

Reg Cox

The Magic Buckle

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The two main characters in this story talk in a 'Jack the Lad' London accent.
For some examples and their meaning, take a look at the last few pages of this book.

DON'T MAKE SEX TOO SERIOUS
IT'S SOMETIMES OVERDONE
TO GET IT RIGHT
KEEP IT LIGHT
'COS MOST OF ALL IT'S FUN
(RTC)

Chapter One.

The Station.

The huge, main concourse of Toronto Union Station, awakening to another working day, streamed with early commuters. Bored, heads down in isolation and trudging in lines towards the exits, they were suddenly startled awake by a man running through them from the opposite direction. Slim and fast, he skimmed over the ground in a blur of white baseball boots, pale blue jeans, red sweat-shirt and black shoulder-bag swinging wide. It was an unusual sight and sound at this early time of day and those in the way, swayed and stepped back in alarm, colliding with others around them, causing confusion and anger. Confronted by the milling crowd, the runner tucked his bag in tight like a ball and began to weave through them like a running-back. Quick, agile, stamping noisily at every cut, he dodged through them with a remarkable piece of broken-field running. The usually blase pigeons exploded from the floor in fright as the slapping, quick-moving figure sent them in a panic to the roof. Startled awake at the sudden commotion, sleepy commuters tried to get out of the way in a melee of waving briefcases and flying newspapers. By the time they registered what was happening, the runner was through them like a dog through cows, leaving them staring after him with the same bovine curiosity.

‘What the hell?’

‘Where’s the fire?’

‘Bloody Hippies.’

At the barrier, two fat ticket inspectors watched the runner approaching. They were middle aged men, one white, the other black and they knew who was coming.

‘It’s that English guy again,’ said the black man. ‘That guy Bobby who’s always late.’

‘LATE AGAIN BOBBY,’ shouted the other. He moved aside for the runner to pass through the gate but he was too slow, too fat and too late. Bob bounced off his big belly onto the other big belly then shot through the gate, causing a large amount of used-tickets to cascade to the floor.

‘Hey!’ one inspector shouted as he stooped awkwardly to retrieve the mess. ‘Watch it bub. What the hell d’You think y’doing?’

Bob, running backwards with his hands outstretched and grinning in glee, yelled back at the two fat guys.

‘I ‘FORT I DID WELL THERE ERIC. CANNON OFF THE PINK, OFF THE BROWN INTO THE SIDE POCKET, NOT BAD IF I SAY SO ME’SELF.’

Eric was not amused, the joke went over his head. He shouted at the retreating figure.

‘YOU SHOULD GET OUT OF BED EARLIER. YOU’LL NEVER GET ON IN THIS COMPANY BY BEING LATE ALL THE TIME.’

Bob's fading answer echoed in the great hall.

'YOU KNOW 'OW IT IS ERIC, SOME OF US GRAB LIFE AND SOME OF US GRAB TICKETS.'

Eric waved him away in contempt, grumbling to his mate as he gathered up the mess.

'Still got the cradle-marks on his arse. Been over here for five minutes and thinks he knows it all. Dining-car waiters? I've shit better.'

His mate agreed and they were off on their usual conversation about how good the old days were and how things had changed for the worse.

Same old stuff.

Bob sprinted along the platform, enjoying his speed. 'Quick and light but not too bright' his old sports master used to say. He ran faster. He was late all right but no more that usual. He thought about the joke he'd just cracked. Not bad. He must remember to tell Mick. That's right, good ole'Mick was on this run with him today. Bob was looking forward to seeing him and belted down the slope towards the sidings where his train was waiting to take him on another exciting trip.

For Bob, the mysterious lakes of Ontario, the awe-inspiring mountains and the forests of British Columbia were all so astounding that it was unbelievable that he was here to see it and that it was part of the job.

He'd always loved trains. As a schoolboy he'd done his time on English stations. collecting numbers, information and photographs. Once again he thanked his lucky stars that he's made that decision to come to Canada. Just to think he was not stuck back in foggy old London filled him with gladness. He just loved this job. The working day was never long enough and time just flew by.

