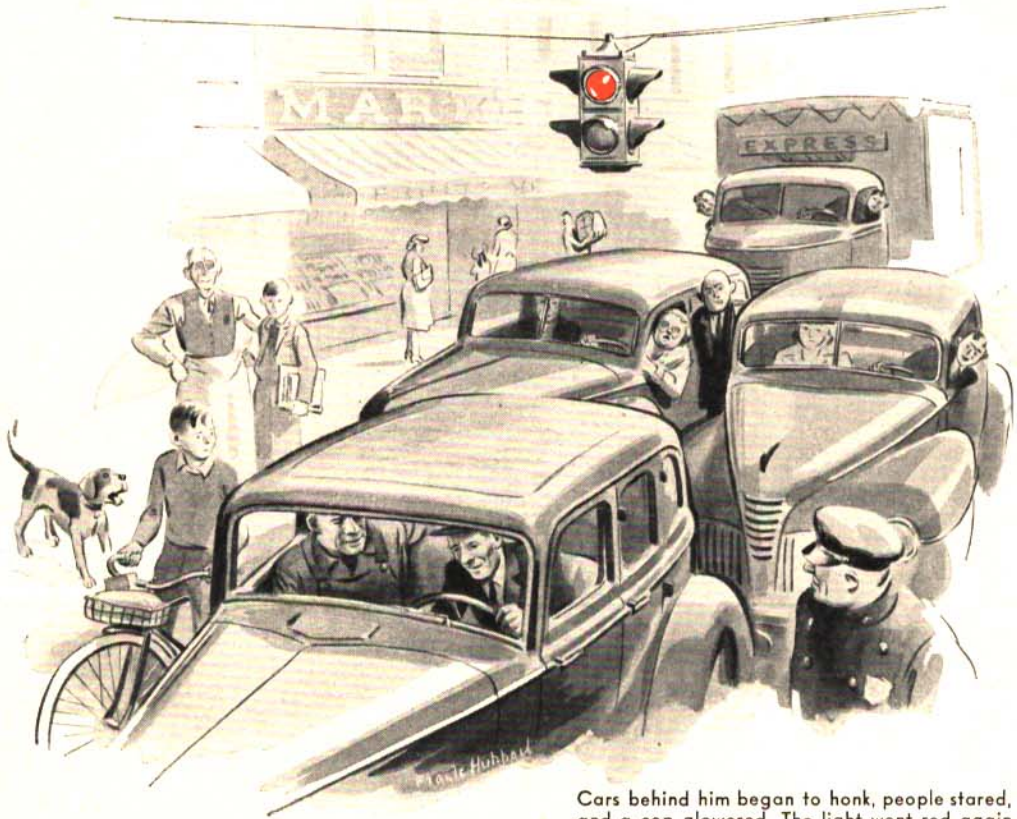
Gus read the short note, and grinned. "He says that your car needs to have a few odd jobs done on it, and that by doing them

I can help your nerves more than he can," he reported. "Maybe he's right, at that—and car noises sure can get you down. Why, I remember one time when—"

He waded into a long yarn about a hard-to-locate car noise which once had made life miserable for him. Conroy became interested, and soon seemed more at ease. Gus finished his story, began to talk about Conroy's car, and slipped in a hint that there wouldn't be any great hurry about his taking care of the bill for what a good overhaul would cost. "Your brakes need adjusting," he said, "and your clutch needs a little attention. Then while I'm at it I might as well . . ."

Conroy interrupted him. "There's something else," he said, and looked around to make sure that he wouldn't be overheard. "Whenever I tell anyone about it they look at me as though they think I'm crazy. But it's true! Almost every time I come to a traffic light *my motor stops dead!* I suppose you think I'm nutty, but if you don't believe me, take the car out and see for yourself!"

Gus used loading and lighting his pipe as an excuse for doing thirty seconds of hard thinking. "Ever had any trouble with your



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engine stopping *except* when you come to a stop light?" he asked.

"Sometimes," Conroy told him. "Very seldom. But it nearly always goes dead when I have to stop for a light. They're a blamed nuisance—half of them aren't needed. They get my goat!"

"Well," Gus said soothingly, "let's go for a little ride in your bus. Suppose I drive."

Gus got into the driver's seat. "Sort of cramped behind this wheel, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, but what do you expect me to do about it?" Conroy snapped. "Go out and buy a new car because this one hasn't quite enough leg room for me?"

"You don't need to buy a new car—not when this one has an adjustable driver's seat," Gus told him good-naturedly. "Slide the seat back to where it's comfortable—and being comfortable counts when you have a lot of driving to do."

Conroy's thin cheeks flushed. "I'm just dumb," he said in a discouraged voice. "I never noticed that the seat is adjustable. It's just the way it was when I bought the car three years ago! I don't know how it is, but I never seem to . . ."

"Forget it," Gus advised him. "We'll adjust the seat when we get back. Now let's go out and get to the bottom of this stop-light mystery."

