

The Best Laid Plans

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Some people have more biased luck than others; but I just have more luck, unbiased and simple. More good luck, true, but also more bad luck. The trick is to stay ahead of the bad luck and ride the good luck to glory.

One day I was wandering about London, as I often do, waiting for luck to strike when lo-and-behold, what do I see but an armored car pulled up in front of a candy store! Now, this isn't one of those things you see every day, so I said to myself, "Self, get to the bottom of this."

A neighborly sort of pedestrian happened to be by me just then so I asked him, I said "what's a car like that doing at a candy store? The guards get hungry?"

"Wull," he said, "I dew hope nau', 'cause there ain't like to be more than a 'alf-dozen sweets in 'ere wot they could a-ford on the pay 'ey're like to get a truckin', hey?"

"And why is that?" I asked this vocal miracle. What are the odds; I ask some random gentlefriend and he turns out to be chatty, knowledgeable, and foreign! Like I said, luck.

"Ever'boday's talking 'bout it at the 'otel, 'hey? This 'ere shop's got the million dollar question, and that's chocolate, see?"

"I see," I said, for I did—I saw tough characters with side arms lugging a portable safe deposit box out of the store and into the truck. Nearly as comprehensible to one of my ready intellect as the sound of the 'hey?'er himself. "And how does a store like this come to be here in Walworth?"

"Cheese! You don' think 'ey can afford to land in the Ritz, do ya? 'Ow many folk gonna drop half a grand on a bar o' chocolate mixed with beaver milk an' flaming sucrose? Some guy were tellin' me 'ey near shut down las' year 'cause they couldn' turn a profit!"

"Really?" When you've got luck, you've got to push it. "Did your friend tell you how they managed to remain solvent?"

"Wot? Weren' they bough' ou' by some chain or the other? Like, 'Jai-alai Call-outs' or sumptin', mayhaps?"

"Well," I said, "I just think I may go take a peak at their wares—I've got five pounds in the pocket, might be able to afford half a stick of gum?"

"You got class, guy, you sure do got spunk. Me, I'm keepin' my cash for stuff 'at'll fill the ribs, hey?"

"Right-o!" I laughed, slapping him on the back and wandering into the store. Now, I'd just had a bit of good luck, so I expected a bit of bad luck, but not as bad as I got. See, I was actually a little hungry and the store was so delightfully laid out and put the delicacies to such advantage that without much thought I found myself completely distracted from the task at hand and actually looking to buy something. The first thing I saw that met the budget called itself a chocolate cupid and was a half-inch figurine of a plump baby wearing nothing but an insufferably smug expression. It was eighteen pounds less tuppence, which I actually thought was cheep at the moment, and when I took it out of the box and bit into it I found it a bland, waxy chocolate like cheep Easter bunnies. I actually spit it out, right there in the store, it was so not chocolate.

The clerk looked at me with a commiserating expression. "Pretty awful, isn't it? I warned you it was I-Li-Colate brand, though, you can't blame me."

"Warned me? Didn't you say, 'Oh, that's one of the ones I like a lot'?"

"No no, I said 'Ew, that's one of those 'I-Li-Colate things'."

"And what's that supposed to mean? Why on Earth do you carry the bilge if you dislike them that much?"

"Because I-Li-Colate owns us, though if I were Mr. Myers I don't think even that could persuade me to carry them. Nasty, aren't they? Lots of people spit them out."

"Do you refund their money?"

"No—I-Li-Colates are provided 'as is' with no written or implied warranties. Σοκολατα, on the other hand, they have a very comprehensive service plan, complete with care and storage instructions, a tamper-proof seal so they can tell if you did something silly like freezing them or leaving them on your dashboard, and full-service no-cost manufacturer repair if anything is less than ideal in any of their products. Maybe you'd like to try one of them?"

"How much are they?"

"Well—we have samples for eighty pounds if you'd like."

As you can see, my luck had shifted. True, I was down eighteen pounds, but I had also found a shop with no

obvious security safeguards where the *samples* went for eighty of the best; and they took cash, I know, because I had paid in cash earlier. Just think of the amount of change they'd need to keep in the till!

