

Gus Runs Into

Gus picks up some business the hard way when his tow truck tangles with a runaway car

By Martin Bunn

ROLLING his tow truck toward the nearest turnaround exit on the parkway after answering a road call, Gus Wilson sniffed the pine-scented fall air with relish. He'd get back to the Model Garage by closing time.

If Gus hadn't been in the habit of watching oncoming cars, as well as those around him, he might never have returned to his shop at all. Just as he entered a curve, a big Chrysler convertible started a pass on the opposite side. It veered left abruptly to get around a car—and kept veering. The instant its front wheel crossed the dividerless center line, Gus knew he was in for trouble.

He swung onto the shoulder. The big convertible seemed bent on meeting him head-on. It grew in the windshield as if seen through a zoom lens; Gus could see the driver fighting the wheel. The Chrysler sped past so closely Gus could have touched it. The tow truck shuddered as metal bit metal in a glancing blow. Gus came to a controlled stop on the grass. In his mirror he saw the car pull up behind him, perhaps 75 feet away.

For half a minute Gus sat still. Then, getting out on unwilling legs, he went back to the Chrysler, a '55 model. Its bumper was caved in where it had struck the wrecker. Hunched motionless over the wheel sat the driver, his left hand clenched.

"You okay, or need help?" asked Gus.

The head lifted. A young man of about 20 looked up.

"Of all the blasted, rotten, dirty luck!" he said bitterly.

"Are you hurt?" repeated Gus.

The other shook his head.

"Then quit beefing," snapped Gus.

"We're lucky to be around and talking."

"I know. But I swore I'd meet my girl by six. Now our date is ruined."



"Let's look at your papers," said Gus.

He exchanged his with the young man, whose name appeared as David Blake. Gus made a sketch of the highway, with the paths of the two cars, and noted the damage to his truck, which had suffered only a dent.

"What made you cross over?" Gus asked.

Blake's answer was cut off by the arrival of a police car.

"Anybody hurt?" asked the patrolman who came up. "No? What happened?"

Gus told him.

"Now can I go?" asked Blake.

"Maybe you can go—after I see your li-

an Odd Customer



The big convertible grew in the windshield as if seen through a zoom lens; Gus could see the driver fighting the wheel.

cense. And give you a summons for crossing the center line," said the patrolman. "Why did you do it?"

"I was passing this other car," said Blake glibly. "It began to edge over . . ." Catching the officer's hard eyes, he flushed. "My power steering cut out," he concluded.

The officer wrote on a form.

"It's true!" insisted Blake. "You can ask *him* to check it right now," he added with a nod toward Gus, and opened the hood.

Gus looked at the belt that drove the generator and power-steering pump. The belt was intact. He walked around for a closer look at the pump.

The driving member of a three-part coupling that drove the pump was broken. Part of its hub was still on the rear of the generator shaft, but the driving lugs had snapped off. Gus reached down and picked a fragment of one off the oil pan.

"How about it?" asked the officer.

"Hydraulic steering power sure was gone," agreed Gus. "But he should still have been able to steer manually."

"Yeah? You try it," jeered Blake. "It feels like a 10-ton truck. Caught me just as I was lighting a cigarette, too."

The patrolman checked the annual inspection sticker, gave Blake a green slip.

"Be in court Tuesday the tenth, Mr. Blake. You'll hear if we need you, Mr. Wilson. Can this car be driven away, or should it be towed?"

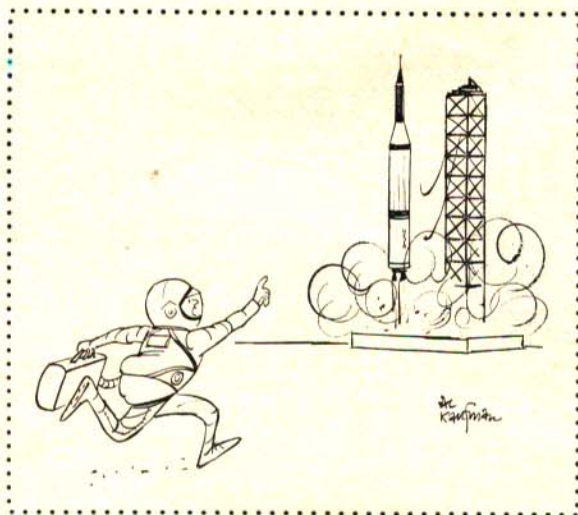
"I'll take a tow," said Blake.

With the Chrysler on the hook and Blake beside him, Gus drove off at the next exit.

"How many of those pump couplings have you snapped?" he asked casually.

"Four. How'd you know?"

"You knew just where to look, so I fig-



ured that it must have happened before."

"Sure has, and it's driving me nuts. The first time it took me three days to find that part. Next time I ordered three from an agency. The last of those just went. My dad told me if it happened again I'd have to get rid of the car. I sure don't want to. Can you get me that part?"

"Maybe, but if four didn't help, it's time somebody found out why they break. The reason could be a broken seal ring, a stuck valve, or bent steering linkage. I'll check it through."

"Great," agreed Blake. "I'll be over in the morning. Could you let me off at Drake Avenue? I promised my girl I'd look over a used car she's thinking of buying. If she does, we'll have wheels for our date."

Gus went a couple of blocks out of his way to let the young man out at the corner of Drake Avenue. As he hurried toward a nearby house, an elderly man and a girl walked around a car in the driveway. It

seemed to Gus, as he got his tow under way, that the car was familiar—and that the man was Silas Barnstable.

