Making the Most of Your Basement
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Gus Gets the Pitch

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" spied the carnival pitchmen, but the Model Garageman kept stalling as mysteriously as their new car.

By Martin Bunn

A horn honked impatiently outside the Model Garage.

"I'll get it," Gus called back to Stan Hicks, his helper. "You'd better stick with that valve job for Mr. Landsdowne."

Two cars were parked out on the concrete by the gasoline pumps. A frayed knotted tow rope linked them. Gus recognized the tow car as the battered coupe belonging to old Jim Barstow who ran a sizable farm about 10 miles out of town. The car being towed looked as if it had just left the showroom.

"Newfangled Buggy" Breaks Down

"Got customers for ya," greeted Barstow as he unhooked a piece of baling wire and pushed open his door. "Broke down on the road out by my back 10. Happened to be cultivatin' and offered to tow 'em in."

"Thanks, Jim."

"Yep, that's the trouble with these newfangled buggies," Barstow rambled on. "Too many gadgets to get out of kilter. Well, I'll be seein' ya."

He tossed the tow rope into his car and clattered off down the road.

"Quite a character," said Gus with a chuckle to the two riders in the new car. "Now, how did your car happen to stall?"

"Just stalled, that's all," said the big man behind the wheel, in a voice like a saw sharpening a file.

"Yeah," echoed a small man sitting beside him, in equally rasping tones. "We were breezin' along in fine style when all of a sudden no motor. It was like Chick, here, had turned off the ignition. I says to Chick—"

"I'll just road-test it,"

"Can the spiel, Sparks. We got no time for chatter. Let's get the car fixed and hit the road." He turned to Gus. "We're pitchmen, mister—you know, spiers— for the big carnival that's opening in the city and we gotta be there tonight to help stake out our act. Think you can help us in a hurry?"

"Try to," said Gus.

The big man eased his bulk out of the
car and Gus slid in under the wheel. There was plenty of gas. The mileage showed less than 1,200—the car still had that new smell about it. But nothing would coax even a cough out of the engine.

**Pitchman Tells Gus How to Fix It**

"Let's push her into the shop," Gus said after a few tries, "where I can put some test instruments on her."

"Now, wait a minute," the man called Chick said. "This should be an easy thing to fix. I know a little about cars myself. It's plain enough that the engine just ain't getting any gas. Trouble's obviously somewhere in the carburetor, the fuel pump or the feed line. You ought to be able to find it there quick enough. We ain't got time for a fancy tune-up, so just check the fuel system and get us moving as quick as you can, huh?"

"You may be right," returned Gus evenly. "But I have to look a car over before I can spot the trouble."

"Okay, okay, let's get her inside."

The three men, with Gus reaching in
through the driver's window to steer, soon had the car parked beside Gus's bench.

"Ever have any trouble before?" asked Gus.

"Nope," answered Chick curtly.

"Been in a repair shop for a check-up?"

"Nope."

As Gus rolled his test panel over, the pitcher moved away and began to pace the garage nervously. His little sidekick paced right along with him. They seemed to be discussing something important in confidential tones. Gus began checking the ignition system—he felt sure the trouble was there somewhere.

After a few minutes, the little guy, Sparks, called out: "Making any progress, Pop?" He looked at a potato-size gold watch anchored to his vest by a heavy gold chain.

Gus ignored the little player and kept about his work of checking every wire and connection. On the surface everything seemed perfect, yet the ignition system was completely dead. The test rig bore him out.

There was only one thing to do, check each unit separately, so Gus started out with the battery leads.

Gus's Behavior Mystifies Stan

"Got an oversize battery in here, haven't you?" he asked, tapping the case with the tip of his screwdriver.

"Yeah, yeah," Chick said shortly. "Do a lot of cold-weather driving... But never mind that. Haven't you located the trouble yet?"

Gus was checking the distributor now and he had an odd gleam in his eye. "Listen, mister," he said finally, "give me a little time, will you? This engine is new to me—I've never worked on a model like it before."

Over in the corner of the garage where he was working on the Landsdowne car, Stan glanced up in surprise. What did Gus mean by saying he wasn't familiar with that car? Doc Hanson had one just like it and they'd had it in the shop for a tune-up only last week. Gus's voice sounded funny, too—kind of Milquetoasty, as if he were extra anxious to please the big loud-talking pitchman.

But it seemed to suit Chick. For the first time he sounded almost genial when he said, "Well, all right, old-timer, but shake it up, will you? We're busy men and time's a-wastin'."

Road Test Rouses Carny Men's Wrath

Ten minutes later, after several trips to the stock room, Gus snapped the distributor cap into place and slid into the driver's seat. The engine started up smoothly.

