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A COMPLETE HUMOROUS STORY.

According to Plan.

"Lummy," said Mr Terence Connor to himself, "What a soft snip!"

He ran his long, slender friend "Jimmy" into a hip pocket and flashed a limited circle of light round the dining room walls. All was as it should be.

"Nice little bit of silver by the look of it," he observed, as the beam lingered lovingly on the side-board. "I wonder—"

Then he shook his head. "No, Terry, my son," he advised himself, "According to plan," is your motto, old bird. Pinchin' silver 'ain according to plan. You stick to the plan" and don't go hankerin' after side-lines." He slipped the ray along the wall waist high and came upon a door knob. "Into the 'all," he reminded him- self. "Turn right and straight on the lib'y." Key on the 'ook in the corner. 'Lord bless all yappin' skivvies,' says I."

Gripping the handle by its narrow neck close up to its seating he turned and slid the door open very quietly. His stock- inged feet were noiseless on the carpet as, with a knuckle on the bead of the wains- coting he crept up the passage towards the rear of the house. A door breaking the line of the wainscot pulled him up. "Drawing-room," said he. "All ac- cordin' to plan; now it's straight ahead to the lib'y."

A few yards further brought him to the library door. He cautiously flicked on his flash, stopping it down with his fingers till a mere slit showed and found the key on its appointed peg. With the same elaborate care he opened and entered.

Instantly the light dazzled him. Every lamp in the brilliantly-lighted little room sprang into action. He started violently, then softly closing the door stood still with his heart thumping madly, his scalp twitching and his upper lip drawn rat-like across bare teeth. Slowly the strain eased as eyes and ears brought no further cause for fear. Certainly the room was empty. There was not in the spare cham- ber a single nook to hide in. "Them shutters is alright," he assured himself with a grin. He had studied the iron window shutters during a preliminary visit which he had paid to Lipsfield in his study of Bolshevik economics. "They let no light through, an' with the curtain over the door I reckon I'm safe enough. One of 'is lordship's clever tricks I take to save puttin' on the light. Very con- siderate, m' lord! Thank you, m' lord! I'm always 'appy to deal with one o' these 'ere scientific nobs."

He had recovered from the shock of the sudden illumination but he was no less careful. For a good two minutes he sur- veyed the room without moving except to rub his back which was protesting against the damp, cold vigil in the shuddery. On his right a clock ticked solemnly. "One of his lordship's 'ome-made," he con- cluded, noting the ungainly mass of it on the heavy bracket. At the other end of the room a huge convex mirror reflected nearly the whole department. There were not as many books as he expected and most of them were quite modern.

The solid ticking of the clock recalled him to business. Terence took a dislike to that clock. He fancied in it a curious resemblance to a human face and the hands, showing 3.40, looked like a mouth, a thin, cynical mouth that jeered at him. With an effort he shook the idea off. "What yer gettin' the wind up over a blighted 'ome-made clock-face, Terry, my lad? There's the box all dinkum, an' that's what you're after. Jess you hump it off accordin' to plan."

The large japanned deed-box which was his objective stood on a little settee before the desk in the very centre of the room.

He paced cat-like up to it. "Ome made too," he ruminated. "No trouble gettin' inside that." Standing thus under the central light of the desk he lifted it by the handle in the centre of the lid. A row of ventilating holes round the lower edge amused him. "Sp'ose 'is lordship keeps white rats in it," he said. "Blighted 'eavy for just a few sparklers anyway. Papers I reckon. Now Mr Blooming White Rat, you got to come along o' me on a visit to London."

The flood of light annoyed him. It would show when he opened the door to return and he could find no switches. He set- tled the difficulty by removing the lamps one by one from their fittings and placing them in a neat row upon the desk. Then with the end of a curtain he hooded the last lamp, stole quietly out, locked the door, and made a tactful exit by the din- ing-room window.

"A soft snip," he whispered to his friend Saville as he hopped into the wait- ing car ten minutes later. "All accordin' to plan, old son. Let 'er rip."

II.

A little after half-past five of a bright spring morning Mr Saville drew up his two-seater at the entrance of Verity Man- sions, Tottenham Court Road, and set down his friend Mr Connor with a large and somewhat weighty deed-box.

Mr Connor, letting himself in at No. 75 on the third floor, deposited the box in the narrow hall and seated himself upon a couch in the dining-room where he rested from the labours of the night.

Some half hour later, his partner re- turned from stalling the car, and Mr Connor let him in. He had become im- patient of delay. "You've come back, 'ave you?" he said. "'You've been long enough gone. 'And us a chisel, an' we'll get going." Mr Saville produced the implement from his pocket, and Mr Connor, taking the box with him, dropped it hastily on the dining-room table with an oath.

"What's up?" growled Saville, lighting a cigarette and watching his companion's startled face with black suspicion.

"The—the box," stammered the tremb- ling Terence. "It—it sp—spoke ter me."

"Oh, cut out the funny stuff," said Sav- ille, wearily. "We ain't got time to be funny. Boxes don't talk."

"Of course not," admitted the box, quite distinctly. "Can't be done. Take a fag like Savvy."