He started the engine and was rather surprised to find, the car ran well enough—except for noises.

There's a stop light at an intersection a mile from the Model Garage. Gus slowed down, and stopped. The engine kept on running.

"Oh, once in a while it'll keep going," Conroy said. "But nearly always it goes dead. You'll see."

There's another light half a mile down the road. Again Gus slowed—with a shriek of brakes—and stopped. And again the engine kept on running.

Conroy looked disconcerted. "It'll do it for you, but it won't do it for me," he said. "I tell you, there's something—" His voice trailed into somber silence.

Gus drove on for a couple of blocks, then swung the car around and pulled in at the curb.

"You try it now," he said. "Forget about me. Drive exactly the way you do when you're alone."

They changed seats, and Conroy drove back the way they had come. When they came to the traffic lights he put on his brakes hard, threw out his clutch roughly, and came to a jerky stop. The engine kept on running. But as he restarted the car the engine stopped.

"All right—start her up again," Gus said. The starter ground away for perhaps ten seconds, then the engine caught.

A few minutes later the other light came in sight ahead of them. As they came up to it Conroy again kicked on his brakes, threw out his clutch, and came to another of his jerky stops.

And again, as he restarted the car, the engine stopped.

Cars behind him began to honk, people stared, and a cop glowered at him. The light went red again before he could start his motor.

He pounded the steering wheel with his fist. "I can't stand any more of this!" he shouted. "It's driving me nuts, I tell you! There's a jinx on me!"

"Take it easy—take it easy," Gus said. "I've found your trouble and it's a laugh—nothing at all to worry about. Go ahead now, and when we're across the road pull into the curb. Then I'll chase that jinx for you."

Conroy did as Gus told him. "Leave the engine running, and slide over so that I can get behind the wheel,"

Gus directed as he got out. He walked around the car and got into the driver's seat. "Now watch," he said. He pressed the clutch pedal down to the floor boards, and then gently shifted gears—into first, second, and high. "That's how I do it," he said.

"It's how I do it, too," Conroy said.

"Not exactly," Gus qualified. "Watch again."

He threw the clutch out, then jerked the gear shift into first, into second, and—

The engine stopped.

"See?" Gus asked.

"No, I don't see anything, except that the motor has quit," Conroy said.

Gus laughed. "While you were driving I noticed that you put a good deal of force into your gear-shifting. When you restarted after stopping for that first light I noticed that just as you shifted into second the engine stopped. I couldn't see why, but at the next (Continued on page 210)

GUS SAYS:

When a driver kicks about his gas mileage even though his car is in good shape, the trouble is usually to be found in him! Either he guns his motor on starts, or fails to keep an even pressure on his foot accelerator out on the highways. Both these mistakes waste gasoline!

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Gus Chases a Jinx

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light I did. You've bent your shift lever a little so that, when you push it forward hard going into second, it hits the ignition-key case, lifts it sideways, turns off the switch and stops your engine. Watch again."

Gus shifted gears hard, raising the key case, and the engine went dead. Then the weight of the key case slowly brought the key back to "on" position.

"Well, there's your jinx, Mr. Conroy," he said. "When we get back I'll chase it for good by straightening that lever."

Conroy was silent for a few minutes. "What I don't understand," he said at last, "is why it is only after I stop for a light that I jam the end of the gear-shift lever against the ignition key. Why don't I do it every time I shift from first to second?"

Gus laughed—that friendly laugh of his that never has any sting in it. "You're pretty high-strung," he said. "And you think that most traffic lights are unnecessary nuisances—you told me you do. Having to stop at one makes you sore, and unconsciously you work off your impatience by slamming your gear-shift lever around."

Ten days later Joe Clark again called Gus to the office telephone and, as always, Gus went unwillingly.

"Is this Dr. Gustav Wilson?" asked a voice. "The distinguished nerve specialist?"

"Hey?" demanded Gus. "No, this—say, what's the gag? . . . Oh, it's Doc Foley, is it? What can I do you for, Doc?"

"You can tell me what you did for—and to—that fellow Fred Conroy," Dr. Foley said. "Conroy," Gus repeated. "Oh, that's the fellow with the jitters, isn't it? Why, I just fixed up his car so that it is fit for a human being to drive."

"How about chasing that jinx Conroy thought he had after him?"

"That was just a little fancy trimming," Gus said. "How is the poor guy, anyhow?"

"I wouldn't say he's cured, but his nerves certainly are in much better shape than they were before you fixed up his car. He's doing better with his selling, too—says he's going to pay part of your bill next week."

"Shucks!" Gus growled. "He needn't get gray hairs about that bill. You really think fixing his car up did his nerves any good?"

"I'm sure that it did," Dr. Foley said decisively. "That experiment has convinced me that driving a noisy, out-of-whack car is a serious nervous strain."

"You've got something there. Doc!" Gus said. "I found that out 25 years ago—with-out going to medical school!"