

Stuffing

by **Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932**

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THERE are several people concerned in this story whom it is impossible within a limited space to describe. If you are on friendly terms with the great men of Scotland Yard you may inspect the photographs and finger-prints of two—Harry the Valet and Joe the Runner.

Lord Carfane's picture you can see at intervals in the best of the illustrated weeklies. He was once plain Ferdie Gooberry, before he became a contractor and supplied the army with odds and ends and himself with a fortune and a barony.

In no newspaper, illustrated or otherwise, do the names of John and Angela Willett appear. Their marriage at a small registrar's office had excited no public comment, although he was a BA of Cambridge and she was the grand-niece of Peter Elmer, the shipping magnate, who had acknowledged his relationship by dictating to her a very polite letter wishing her every happiness.

They lived in one furnished room in Pimlico, this good-looking couple, and they had the use of the kitchen. He was confident that he would one day be a great engineer. She also believed in miracles.

Three days before Christmas they sat down calmly to consider the problem of the great annual festival and how it might best be spent. Jack Willett scratched his cheek and did a lightning calculation.

„Really, we ought not to spend an unnecessary penny,“ he said dolefully. „We may be a week in Montreal before I start work, and we shall need a little money for the voyage.“

They were leaving on Boxing Day for Canada; their berths had been taken. In Montreal a job was awaiting Jack in the office of an old college friend: and although twenty-five dollars per did not exactly represent luxury, it was a start.

Angela looked at him thoughtfully.

„I am quite sure Uncle Peter is going to do something awfully nice for us,“ she said stoutly.

Jack’s hollow laugh was not encouraging.

There was a tap at the door, and the unpleasant but smiling face of Joe the Runner appeared. He occupied an attic bedroom, and was a source of worry to his landlady. Once he had been in the newspaper business, running evening editions, and the name stuck to him. He had long ceased to be associated with the Press, save as a subject for its crime reporters, but this the Willetts did not know.

„Just thought I’d pop in and see you before I went, miss,“ he said. „I’m going off into the country to do a bit of work for a gentleman. About that dollar, miss, that you lent me last week.“

Angela looked uncomfortable.

„Oh, please don’t mention it,“ she said hastily.

„I haven’t forgotten it,“ said Joe, nodding solemnly. „The minute I come back, I’ll bring it to you.“ And with a large and sinister grin he vanished.

„I lent him the money because he couldn’t pay his rent,“ said Angela penitently, but her husband waved her extravagance away.

„Let’s talk about Christmas dinner. What about sausages...!“

„If Uncle Peter—“ she began.

„Let’s talk about sausages,“ said Jack gently.

Foodstuffs were also the topic of conversation between Lord Carfane and Prince Riminoff as they sat at lunch at the Ritz-Carlton. Lord Carfane emphasized his remarks with a very long cigar.

„I always keep up the old English custom of distributing food to the poor,“ he said. „Every family on my estate on Christmas Eve has a turkey from my farm. All my workers,“ he corrected himself carefully, „except old Timmins. Old Timmins has been very rude to me, and I have had to sack him. All the tenants assemble in the great hall... But you’ll see that for yourself, Prince.“

Prince Riminoff nodded gravely and tugged at his short beard. That beard had taken Harry the Valet five months to grow, and it was so creditable a production that he had passed Chief Inspector Mailing in the vestibule of the Ritz-Carlton and had not been recognised.

Very skilfully he switched the conversation into more profitable channels.

„I do hope, my dear Lord Carfane, that you have not betrayed my identity to your guests?“

Ferdie smiled.

„I am not quite a fool,“ he said, and meant it.

„A great deal of the jewellery that I am disposing of, and of which you have seen specimens, is not mine. I think I have made that clear. I am acting for several of my unfortunate compatriots, and frankly it would be embarrassing for me if it leaked out that I was the vendor.“

Ferdie nodded. He suspected that a great deal of the property which he was to acquire had been secured by underhand means. He more than suspected that, for all his princely origin, his companion was not too honest.