Mr Saville's cigarette dropped from his white lips, and he made for the passage calling on gods for whom hitherto he had no sort of use. Mr Connor was a very good second.

Outside, and breathing hard, they sur- veyed one another with dismay. For a moment neither spoke, then "Sp—sp— spirits," suggested Terence, plaintively.

"I ain't had any," returned Saville with vigour, "but I will."

"Ghosts I mean," explained Connor, "Spooks."

"Strewh," said Saville quickly, "Don't call it that, Terry. It—it might not like it."

"Well, I got a drop," admitted Connor, after a pause. "Praps we'd better."

He led Saville into the kitchen, and they fortified themselves after the ap- proved manner of the Netherlands. Mr Saville grew confident again. "You got the wind up," he said, putting down his glass. "Lummy, I thought you had more neck."

"Well, so did you," protested Terence. "What do you expect," retorted Sav- ille, "with you squawking like a blighted parrot-house?"

Connor brought his fist down on the table. "That's what it is," he said, "a blighted parrot. We'll wring its blooming neck."

They opened the dining-room door and went in, half, expecting to find their plun- der sitting in an armchair smoking a pipe, but the box had not moved. "Hallo!" it remarked cheerily, "You've come back. Have you been round the corner to the Swan?"

With some effort they held their ground, watching the cube of black japanned metal with awe. Connor kept his hand on the door knob. At last Saville spoke. "Are you—er, are you a—er, spirit, box?"

The box laughed heartily, which was the more uncanny as it had nothing to laugh with. "No," it said at last, still chuckling. "I am a box."

"That settles it," said Connor. "I never heard a parrot what talked sense."

"Familiarity had, however, by now bred a certain limited contempt for the phen- omenon. They watched in silence for a minute or two then, "Aw," cried Saville, "what's the use of waiting? Let's have the lid off."

He produced the chisel and again walk- ed forward to the table and started to insert it in under the lid. At the first touch the box cried "Squawk," loudly. Saville dropped the tool and rushed for the door.

"The devil's in the damned thing," he said. "What can we do?"

"Oh, take me home," moaned the box piteously, "Take me home, and I won't say a word about it."

"Ho! yes," replied Connor, noting the sign of weakness with satisfaction. He seized the poker and brought it down viciously upon the lid. "Take that," he cried, "and we'll see if you're so free with your back chat."

He stepped back to survey the result of his work in breathless silence.

"How dare you chip my enamel, sir?" thundered the box, angrily. "I will have no mercy. I will have no mercy. I will put the police on you."

"You've put the lid on it now," said Saville, wilting before the enraged casket. "That's torn it, sure. 'What did you want to hit him for?"

Connor was shaken too. "Oh, Mr—er—Mr Box," he coaxed, stroking the bat- tered lid. "I didn't mean no 'arm; it was just a joke like."

"Then take me home, damn you," snapped the deed-box, crossly. "At once before I have you pinched."

"Yes, yes," agreed the two delinquents feverishly. They felt like people in an evil dream, but they had too much respect for that uncanny bit of japanned ware to take risks. "Certainly, Mr Box."

"Take me home," reiterated the box. "I want my breakfast."

"Of course," agreed Mr Saville, sooth- ingly. "Sorry we forgot, Mr—er—Box. Breakfast, of course. Don't do anything hasty in the pinching line, Mr Box. Could you do with a little bit of bacon and some coffee through the keyhole?"

It was some little time before "Mr Box" grew articulate. He spluttered and made a series of gasping explosions which so startled his wide-eyed, pallid hosts that they clung to one another for support from the unheard-of menace of it. At last it said rather shakily, "I think, I think I'd better wait till I get home. Put on your hats and take me to Vic- toria."

For a moment the rogues stared at one another aghast, then said Saville, "Not blinking likely with you giving us to the first cop we see."

"My good man," said Mr Box grandly, "Don't let that worry you. I could have had 'em outside this door half-an-hour ago if I wished. Carry out my orders and you'll come to no harm."

"What if we don't?" asked Connor, frowning at the keyhole, the most face-like portion of "Mr Box's" anatomy.

"Mr Box" rattled with laughter. "Bet- ter not inquire," he said, "I don't want to start shooting, but if you're not quick. . . ."

There was a bang like the re- port of a pistol.

"Murderin' snakes," cried Connor. "Where did that one go?"

Instinctively they put their hands above their heads. "It's a fair cop," said Sav- ille feebly. "Don't shoot, mate."

"Now," went on "Mr Box," calmly. "Perhaps you'll take me home."

"Certainly, sir," they assented in unison.

"And no tricks, mind," said Mr Box. "No, sir," they agreed piously.

In dejected silence they raised their guest tenderly and carried him with care into the street. Asking with deep re- spect at Victoria if Mr Box would travel first-class, Connor received the reply, "Don't be an ass, you fool, I travel on the hat rack."

The reply kept one of the porters sober for months.

III.

Lord Lipsfield, savant, millionaire, in- ventor, waking, as was his custom, at quarter to six, tubbed, slipped into his old easy working clothes and went down- stairs to his library. The hooded lamp gave him a slight shock. His glance turned to the place of the deed-box. "Tut, tut," said he; "they've been at it again. He stood up tall and leonine, rumpling his shock of silver hair, a look of vexation in his bright eyes. "And I meant to get on to the details of the 'Kappa' beam," he murmured plaintively.