That had had never been the case before. He'd had several soul-destroying jobs back in England but this one was pure enjoyment. Often when returning from a some trip he would be amazed to find he'd done about three-thousand miles. Three 'fousand miles! Wow! What would his mates back home say about that? Some of them he knew never ventured out of their 'manor'.

Bob always carried maps of the wild country he passed through. Plotting each route, noting all the branch lines, reading every railroad book and pamphlet he could find and boring everyone with his endless tour-guide information. He couldn't get enough of it all.

One of his greatest delights was exploring the little track-side towns which still had trading-posts and STILL sold pioneer stuff. Guns, bowie-knives, animal pelts, western saddles, lariats, indian bead-works, Eskimo soapstone carvings, the lot. When he could finally drag himself away from these treasure caves, he found wonderful honky-tonk bars full of interesting old railroad-men. It was unbelievable that the walls were covered in old railroad posters, prints and newspaper cuttings of railroad happenings and past disasters. 'The wreck of ninety-two.' 'The great snowfall of fifty-six.' The jukeboxes played his favourite train songs and in the bars, old guys spoke a kind of railroad slang that Bob found absolutely irresistible. Bob's working colleagues laughed at his enthusiasm but he

didn't care. This vast country had been opened up by the railroad pioneers and little Bobby from London Town felt a part of it all.

He came to the end of the track and ran across a footbridge to the marshalling yards. Here the train-cars stood in rows like some vast ghost town. Quiet and empty, like the city of the dead. The train he was to join was in here somewhere, waiting to come alive, waiting to be stored up with provisions for the big adventure.

He thrilled at the thought. Not long now. Shame it was only a five hour run to Montreal, there wouldn't be much to load with just the one meal to serve.

Never mind, he'd be with good ol' Mick and that made up for everything.

Chapter Two.

The stores.

Bob jogged along between the train-cars towering high above him. Pulled by diesel of course. 'Shame that. What must it have been like in the days of glorious steam? He'd been born too late. He could only read about those magnificent locomotives and look at his picture collection.

He thought about that fat Eric's remark just now.

'You'll never get on in this company!'

That was a laugh for a start. This job was just a chance ride the rails and see Canada. Bollocks to the company.

Getting paid was a bonus. He had plans to leave next year and go gold prospecting. He thought about his answer to Eric.

"You know how it is."

Of course, Eric would never know how it is. Neither would all the other old guys working on the station, doing as little as possible until they retired on their pensions. What did they know of the adventurous spirit Bob felt? He was working the trains across Canada and meeting his heroes. Real railroad men, prospectors, loggers, miners. He sought out and talked with them every chance he had. They were fascinating people in a beautiful country and it was all so exciting and his to enjoy.

Bob ran on, looking at his watch. Bags of time. The stores for Montreal would take no time to load. After that, the train would move to the station to board all the passengers and be ready to leave at eight fifteen.

Great stuff.

He came to an engine and was once more reminded that there is nothing attractive about a diesel engine. Just like a massive shoe-box, with no giant pistons or fly-wheels to marvel at. Never any jets of steam or towering smoke to show what was happening. Just horrible fumes. Still, he never ceased to wonder at the size and power of these American trains. They were like office blocks on wheels. Two hundred tons of cold, oppressive metal.

Now, inside the cars was entirely a different matter. Oh yes. Inside the cars was brightness, warmth, good times, good food and excitement, a lovely, homely place where he felt at home with his mates. Bob loved the feeling of 'belonging'. 'Crew' was his favourite word, a lovely, comfortable word that conjured up the 'us against them' feeling.

A togetherness that felt good when travelling across the plains and mountains to face adventures in the wilds of Canada. To the old regulars who went about their day-to-day routines, it was probably all so boring. To Bob it was all so new and exciting. Especially today. Bob felt good about today because his mate Mick was going to be on this run. Mick

was also a waiter and another Londoner and the two friends tried to get on the same run whenever they could but it rarely happened. Mick was street-tough and wise to the ways of the world and Bob felt safe with him. There was always a good laugh with Mick aboard and it was going to happen today.

