



GUS Settles an International Incident

By MARTIN BUNN

STAN HICKS has a habit of acting first and thinking afterward. That's what he did late one afternoon when a convertible with its horn blowing continuously was driven up to the Model Garage. He dashed to the shop door, opened it, and motioned in the sheepish young man at the wheel.

Gus Wilson, intent at the workbench, looked up startled as the continuously blasting horn echoed in the garage. Then he hurried over, raised the hood, and deftly disconnected the horn relay. Quiet returned to the shop.

The driver climbed out—Paul Tarlin, a young man who's been going right up the ladder at our town's bank. It was the opening day of the bass season and his clothes told Gus that he'd been fishing. "Hello, Paul," Gus greeted him. "Get any bass?"

Paul shook his head. "They wouldn't

touch a thing," he said dourly. "Say, that's the second time the horn's done that. The first time my wife was with me, and did she raise the roof! She always blames me if anything happens to the car—and you ought to see what *she* does to it!"

Gus bent over to examine the wiring so he wouldn't have to answer that one.

"Short in the relay," he diagnosed after a moment. "If the owner of a '39 bus hasn't anything worse than that to worry about, he ought to be a happy man."

Paul grunted. "As a matter of fact, there is something else. The engine's begun making a queer sort of noise—it sounds as if there's something wrong with a bearing. I noticed it driving up to Round Lake this morning. It kept getting louder and louder, especially when I went over 40.

"There's a one-man garage at the boat landing, and I told the man there to take a look at the engine while I was fishing. The

bass wouldn't bite, so after an hour I decided to drive over to Clear Pond. Back at the landing the garageman told me the trouble was that the oil was too thin. It sounded reasonable because I was still using winter oil, so I had him drain the crankcase and put in No. 30."

"Did that help any?" Gus queried.

"For a while it seemed to," Paul went on. "But before I got to Clear Pond the noise was back as loud as ever. I parked the car and fished for a couple of hours, but I couldn't get a single strike, so I thought I'd call it a day. On the way back the engine ran quietly for a few miles and then it started making the same racket.

"At the Coatsville Garage the mechanic told me that the trouble was in the connecting-rod bearings. He said I could make it home all right if I went slow. I kept under 35 all the way and didn't have any trouble, though the noise was there all the time. It must be made by a bearing that's quiet when the oil is cool and thick, but gets noisy when the oil thins out."

He started the engine. Gus's trained ear immediately picked up the sound, a regular thudding knock that speeded up as Paul opened the throttle. After a moment he signaled Paul to cut the switch.

"It could be a con-rod bearing, and it could be something else," Gus mused. "Anything I told you now would be just a guess. Suppose you let me do a job of checking and we'll know for sure."

Paul looked at his watch. "I've got to get home now," he said. "Agatha has to use the car tonight, and she'll be madder than a wet cat that I'm this late. How'd it be if I bring it in before work tomorrow so you can give it a good going over?"

"Make it day after tomorrow," Gus amended. "Tomorrow I'm going fishing."

"They won't bite," Paul predicted glumly.

THE NEXT day, with Gus fishing and Joe Clark busy in the office, Stan Hicks was feeling comfortably important when a blonde young woman brought a convertible to a rubbery stop at the gas pump. "Fill it up with petrol," she directed in clipped accents.

"Huh?" Stan demanded.

"I said," the young woman repeated, "fill it up with pet—I mean, gasoline."

"I getcha," said Stan. "Switch the engine off, please—no, wait a moment." He listened intently. "Hear that noise?"

She listened. "I do rather hear a thump,"

she admitted. "Where does it come from?"

Stan raised the hood, looked as wise as he could, and listened again. "Loose connecting-rod bearings," he announced.

"Oh, bother!" said the young woman.

"You better have it fixed right away," Stan told her. "Otherwise your crankshaft might be scored, and then you *would* be in trouble."

"Bother!" she repeated. "It must have happened since I took Paul down to the bank this morning. If there'd been a thump then he would have noticed it—he's such a fuss!" Her pretty face hardened. "Now he'll say I've ruined his blawsted motor car! How long will it take to tighten those things?"

"Can't tighten them—have to put in new bearings." Stan hesitated because it was really too big a job for him to tackle alone. Then he yielded to the temptation to show Gus how good he was. "I'll have it done by four o'clock," he promised.