Still, there was info I needed to gain, so I eased into a little banter with this clerk fellow and learned that though he was only part-time and a pretty recent hire, he was pretty sure there were only two other employees.

"Course, one of them is always here," he laughed, "they wouldn't trust me with the combination to the safe in back!"

A safe in a store with only two and a half employees. . . luck was still up! I'd a pete-buster on the payroll, a bit of a dimwit but a handy man with his drill. Still I had to find a way in, so after checking the friendly's schedule I hopped it.

When you're looking for a slip with a retailer, and you happen to own the packaging of a product manufactured by it's parent company, and that parent company happens to be in Manchester while you are in London, a trip to Manchester is in order. Spent the night with an *objet malheureux* with unfortunate appellation of "Joy Bright" (my widowed aunt), and showed up at the offices with the morning influx of workers.

Never, never, never try to find out anything useful by bumming around a corporate office.

Good luck: the place didn't require visible ID badges.

Bad luck: secretaries. Oh, so many secretaries. Pardon me: administrative assistants. Short ones, tall ones, thin ones, fat ones, the male one and all the female ones, the pretty one who called me a bore and threatened libel, the old one that looked like the witch of the waste from "Howl's Moving Castle" and smelled like dusty rafters. Still, I pawed and purred and made a fool of myself kissing up to the lowlife and finally, after five hours, I got what I needed; some sap had taken a letter to John Rendleoffer in the London branch instructing him to make surprise tours of all the London-area stores—he in particular *because the London managers didn't know him!* Five hours of the worst luck, and then the luck turns.

So I called up my safe man and did the three-hour ride back from Manchester to London. I donned a pinstripe, took the tube, and landed in the delicatessen a bit moist under the collar, but none the worse for the wear.

First thing I see, besides all the thousand-pound chocolates, some fish in a what the world calls "business casual." Young bird, efficient looking—actually, he looked so much like that guy from "Face of Face" that I nearly decided he wasn't even an employee, but he was standing on the wrong side of the counter for that so I approached him.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Oh, hey!" he burst, spinning on his axis to face me. "I didn't see you come in. How do you like this weather?"

I confess to being floored by this. It didn't sound like good luck, nor did it sound like bad luck. "Weather?" I said weakly.

"You know, the gentle sunshine which falls like the dust of fairies, illuminating all both near and far and warming the heart chilled by the abuse of mankind?"

Commander Keen! What sort of a dupe was this? "Uh, sorry, do you work here?"

"I do. Weather's not your line, huh? How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the manager of this place. I'm from regional H.Q."

Now my luck returned, and he recognized it himself. "What luck you have today! I happen to be the fellow himself. What can I do for you today?" I mean, the store is empty except for the manager, who's a complete nitwit? Sweetness.

The phone rang. Two to one says its that idiot safe-cracker calling to ask for directions. Not a call I want this dweeb to take, let me tell you. I begged off that I was expecting a call and moved to the receiver. Sure enough, the goofball was calling but—get this—he was calling about what to wear! "What's the outfit?" are his opening words, without so much as a howdy-do!

Now, four hours earlier I had called this dimwit and told him to dress as a cop. That hadn't changed. But what was I supposed to say with this sappy young manager-character peering over my ear? Still, luck changes fast, and it came to me, clear as day, "Police? I think you must have the wrong number." Even a dimwit should be able to get that!

Now came the awkward part. If he was just now calling me about his costume, it would be plenty long before he showed up, and in that time I had to play the overseer. I figured, if I wanted to have the room with the safe in it to myself later, I had best make myself as annoying as I could, so I pestered him with petty questions and rude comments. He tried to escape to talk with a customer who came in, but I held him with an iron fist. No one out-maneuvers me in my prime.

Finally, the door swung open and in walked a blue-bottle. Anxious to get on with it, I mentioned to the manager character that I needed a private room and took the depeter into the back. Luck was happy: it was an office, with the safe, and the manager didn't follow us. Luck was angry: it wasn't the pete buster at all, it was an actual cop.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he asked.