Great stuff!

Although they were strong friends and shared everything, Bob knew that it only worked on the trains.

Mick despaired about Bob's attitude and silly interests and would never tolerate him socially. He often had the lad cringing and looking downcast while he had a go at him, or as Bob sometimes put it, gave him 'one of his lectures.'

Mick was famous for them.

'I can't believe you're from 'The Smoke' like wot I am. You're like them bleeding train spotters 'anging around railway stations in their 'stoopid anoraks and fucking notebooks. Wyn'cha get wivvit and use a bit a'common sometimes?

I dunno, you drive me potty sometimes. Call yerslf a Londoner? I dunno what I see in you 'arf the time.'

Mick was merciless with him, saying that Bob was a tosser that everyone laughed at and took advantage of and it made Mick feel ashamed. To him, Bob was a silly-arse that saw romance and adventure in just about everything. This is only a job for fuck's sake with maybe a few perks that made a few 'bob on the side. Yeah, Bob should 'shape up and forget the 'beauty of the country and 'stoopid stories of the wilderness' and concentrate on ducking and diving like he did himself and earn a few 'extra sovs'.

One of the reasons why Mick tolerated young Bob was, the lad was 'andy when there was birds about. Not that the silly arse knew it of course. He didn't know if he was punched or bored arf the time. But, with his shy manner, curly blonde hair and blue eyes, he was good to be with when there were girls on the train. They were always coming on to Bob with their big eager eyes, getting him to say something but Bob was too shy or thick and never took advantage.

'Taking advantage' was Mick's one great passion, a law he lived by. He made his business to see that girls eager to meet Bob had first to get past HIM and there were'nt many that managed that without some sort of compromise.

Bob never knew what was going on. If a girl spoke to him, he went red and rigid with fear.

When Bob was being silly and tongue-tied, Mick's own brand of lecherous chat and innuendo filled in the gaps and sometimes it worked and... sometimes it really worked. It drove Mick spare to see the lad's effect on crumpet all going to waste. Mick reckoned that if he had Bob's looks and his own chat-up lines, he'd've been dead long ago.

No sweat.

One thing about Bob that Mick respected was, the lad had left England at such a young age. Bob was here on his own and he was only eighteen. Mick admired that. The lad had 'bottle', of a sort. Having himself been forced to leave London by the 'boys in blue', Mick missed the pubs, the markets and the dodging about on the edge of the law. Young Bob may be a 'wolly' but he was a bit of Mick's old manor and he was here on his own in Canada. Yeah, Mick had a lot of time for the lad.

Bob had his reasons for leaving England. Dumped by his frigid, domineering girlfriend for being what she called 'too milky', he found himself wanting a change, any change. He just wanted to get away and forget her.

For years he'd been reading up on Canadian railroads and the wild country, so now he had the chance, he took it. He just upped stakes and left his boring job, boring pubs and boring mates who never talked about anything but birds, cars and football. His mum cried. His dad reached into his pocket and Bob arrived in Toronto with eight quid in his pocket and another life waiting.

Right now the eight-fifteen was waiting.

He ran around the end of the last car and saw with pleasure a black man pushing a flat stores-trolley. It was good old Ivan. 'Ivan the Ingot' his mates and girl-friends called him and the name was apt. Bob called out.

'Morning Ivan. On the job again I see.'

Ivan stopped, his face split by a dazzling smile.

'I'm always on the job man.' he said.

Ivan was from Jamaica and black as a company bin-liner. He was built short and wide with teeth that made you reach for your ray-bans and like Bob, he was a dining-car waiter. They got on well together, as everyone did with Ivan so long as you didn't let him meet your girl, wife, mum or grannie. He had a very bold confidence that all women were fair game and had to be tried. Bob dumped his bag onto the trolley and walked alongside.