Gus drove on. The afternoon's events had been disturbing enough; he had no desire to run into Barnstable, his grouchiest—and stingiest—customer.

First thing next morning, Gus put the big convertible on a body lift. In sharp contrast to its well-groomed exterior, the underside of the car bespoke serious neglect. Grease fittings were invisible under long-accumulated dirt.

Pulling out the cotter pin at the left end of the tie rod, Gus removed the nut and drove the rod out of its socket. With the left wheel disconnected, he was able to swing it from side to side.

Behind him, Gus heard a car drive into the shop. He was neither pleased nor unduly surprised to see Barnstable and young Blake get out of the 1956 Ford sedan he'd spotted in the driveway the night before.

"Hi, Mr. Wilson," said Blake. "Expect to find my pump trouble way down there?"

"Morning," replied Gus. "Yes, I do."

Having loosened the right end of the tie rod, Gus drove it out also. Then he grasped the right wheel and tried to swing it on the kingpin. Failing, he exerted all his strength. The wheel didn't budge.

"Here," he said, offering Blake a couple of clean rags. "You try it."

The young man took the rags and tried to move the wheel. "Sure is stuck, isn't it?"

"That's what broke the pump couplings," said Gus. "The kingpin is seized." He wiped off the grease fitting and applied a pressure gun.

"It's seized so hard I can't get any grease in. We'll have to take it apart, see whether rebushing is necessary, and fit a new kingpin. We'd better check and lubricate all other fittings, too. They look as if they hadn't been touched in years."

"Guess they haven't," confessed Blake.

Gus shook his head. "This is something to watch if you have power steering. With manual steering, you'd have noticed it was getting to be almost impossible to turn the

wheel. But with power doing the hard work, you never felt it.

"On quick turns, the sudden overload would break the pump coupling. Then you couldn't steer. It nearly killed you yesterday. How come you take such good care of the car topside, and forget lubrication?"

Blake shrugged. "Greasing costs money. Cleaning and waxing I do myself."

"Quit chewin' the fat, Gus," put in Barnstable, "and fix them brakes you re-lined. I sold the car to this young feller's girl. They already had an accident in it."

"Not much of one," Blake said. "Last night Betty came up behind a car at a stoplight. She braked in plenty of time, but the car kept on and bumped the other one. When I tried it, the brakes held okay. But we told Mr. Barnstable whatever's wrong has to be taken care of."

With Blake beside him, Gus drove the Ford out. Six times the brakes held. The seventh time, they seemed weak. Gus nudged the automatic drive into neutral. The car stopped easily, engine racing. After a jab at the gas pedal, it idled again.

"It isn't the brakes," Gus told Blake. "The throttle's sticking."

Back at the garage, Gus asked Stan Hicks, his helper, to check the throttle linkage. Barnstable was in the phone booth.

Stan came up to Gus shortly after. "You sure the throttle's hanging up, Boss?" he asked. "I took off the air cleaner and checked the linkage. It doesn't stick."

Going over to the Ford, Gus worked the linkage by hand. As Stan said, it operated the throttle faultlessly. But then, with the air cleaner off, Gus noticed something odd about the two-barrel carburetor.

"Don't you try making yourself another job," growled Barnstable as he came up.

"Look at this, Silas," said Gus. "See how the carburetor flange tilts back?"

Putting the air cleaner back on, Gus again tried the throttle linkage. Only a hard push would open it, and it failed to return to the idle position.

"See where it rubs the bottom of the air cleaner?" asked Gus. "When the engine's running, vibration sometimes frees it, sometimes doesn't. You knew the throttle was sticking, and, because the linkage is hidden behind the air cleaner, you took that off to see where. Only then it didn't stick. So you complained about the brakes, hoping to get two jobs for the price of one."

Scratching a mark on the air cleaner, Gus removed it and made a small dent at the mark. When he put the air cleaner back, the linkage worked smoothly.

"Never told you to fix that," muttered Barnstable. "I ain't payin' for it."

"Will you pay if I tell you what you did—something nobody else knows about—that caused the trouble?"

"You'll have to prove it!"

"Okay. You buy motor oil in bulk. Last time you put some in this car, you laid the oil-filler cap on the air cleaner. But you forgot, and slammed the hood on it. That shoved the cleaner down so hard it bent down the carburetor."

"Yeah? Prove it," growled Silas.

Gus pointed to the top of the air cleaner. "There's the dent made by the oil cap. And here's your bill."

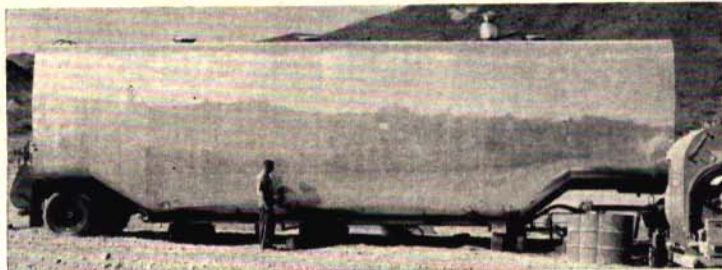
"He'd never have paid, Boss," said Stan after Blake had driven out the Ford, "if you hadn't spotted that dent. I sure didn't."

"You weren't looking for it," returned Gus. "And Silas was too mad to look. He was too hurt by the dent in his pocket-book." ■ ■

Big portable tank stores oil on job

This huge trailer tank was built for a California highway-construction firm to carry 32,500 gallons of road-surfacing oil.

It accompanies crews building a section of new freeway across the Mojave Desert, providing them with an almost endless



supply on the job. Thermostatically controlled panels divide it into compartments.