“Well,” I said slowly, stalling for time, “A customer walked into the store a few minutes ago and I think he’s got a bomb strapped under his clothes.”

Lame story, I know, but my luck changed again. He swallowed it. “You say he has a bomb?”

“I am nearly positive of it. I saw it as he was asking the price of Dutch *Chocolade*.”

“Alright, then, I guess I’ll look into it,” he replied. And we left the back room.

So now it was back to waiting and hoping the idiot with the drill showed up in a timely way—but not until after the other copper had piked it. As I’m standing there, the customer came up to me and started asking me all these weird questions. He wanted to know where the fire extinguishers were and how long it took to evacuate the building and if the shelving moved and random stuff like that. Finally I told him, sorry, but I was just a visitor and not familiar with the particular layout of the store. That seemed to shut him down.

Well, that was not the end of my worries. Instant the customer-thing left, a middle-aged man in fleabags came up to me and—good luck again! The real McCoy cuts him off and says to me “Sir, may I have a word with you?” Finally! The depeter himself. We walk toward the back and as we do I am surprised to see the bluebottle and the manager walk out of the office, but they didn’t say a word to us so ’twas a’right.

As soon as the door is shut behind us this dimwit, who couldn’t even remember he was supposed to dress like a bluebottle for four hours at a time, began to chew me out! “Fine going, Fleg,” he spat. “That cheeseshop Rendle-hoffer you’re imitating is standing flatfooted in the store, requesting your prompt execution.”

I have no idea where the lightbulb got the idea—he hadn’t even been there long enough to know the name Rendle-hoffer I thought. Anyway, be that as it may, we had work to do. “Really? Not to sweat, everything’s under control. There’s the safe, you’ve got the drill?”

Rather than words, he flashed the equipment in my face just as that idiot manager opened the door behind him. This did not look good; if the safe man lost his head we were both of us copped.

Fortunately, the kuldge seemed to have other things on his mind. Ignoring me and the drill completely, he turned to my cohort and asked “Hey, I assume this fellow has told you there is a customer with a bomb in the store?”

Now, some of you will have doubted my statements about luck earlier, but you have to admit it takes a double measure to have a tale like that make it to the ears of the manager so quickly. I silently pushed the drill down from shoulder height to the stomach of the stunned dude

in front of me and prepared to try a little oil when there was a knock at the door. The manager, with almost theatrical exaggeration of feeling (where do these characters come from?) barked out “It’s him!” and motioned for the safecracker to take the door.

Now, I admit this was not exactly the ideal set of circs, but I was by now convinced that somehow this absent-minded fellow had not noticed the drill, so I motioned for the sap to stuff it in a pocket and answer the door. One must maintain appearances.

Well, it takes him a bit to catch on, but when he does open the door the fleabag that had tried to corner me earlier popped in like a spring-loaded pop-in-the-jack, blurt-ing out (no joke)

“The terrorist tried to use the telephone, but I cut the line!”

I mean to say! How on Earth did this unknown come to hear my little story? Luck seemed to be souring fast. How could I possibly calm these two terrorphobes and get them out of the office long enough for even a really good safecracker to make off with the kitty? I looked at the confused, worried look on the depeter’s face and realized it was hopeless. There was no way his fingers would be steady on the job for at least an hour. The bad luck had won. Time to pull anchor and cut my losses.

“This doesn’t seem like a two-man job,” I told my cohort. “Care to go and. . .”

“Oh, right!” he said, and shot out into the night like a burglar with nerves.

That done, it was time for my exit as well. “I think I’d better go keep an eye on that terrorist until the reinforcements arrive,” I said. The manager said “I’ll come with you”—sticky little pest—so when we got to the main store and I noticed it was completely empty I took a chance and said “I think I see him!” and left the store at a dignified gallop.

That was that. Two days of brilliant work, spoiled by the unaccountable presence of a policeman who could spread a story like none other and a safecracker with nerves of butter. Go figure. All I can say is, it doesn’t matter how much I plan; the luck has it.