'ave a good lay-over?' he enquired.

Ivan's 'whoop' sent dozens of pigeons off the tracks in fright. Ivan was famous for his loud and joyous 'whoops'.

They made people either jump or get annoyed.

'Man Oh man, did I have a good lay - er - over.'

There came that 'whoop' again and they both laughed out loud, slapping each other like long-lost brothers.

Another thing Ivan was famous for was his hilarious tales of what he got up to with all the black girls he chased and caught. He was legendry with his amazing anecdotes and eagerly sought after in the pubs and clubs around Toronto as a real fun guy to have an evening with. But the most famous thing about the happy black waiter was not his

personality or his stories. Sharing communal showers or hotel rooms with Ivan was sometimes a sobering moment for new members of the crew. Mick reckoned the bloke should get two sets of wages. Ivan began to tell a hysterical story about a girl on a snooker table and how he lost the black in the 'pink' and they went on down the yard laughing and frightening more pigeons.

Staggering along and giggling, with the trolley weaving a crazy course, they turned a corner and saw two identical short fat figures waiting at the stores entrance. It was Milo and George, the assistant cooks. Both Greek, both short, dark and sallow with thick stubby legs, they looked like twins but were unrelated.

Although they made him laugh, Bob always felt uneasy in their company. He didn't trust them. They were too intimate with each other, always conspiring in secret, whispering in Greek and looking sinister. They seemed dangerous because of their short tempers and Bob suspected they had knives hidden away. They couldn't follow English conversations and were always getting annoyed or suspicious of anyone who wasn't Greek. Another bad thing about them was their breath. A powerful garlic gas that withered flowers and killed wasps.

There was however, two things about them that made everyone laugh. One, because they had only a very few words of English between them, their confused pronunciations were a great source of amusement and two - in place of a laugh, they both had the most amazing, high-pitched whinnying giggle. They blared it out together like mad horses.

A kind of alien sound that scared some and amused others. Bob had often seen it shock a crowded room to silence. Because most conversations went over their heads and certainly every joke, these startling screams had a strange timing.

Bob greeted them in his usual way. He took a strange delight in confusing these two, like dicing with danger.

'Hi Milo. How's it 'anging George?'

Milo answered with a smiling face for a change. He seemed happy.

'Wok amacker for you innit we go up stinking go for stinking.'

Everything was 'stinking' with Milo lately, it was his latest word. Bob turned away, his hand over his nose.

'What did he say?' he giggled to Ivan.

In some strange way, Ivan usually understood them. Not this time.

'Dunno man.'

Bob grinned happily.

'Yes you do you, you fat black git. You always know what they say.'

'He said you're sexy,' invented Ivan. 'He wants your arse.'

Bob howled, Ivan whooped, the Greeks shrilled and more pigeons headed for the suburbs. George and Milo added their bags to the trolley, chatting away to each other like budgies. The four of them entered the stores. There, waiting beside a huge pallet of provisions, were two more of the crew, Jacob and Garth. Bob liked one and hated the other.

Bob really liked and respected Jacob, the head chef. He was a legend, known throughout the Canadian railroad system for his superb roast beef and crazy personality. Passengers and crews loved travelling with him. Bob reckoned he was the funniest man he'd ever known. Also, the weirdest.

'Hi Jacob. Keeping well?' said Bob respectfully.

'Why?' grunted Jacob. It was his favourite word and usually all you ever got. Jacob spoke without looking at Bob. He had a far-away expression in his eyes as he stared at the tracks stretching away in the distance. Bob watched the old man's eyes reflecting the morning sun and the wind catching the wisps of grey hair and not for the first time, wondered about the wonderful and terrible things the old cook must have seen in his lifetime on the railroads. Right now he looked like a frontier scout searching the high ground for indian sign and Bob was fascinated. He watched the the wizened, patchwork skin and wished he could get closer to the glorious old man, suddenly feeling homesick for his dear old dad.