"Cheers!" she said, and climbed out.

In the next few hours Stan hung up a new personal record for sustained effort. At quarter to four, when he had the oil pan back on, Gus Wilson drove into the shop. The bass hadn't bitten and he had quit in disgust. "What's all this?" he asked Stan as he eyed the discarded bearing shells.

Stan tried hard to be nonchalant. "Con-rod bearing job for Mrs. Tarlin," he said. "I was just going to road-test her car."

Gus looked surprised. "You mean *Mr.* Tarlin, don't you?"

"Nope—Missus."

"Oh," said Gus. "I see. . . . I'll go with you." Stan drove the convertible out of the shop and up the highway. It purred as contentedly as a cat that sees the top taken off the cream bottle. After a mile Stan started back. "Keep going," Gus told him.

Stan drove on. After another mile Gus's quick ears picked up a noise from the engine—the same muffled knock that he had listened to the day before. He watched a crimson flush spread from Stan's cheeks to his ears and to the nape of his neck. After a minute, his eyes still on the road, Stan muttered, "Go ahead, boss—say it!"

Gus laughed and gave his deflated assistant a friendly poke in the ribs. "You're not the only mechanic in this car who's made a good job of fixing the wrong thing," he said. "Let's get back to the shop."

When they got there, Agatha Tarlin was waiting. "Is my motor car all right now?"

Stan, in the throes of another hot flash,

muttered unintelligibly. Gus went to his rescue. "I'm afraid it isn't," he said. "You see, that noise that Paul noticed yesterday—"

Agatha's lips tightened and her blue eyes flashed. "Oh," she interrupted grimly, "so Paul did something to the car yesterday, and didn't say anything about it so he could blame it on me! That was simply caddish! And I'm going right over to the bank to tell him so!"

"Well, now," Gus mollified, "I wouldn't—" But Agatha was already out the door.

Gus shrugged helplessly. Then he got a steel rod, placed one end of it on the cylinder head, and put his ear against the fist holding the other end. The engine was still running, and with his improvised listening rod he could hear the knock better. "It might be the wrist pins," he said, "but it sounds more like—Stan! Help me get this cylinder head off!"

THEY were ready to lift the head free when the shop's quiet was shattered by the sound of high-voiced contention. Paul and Agatha arrived together, both talking at the same time. "What do you mean, it isn't my car—just lend-lease?" she shrilled. "I've listened to just about enough such talk, Paul Tarlin!"

By then Stan was carrying the head to the workbench. Gus took one look at the pistons, and quelled the riot by pounding on an oil can with a wrench. "If you kids will quiet down for a moment, I'll show you that you're scrapping about nothing at all," he announced. He pointed to the exposed pistons. "The normal clearance between the pistons and the head on this engine is about an eighth of an inch. See how the carbon has built up on these pistons until it practically

fills the clearance space? Look at these flat spots—that's where the carbon has been hitting the head and making the noise that started all the trouble.

"As soon as we get the carbon scraped off, the engine will run as smoothly as ever. Neither of you is to blame for this—it's just the result of easy-carbonizing wartime gasoline."

Paul looked at Agatha, but she wouldn't look at him. "That's extraordinarily interesting," she told Gus coldly. "Nevertheless, the beastly car must have been thumping when I drove Paul downtown this morning. Knowing that I can't tell if it makes odd sounds, he didn't say anything about it so he could say later that I was to blame!"

Gus grinned. "The engine wasn't making that noise when you started out this morning. You see, when it's cool the pistons and rods contract sufficiently to clear the head. So there isn't any noise until the car has been driven a few miles."

Now Agatha looked at Paul, and after a moment they both laughed. "I say, Mr. Wilson," she said with a grin, "it rawther looks as if I'd been the fuss this time, doesn't it? I'm most dreadfully sorry."

"Skip it," said Gus cheerfully. "If an Englishwoman driving in this country can keep on the righthand side of the road, she's doing well." Agatha made him a graceful mock curtsy.

"And as for the new bearings Stan put in," Gus went on, "your old ones don't seem to have been in bad shape. So you'll have a new set free, and Stan here will have learned not to jump at conclusions. Something which," he finished with a twinkle as Agatha took Paul's arm, "seems to have caught on generally."