„That is why I have asked that the money you pay should be in American currency. By the way, have you made that provision?“ Lord Carfane nodded. „And, of course, I shall not ask you to pay a single dollar until you are satisfied that the property is worth what I ask. It is in fact worth three times as much.“

Lord Carfane was nothing if not frank.

„Now, I'm going to tell you, my dear chap,“ he said, „there will only be one person at Carfane Hall who will know anything whatever about this little transaction of ours. He's an expert jeweller. He is an authority, and he will examine every piece and price it before I part with a single bob!“

His Highness heartily, but gravely, approved of this act of precaution.

Lord Carfane had met his companion a few weeks before in a highly respectable night club, the introduction having been effected through the medium of a very beautiful lady who had accidentally spilt a glass of champagne over his lordship's dress trousers. She was so lovely a personage that Lord Carfane did no more than smile graciously, and a few minutes later was introduced to her sedate and imposing presence.

Harry the Valet invariably secured his introductions by this method. Usually he worked with Molly Kien, and paid her a hundred pounds for every introduction.

He spoke no more of jewels smuggled from Russia and offered at ridiculous prices, but talked sorrowfully of the misfortunes of his country; spoke easily of his estates in the Crimea and his mines in the Urals, now, alas! in Bolshevik hands. Lord Carfane was immensely entertained.

On the following evening, Harry drove down in Lord Carfane's limousine to Berkshire, and was introduced to the glories of Carfane Hall; to the great banqueting chamber with its high raftered roof; to the white-tiled larder where petrified turkeys hung in rows, each grisly corpse decorated with a gay rosette...

„My tenants come in on Christmas Eve,“ explained Lord Carfane, „and my butler presents each one with a turkey and a small bag of groceries—“

„An old feudal custom?“ suggested the Prince gravely.

Lord Carfane agreed with equal gravity.

The Prince had brought with him a large, heavily locked and strapped handbag, which had been deposited in the safe, which was the most conspicuous feature of Ferdie's library. The expert jeweller was arriving on the morrow, and his lordship looked forward, with a sense of pleasurable anticipation, to a day which would yield him 400 per cent profit on a considerable outlay.

„Yes,“ said Ferdie at dinner that night, „I prefer a combination safe. One can lose keys, but not if they're here“—he tapped his narrow forehead and smiled.

Harry the Valet agreed. One of his greatest charms was his complete agreement with anything anybody said or did or thought.

Whilst he dwelt in luxury in the halls of the great, his unhappy confederate had a more painful task. Joe the Runner had collected from a garage a small, light trolley. It was not beautiful to look upon, but it was fast, and under its covered tilt, beneath sacks and amidst baskets, a man making a swift getaway might lie concealed and be carried to London without exciting attention.

Joe made a leisurely way into Berkshire and came to the rendezvous at the precise minute he had been ordered. It was a narrow lane at the termination of a footpath leading across the Carfane estate to the house. It was a cold, blue-fingered, red-nosed job, and for three hours he sat and shivered. And then, coming across the field in the blue dusk, he saw an old man staggering, carrying a rush basket in one hand and an indescribable something in the other. He was evidently in a hurry, this ancient. From time to time he looked back over his shoulder as though he expected pursuit. Breathlessly, he mounted the stile and fell over rather than surmounted it.

Stumbling to his feet, he saw Joe sitting at the wheel of the van, and gaped at him toothlessly, his eyes wide with horror. Joe the Runner recognised the signs.

„What have you been doin'?“ he demanded sternly.

For a few minutes the breathless old man could not speak; blinked fearfully at his interrogator; and then:

„He's fired me,“ he croaked. „Wouldn't give me no turkey or nothin', so I went up to the 'All and pinched one.“

„Oh!“ said Joe judiciously.

It was not an unpleasant sensation, sitting in judgment on a fellow creature.

„There was such a bother and a fuss and shouting going on... what with the safe bein' found broke open, and that foreign man being caught, that nobody seed me,“ whimpered the elderly Mr Timmins.