Jacob was a small, hunched man with thinning white hair. He looked about eighty but obviously wasn't owing to the retirement age of sixty-five. His faded blue eyes were set deep in a cracked face, baked a rosy colour by the heat from his beloved ovens, plus a few thousand bottles of Jack Daniels. His ancient hands were always on the move, chasing invisible flies, flicking at imaginary creatures. Bob loved Jacob's strange habit of coming out with the odd, confusing quotations at untimely moments. They never seemed to have anything to do with the situation or conversation at hand until it sunk in for a minute. Some unexpected old homily from Jacob had often dropped Bob to his knees in helpless giggles at the bewilderment it caused.

At the moment Jacob was ignoring Bob, so Ivan tried.

'Go to any good bars on your lay-over Jake?'

'Some waters are too cold even for sharks.' muttered Jacob.

Bob turned away quickly, absolutely destroyed by the confused look on Ivan's face. The Greeks missed the exchange but caught Ivan's look and shrieked. Bob couldn't get breath. It was Garth who stopped the lovely moment with his usual arrogance, breaking into the exchange with his miserable face ugly as ever.

'Your mate Mick is late again as usual. He's worse than you. You're both useless.'

Bob ignored him. Man - what a pain in the arse was Garth. No sense of humour at all. Almost alien to a joke.

He returned to Jacob.

‘Give us you bag mate, let’s put it on here.’

Jacob handed it over, looking into Bob’s face with a careful expression. The bag was heavy and contained something that moved. Liquid? The old man was looking straight in the Bob’s eyes and the meaning was clear. Take care. Bob carefully placed the bag on the trolley and Jacob gave an almost imperceptible nod.

You could tell Jacob was a drinker by his blue-veined, purple nose. Bob suspected that drink had made Jacob ‘off his trolley’ as Mick would say. Not quite the ‘full deck’. The old chef was always talking to himself, tucked away in corners, head inside food cupboards or barking away at the furry creatures that lived in his dark ovens. According to company rumour, he’d been trapped against a hot oven in some derailment years ago and badly burnt. It was said it affected him. Whatever, the two Greeks hated working the same run as Jacob. They couldn’t understand how he saw and heard things they didn’t. He made normal kitchens frightening places and they were terrified of him. Surprisingly, so was another member of the crew.

Hard man, street tough, ruthless and clever, Mick.

It was a mystery that Bob could never understand. Why, with his tough attitude and knowledge of hard life, did Mick have this one baffling weakness? He was scared of nothing – well, nothing that lived. Mick was terrified of what he called the ‘spirit World’ and would go to any lengths to avoid it being mentioned, even bringing violence down on the heads of persistent offenders. Only Bob knew his secret and he had to keep it quiet as the threat of hospital food hung over his head. On the rare occasion when the subject had come up about ghosts or vampires or whatever, Mick had got up and left. It was funny to pin him down and get him on the subject as he hunched over the words as if they could be seen coming out. Bob was amazed that Mick considered old Jake frightening. The old boy was pure gold, harmless and very interesting. Certainly no one to be scared of. It was laughable. On the other hand, Mick was surprised by Bob’s fondness for the old weirdo. Mick put Jacob on a par with tarrot cards or oigee boards. Something you definitely did not mess with,

‘Oo’s he talking to in those fuckin’cupboards?’ he’d say. ‘Or, even worse...WHAT?’

Mick was very superstitious and frightened of people who were odd in mysterious ways. Mick was also scared of tattoos. Something had happened in Mick’s past concerning a man with tattoos and Jacob was covered in them.

Bob found Jacob romantic and interesting, although it was hard to make any sense of what he said. Whenever Bob tried, Jacob’s mind seemed to be elsewhere. If you got an answer, it was not one you expected. Had booze pickled his brain? He was always shouting at something he could see that always escaped the notice of everyone else. Maybe something in his past had affected him. He did not confine his shouts to the inside of food cabinets either. It could blast out anywhere - at any time. Mostly it was the single word ‘WHY’. A stacato question, spat out and guaranteed to stop all conversations. Strangers to Jacob immediately formed the opinion that he was mad.