"I'll just road-test it," he called out to the pitchers and backed the car quickly out of the shop. Both men started to protest that they couldn't spare the time, but Gus was already headed down the road.

When Gus got back to the garage, he was greeted by two red-faced, fuming men, who, judging from the look on Stan Hicks' face, had been venting their anger on him.

"What's the idea?" Chick shouted. "You knew what a hurry we're in!"

"No idea. Just routine in this shop. We don't like customers to get a few miles down the road and find that what we thought we'd fix isn't right after all. Matter of fact, she needs one more minor adjustment."

Gus popped open the hood again. "Stan, come over here a minute, I've got a job for you." Gus whispered briefly. Stan nodded and left the garage.

After a few minutes Gus closed the hood again. "There she is, boys, as good as new. That'll be $12.50."

"Well, it's about time," snapped Chick. The little fellow was already in the car when the big guy slid in and started backing out. Suddenly he stopped. "Hey," he yelled, "get that grease monkey of yours to back that tow truck out of the driveway. How in blazes do you expect me to back out?"

Stan climbed up into the driver's seat and

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started the engine. As the tow truck eased
back out of the way it revealed a state
police car also parked crosswise of the
entrance.

Sgt. Jerry Corcoran was standing in front
of it with his right hand resting firmly on
the butt of his gun.

“Okay, you fellows,” ordered Jerry, “might
as well make it easy for all of us. Slide out
of the car with your hands in back of your
heads."

Gus Gives Stan the Inside Dope

At that moment, two more state cops
appeared from behind the tow truck and
had handcuffs on the startled pair before
they knew what was happening.

“Thanks a million, Gus,” said Jerry, after
he’d herded the handcuffed pair into their
own car with a trooper at the wheel and
another in the back seat. Then he climbed
into the police car and started the engine.

“What gives with the carnival guys?”
asked Stan as he and Gus watched the two-
car caravan pull away. “Fleece a local yokel
at the last stand?”

“Nothing as simple as that,” said Gus.
“That car of theirs has more built-in secret
compartments than a Chinese puzzle chest.”

“Jewel smugglers?”

“Dope peddlers.”

“Then they weren’t really carnival men
at all.”

Pitchmen Put Up a Good Front

“Sure they were. They’ve been using that
as a front to sell dope to local peddlers
around the country. That car of theirs is a
rolling narcotics warehouse.”

“Gosh, how did you spot it?”

“Well, if the trouble hadn’t been in the
ignition I probably wouldn’t have stumbled
on it. In checking it over on the first go-
around, it seemed as if everything was over-
size—the battery, the oil cleaner, even the
coil. Incidentally, the trouble was in the
distributor.”

“What was it?”

“You know that small carbon brush in
the center terminal of the distributor cap
that serves as the contact for the spring on
top of the rotor?”

Stan nodded.

“Well, it had cracked and a piece of it
had dropped down into the breaker-arm
assembly. It was shorting out the breaker arm,
and keeping the breaker points from closing,
too.”

“What was suspicious about that?”

“Nothing. But after I dislodged the piece
and began replacing the broken brush with
a new one, the coil caught my eye. I noticed
that it seemed higher than most. I twisted
the top and it came off in my hands. The
outer shell was a very neat dummy. Inside
was a standard coil and wedged in around
it were dozens of tiny white paper packets.”

“And that’s when you decided to road-test
the car,” put in Stan.

Gus Helps Smash a Syndicate

“Right. I wanted Jerry and the boys at
the barracks to back me up. The paper
packets contained dope, all right—‘uncut
heroin’ they said—and a concealed drawer
at the back end of the battery case was filled
with marijuana. What the narcotics boys’ll
find when they really go to work on it is
anybody’s guess.”

“Nice haul for Jerry,” said Stan.

“Oh, both the state and the federal boys
knew that some syndicate was doing a fast
job of distributing dope around the country,
but they didn’t know about this car. Now
they think there might be more than one,
part of a big network run by some mecha-
nically minded guy who thought up this
gimmick of stashing the dope away in car
parts rather than under the seats and in
built-in compartments cops are wise to.”

Sometimes It Pays to Play Dumb

“But wouldn’t any wise mechanic like you
catch on?”

“They probably have their own garage
where they go for repairs, most likely the
same place where the changes are made.
Fortunately, the mechanic, whoever he is,
cracked that distributor brush.” Gus grimed.
“And maybe you noticed I played kind of
dumb.”

“You sure did. Maybe you ought to be in
show business yourself.”

Next month: Gus goes hunting for trouble.

Tipsy Tip

A guy went into a bar and ordered three buckets
of beer for his horse, hitched outside. Bartender
says, “All that beer for the horse? How about
you?” “Not me,” says the guy, “I’m driving.”
—Clues.