„Eh?“ said Joe. „What's that—safe broken open?“

The old man nodded.

„I heered 'em when I was hiding in the pantry. His lordship found that the safe had been opened an' money took. He sent for the constable, and they've got the prince locked up in a room, with the under-gardener and the butler on guard outside the door—“

He looked down at the frozen turkey in his red, numbed hand; and his lips twitched pathetically.

„His lordship promised me a turkey and his lordship said I shouldn't have—“

Joe Runner was a quick thinker. „Jump up in the truck,“ he commanded roughly. „Where do you live?“

„About three miles from here,“ began Mr Timmins.

Joe leaned over, and pulled him up, parcel, bag and turkey.

„Get through into the back, and keep quiet.“

He leapt down, cranked up the engine with some difficulty, and sent the little trolley lumbering on to the main road. When he passed three officers in a police car speeding towards Carfane Hall his heart was in his mouth, but he was not

challenged. Presently, at the urgent desire of the old man, he stopped at the end of a row of cottages.

„Gawd bless you, mister!“ whimpered Mr Timmins. „I’ll never do a thing like this again.“

„Hi!“ said Joe sternly. „What do I get out of this?“

And then, as the recollection of a debt came to him:

„Leave the turkey—and hop!“

Mr Timmins hopped.

It was nine o’clock on Christmas morning, and Angela Willett had just finished her packing.

Outside the skies were dark and cheerless, snow and rain were falling together, so that this tiny furnished room had almost a palatial atmosphere in comparison with the drear world outside.

„I suppose it’s too early to cook the sausages—by the way, our train leaves at ten tonight, so we needn’t invent ways of spending the evening—come in.“

It was Joe the Runner, rather wet but smiling. He carried under his arm something wrapped in an old newspaper.

„Excuse me, miss,“ he said, as he removed the covering, „but a gent I met in the street asked me to give you this.“

„A turkey!“ gasped Angela. „How wonderful... who was it?“

„I don’t know, miss—an old gentleman,“ said Joe vaguely. „He said ‘Be sure an’ give it to the young lady herself—wishin’ her a happy Christmas.’“

They gazed on the carcass in awe and ecstasy. As the front door slammed, announcing Joe’s hasty departure:

„An old gentleman,“ said Angela slowly. „Uncle Peter!“

„Uncle grandmother!“ smiled John. „I believe he stole it!“

„How uncharitable you are!“ she reproached him. „It’s the sort of thing Uncle Peter would do. He always had that Haroun al Raschid complex—I wrote and told him we were leaving for Canada tonight. I’m sure it was he.“

Half-convinced, John Willett prodded at the bird. It seemed a little tough.

„Anyway, it’s turkey,“ he said, „And, darling, I adore turkey stuffed with chestnuts. I wonder if there are any shops open.“

There was a large cavity at one end of the bird, and as he lifted the turkey up by the neck, the better to examine it, something dropped to the table with a flop. It was a tight roll of paper. He shook the bird again and a second fell from its unoffending body.

„Good God!“ gasped John.

With trembling hands he cut the string that bound the roll.

„It’s money!“ she whispered.

John nodded.

„Hundred dollar bills... five hundred of them at least!“ he said hollowly.

Their eyes met.

„Uncle Peter!“ she breathed. „The darling!“

Mr Peter Elmer, the eminent ship owner, received the following day a telegram which was entirely meaningless:

Thank you a thousand times for your thought and generosity. You have given us a wonderful start and we shall be worthy of your splendid kindness.

It was signed „Angela“. Mr Peter Elmer scratched his head.

And at that moment Inspector Mailing was interrogating Harry the Valet in the little police station at Carfane.

„Now come across, Harry,“ he said kindly. „We know you got the money out of the safe. Where did you plant it? You couldn't have taken it far, because the butler saw you leaving the room. Just tell us where the money is, and I'll make it all right for you when you come up in front of the old man.“

„I don't know what you're talking about,“ said Harry the Valet, game to the last.