What with Jacob's deranged shouts, Ivan's whoops and the Greek's mad screams, things could get a bit hysterical at times and Bob had often had to leave the dining car and go somewhere quiet to recover. It was a sheer delight to have such a great character on the trip. Jacob was a loner and people accepted that. He was the best chef on the line and anything else that went on in his head was best left alone.

Bob stood by the pile of supplies and wondered why it was so large. The Montreal run was short. He looked around, Mick would know, he knew everything. Why was he always late?

'No good looking for him, God knows when he will appear,' said Garth. 'He's a waste of time.'

Reluctantly, Bob turned to look at him, wishing he could hit him.

Garth was huge. Six foot two with wide, sloping shoulders. A door with blonde hair. He was the only natural-born Canadian on the crew and was constantly reminding the others that they were all immigrants. In his spare time he worked out with weights and attended un-armed combat classes. Bob hated and feared him.

'He'll be here soon,' said Bob. 'He's never let us down yet.' Bob was ready to defend Mick, hoping there were no more remarks coming. Garth ignored him. He had turned and was loading stores onto the trolley. Although Bob's dislike was strong, watching Garth work was always a pleasure.

Like most men, Bob admired sheer bull strength. The way Garth lifted two full crates of soft drinks with either hand was a wonder. That was pure power. Bob had felt it too, at times. Garth was often bragging about his prowess.

'Come at me with a knife,' he would shout. 'Go on pretty boy, come at me with a broom, anything...just come at me. I'll dis-arm you in three seconds.'

He had muscles on muscles. Bob hated him for he was so unsociable with the crew. He only worked on the trains during his holidays from some university. Nobody knew what he was studying and nobody cared. He was the most rude and bloody selfish man Bob had ever known and no matter what emergency came up, it was no good asking Garth for help. He just did his job and nothing more. He had a superior attitude and didn't like immigrants. Not that he ever said so for he hardly spoke to other crew members, but the lads could tell and Ivan never spoke to him unless it was about work.

They all quickly set about loading the trolley. The Greeks formed a chain of two as usual, chirping away happily. Ivan chose the opposite side to Garth and matched him as best he could. Bob jumped in. He enjoyed physical work for although thin, he was wiry and strong. Soon it was all loaded and they looked about.

Where was Cecil? He was in charge of the dining car. There he was down the end of the stores talking to the storeman and two other official-looking men. They were gathered in a tight group looking at papers. After a while Cecil broke away and walked towards the crew.

By the look on his face, Bob had a clear feeling of trouble coming and stood silent as Cecil approached.

‘Chop chop,’ said Cecil. ‘Speed o’light, speed o’light.’

‘It’s done,’ said Garth. Cecil shook his head and lifted his sheaf of papers.

‘No it isn’t, no no, oh dear no. Not by a long chalk. There is more, much more. Come this way, chop chop!’

Bob always cringed at the style of speech Cecil used when he was ordering his minions to do something.

Bob had heard somewhere that he was ex-army and by the way he talked it was probably true. Silly old sod, thought Bob. What the hell was the old fool on about now? There’s no need any more stores for Montreal, it’s only a five-hour run for Christ’s sake. We’ve already got far too much.

‘Why more stores?’ Garth asked as they followed Cecil towards the storeman standing by another huge palletted pile. ‘This looks like a pile for a run to Vancouver, not Montreal. Why so much?’

Cecil looked grim and shook his bald head.

‘All will be revealed soon enough my lad, I will tell you all on the train. By the way Robert, where is your partner-in-crime today? Is he going to grace us with his presence do you think? I telephoned him last night, as a matter of fact I tried to call you all, Michael was the only one I could contact.’

He turned to Milo and George. ‘Oh yes, I called you two as well. I got someone speaking Greek and for the life of me I could not make them understand what I wanted.’

The greeks stepped back in horror at the rare occurrence of being spoken to by the boss-man. They tilted their heads over like puppies and missed every word, then looked at everyone in turn for an explanation.