"Well, well."

He strode across and threw the shutters back, then he wound up the clock. This last was a rather intricate undertaking involving the removal of a cylinder and the substitution of another.

Having done this he unlocked one of the bottom drawers of his desk and took out three pieces of apparatus. Two of these were boxes fitted with trumpets that stood on pillars of vulcanite: the third was an extremely large dictaphone which still revolved as he placed it on the desk.

Adjusting the dictaphone for transcrip- tion he began to take down its record upon paper. The result with some sub-editing runs as follows:—

"Click." ("The drive gate?").

Voice: "A soft snip, All accordin' to plan, old son. Let 'er rip."

A motor warming up—clutch let in (she knocks a good deal). Sound of motor now continuous. Down hill on hand- brake (Crawley?).

Voice: "Where are we now, Saville?"

Croydon?" (Note Saville).

Another voice, "We shall be in by six, Terry; don't you fret."

Motor slowing—tram bells continuous (Clapham or Brixton?).

"Ster Bridge, Ster Bridge." (Plainly a bus conductor).

Terry's voice, "Ease 'er down, Savvy. No 'urry."

"Tom Corrode. Tom Corrode. (An- other bus conductor).

Terry again, "Sharp right at The Swan, Savvy. It's the second door, No. 75, on the third floor. You take the car 'ome. I won't touch 'em till you're back."

Motor shuts off.

The dictaphone slid on for a few minutes in complete silence. Then one of the boxes on his lordship's desk remarked without warning, "Oh, you've come back, 'ave you? You've been long enough gone. 'And us a chisel and we'll get going."

Lord Lipsfield's eyes brimmed with elfin mischief.

IV.

At eight o'clock Fipkin entered the lib- rary with slow state. "Breakfast is served my lord."

His lordship hastily adusted the key controls of his two trumpet boxes. "Would you ask her ladyship to excuse me for five minutes, and ask Mr Field to come here at once, please?"

Mr Field hurried from the breakfast table. "Ah, Field," said his lordship, "sorry to interrupt your meal, but the fact is we've been having a burglary."

"I feared so," returned the secretary, "from the look of the dining-room win- dow. Shall I 'phone the police, sir?"

"No, no," returned the old man, testily. "It's only Lady Lipsfield's diamonds. They haven't taken my 'Remarks on the theory of ether.' Take this spool of him for immediate development to Hedges in the lab., please."

"Very good, sir," said Field, taking the cylinder. "Only Lady Lipsfield's dia- monds," he said to himself as he sped; "only £30,000 worth."

"Now," said his lordship on his re- turn, "if you will be so good as to sit here until you hear a voice say, 'Lipsfield Junction,' and then call as loudly as you can, 'Here's where I get out; I shall be infinitely obliged to you.' And straight- way his lordship sought his breakfast.

"Excuse my unpunctuality, my dear," he remarked to his wife, but the fact is someone has taken away your jewels. It's most provoking."

Lady Lipsfield, in the act of passing a coffee-cup, stopped, put it carefully upon the table, raised her brows, and asked with icy calm. "My jewels, Arthur, what do you mean?"

"The necklace," he answered, "and the big hair affair. They've taken the whole bag of tricks."

"I knew it would happen," said her ladyship.

"I'm awfully sorry," said her lordship penitently.

"Sorry," she retorted. "When did you find out?"

"When I came down at about six o'clock this morning."

"Well," said her ladyship, impatiently. "What have you done? Have you tried to trace them?"

Lord Lipsfield rubbed his shaggy fore- lock ruefully. "Oh, I've traced 'em," he said. "They were taken to No. 75 in some flats off Totten Court Road, close to a public-house called The Swan, but I don't quite know where they are now."

Upon the acid of the debate came a parlour-maid pouring balm. "Two gen- tlemen to see your lordship," she said.

"If your ladyship permits," said he, "may they come in? I think they will interest you."

Lady Lipsfield sighed and nodded, and thereafter entered Messieurs Saville and Connor.

"Please, your lordship," said Saville, "we brought him back as he directed. Mr Box, sir, he asked to come back. Strictly understood, no proceedings.

"So," said her ladyship, "you informed the police after all, Arthur. I suppose you are detectives?"

Mr Connor was too much amazed to reply, but his friend had more aplomb. "Not detectives, Madame," he said, "not exactly detectives, though we study to keep closely in touch with them."

"It was very kind of you to look after my deed-box," said his lordship. "I hope you didn't find him unfriendly. He's a little inclined to be too chatty at times." Negligently he selected a key from his bunch and fitted it into the lock. "By the way," he added smiling, "you haven't given him anything to eat, I hope? He's always howling for grub." His eye caught the dent on the lid. "Your work, Mr Terry, I think," he said.

"Strewh!" said Connor.

At that the box woke up. "Having breakfast," it remarked discontently. "I've been sitting here half an hour and haven't had a bite. Yes, Lipsfield's in an al- mighty hurry."