‘If you live near a dragon you must include it in all your plans,’ said Jacob to the Greeks. They looked at him in confused terror, making Bob turn away with a loud laugh.

‘Wokamacker for you?’ said Milo angrily to Bob, holding his hands out in question. Bob shook his head and turned to Cecil.

‘You ‘phoned ME?’ What for?’

‘I was at the gym,’ said Garth to Cecil. ‘Why did you call?’

Cecil answered them both.

‘There is something that I will explain later when we are all together in the dining car. At the moment we are pushed for time. We must get these stores loaded quickly now, it’s too warm to let the cold provisions stand about.’

Cecil stood watching as they started loading another trolley.

Tall and bald, he had a military bearing and moustache to match, a legacy of his army days in England. He always dressed in the English style of dark blue blazer, white shirt, old school tie, cavalry twill trousers and dark ox-blood brogues. Bob liked him a lot as he was fair in his dealings with the crew although sometimes he was a pain in the arse with his style of speech and concern for details. The executives of the line loved him, he projected a classy image.

Seen around town off duty he looked like an advert for Harris Tweed. His cultured accent and English manner went down well with the passengers, especially American women. Bob suspected there was more to Cecil than just the front image. He was so educated, using words that Bob had never heard of. He had an air of authority as if he had been somebody of importance. Why was he running a dining car in Canada when he obviously loved England so much?

Had he committed a crime? Had there been a disgrace? Was it booze? Still, what did it matter?

He ran the car efficiently and Bob liked him for that.

When the loading was finished, they pushed both trolleys past the buffer-end of several trains until Cecil found the one he wanted and led them down between the tracks to the dining car, which was always situated in the middle of the train. Bob was amazed as he walked alongside three sleepers and wondered why. Sleepers? To Montreal? No way.

They sure didn't need no sleepers. Something was 'up' and the hairs on the back of his neck tingled, a sure sign of trouble. He wondered if they were off to somewhere else and Bob began to feel a tinge of excitement. Could it be? Where to? For how long? Bob loved this job, the travelling, the new places, new adventures.

The kitchen's loading door was high above their heads. Using the iron rungs below the doorway, the three cooks climbed up, opened the door and disappeared inside. Milo instantly re-appeared, ready to take the stores. As Bob and the others started handing them up, someone yelled out behind them.

'WOTCHA YOU 'ORRID LOT!'

There was Mick walking towards them carrying a large holdall. Bob was amazed at his cheek of the bloke casually strolling in as if he had all day. He went to speak but Cecil beat him to it.

'What time do you call this Michael? You should have been here half an hour ago.'

Bob saw Mick flinch at the 'Michael' as he always did.

'Sorry Cece, I was so put out by your call I had to run about like a blue-arse'd fly to organize me social life. Y'know how it is.'

He smiled at Cecil, cut it off for Garth then winked at Bob and Ivan.

Cecil spoke again.

‘Michael, you would do well not to take me for granted although on this occasion you are probably entitled to feel a bit disorganised so I will let this go.’

‘Nice one Cece’,’ grinned Mick.

Mick was tall and slim with wide shoulders. He had a thick mop of ginger hair. A legacy of violence showed a wide broken nose and fighting scars above his eyes. He was twenty four but there was a world of experience in his face.

‘You missed all the work as usual, arriving too late.’ sneered Garth.

Mick answered as he dropped his bag and started to lift a bag of sugar up to George.

‘I knew you’d do my share Garth. You’d do the lot if you could. Anything to show off and get in with Cece’.’

Cecil broke in between them.

‘That’s enough you two. Let us get going. Chop chop, speed o’light.’

‘You look knackered,’ grunted Ivan to Mick as he lifted a case of jams.

‘I’m entitled to be my old mate Ivanovitch, the ‘andsome time I’ve ‘ad.’

Mick had that crooked grin on that Bob knew so well. It meant two things. Either Mick was happy or someone was in trouble. He was full of tales to tell, that was obvious, so Bob moved closer.

‘What’s with the big holdall?’ he whispered. ‘You going somewhere?’

Mick grinned.

‘Bobby me ole’ mate, you’ve got a shock coming if you don’t know why I’ve got the bag. Don’t worry, I’ve got enough for two.’

‘What d’Ya mean ‘enough for two’,’ said Bob. ‘What’s in the bag?’

‘Butter goes up there,’ pointed Cecil. ‘Come along now Robert, stop chatting. Chop chop.’

Dramatically straining, Bob tried unsuccessfully to lift the case up to Milo. Garth took it from him contemptuously and with one hand, swung it up with an easy movement. Some of the boxes were filled with jams, sugar, cans of fruit and other heavy provisions. As usual, the London lads gave out exaggerated grunts as they pretended to struggle, commenting to each other on ‘how ‘eavy the fucking boxes were’. Just loud enough for Garth to hear and he - being the show-off he was - showed off. Lifting sacks of potatoes one-handed, he smiled at the two friends.

It looked like the kind of smile a shark might use.

Jacob’s voice drifted down from the high door.

‘A lover of himself has no rivals.’

Garth was fooled every time, thought Bob. So much for a university education.

With Cecil organizing, there was no chance to talk and soon the two trolleys were empty. Then one by one the lads climbed the iron rungs up into the train. This was one of the best moments for Bob. Here he was, scaling the rigging on some clipper ship bound for fabulous adventures on the South China Seas to load up with spices. Here he was, high above the deck, holding onto the yards with one hand, the sea-wind ruffling his hair while he waved farewell to an adoring quay-side girl. Bob swung up the kitchen ladder with the cry of sea-birds ringing in his ears.

Chapter Three.

The Train.

The kitchen and galley compartments were narrower than the rest of the train owing to the two foot wide corridor by-passing on one side. This gave access to the front or back of the train. The kitchen and galley were also divided by a metal counter. On one side the cooks worked with their massive ovens, fridges and chopping blocks while the waiters worked the diner side with its sinks, drainers and cupboards. During the fast-pace of a meal, the waiters rushed in from the dining-car, called their orders over the counter, received them back from the assistant cooks then rushed off to serve them to the diners. The system worked well. They were all busy packing away the stores when Cecil came in.

‘When you are all finished I would like you all to come into the dining car. I have some important news for you all.’

‘ere we go,’ grunted Mick to Bob. ‘Now you’ve got a shock coming pal. I’m gonna enjoy watching your face.’

The dining-car was all colour and comfort and Bob loved it. Royal blue carpet, bright orange curtains, the walls panelled in dark mahogany. A central aisle separated twelve tables, each with crisp white tablecloths and a small vase of flowers. Each table had four seats in the form of back-to-back double bench-seats in light blue moquette. Red shaded wall lights over each table made the whole effect cosy, warm and welcoming. Forty-eight passengers could eat here at one sitting and on this Montreal run the car was always full. Expo ‘67 was on at the moment, the World Fair at Montreal and the business it generated was making the waiter’s pockets jingle from tips.

Mick was getting rich with his crafty ways.

‘You want a cushion for your back? Certainly madam. I’ll have to walk right back to the baggage car to get it but I don’t mind.’

He had a stack of ‘em next door in the first-aid cupboard and was coining it from the wealthy Americans and expected to do so again this trip.

The dining-car was Cecil’s domain, his power base. He had a pull-down desk just outside the kitchen where he totted up the bills and kept all the menus and cutlery. Now he stood on his little dais with his back to the desk while they all filed in and sat around him. Bob sat next to Mick, nudged him and in a whispered threat, demanded to know the score.

Mick just grinned mysteriously and nodded at Cecil starting his announcement.

‘As we are all aware,’ said Cecil imperiously, looking around, ‘this train is going to Montreal, leaving this station at eight fifteen and arriving at Montreal at one-fifteen.’ Cecil beamed down at the nodding faces and continued. ‘That arrival time has changed by a few hours.’