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The Live Wire

E. C. R. Lorac

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“Now you think it over, Lorimer. It’s not as though you hadn’t any brains. You have. Use them to advantage. You can if you try.”

Jeff Lorimer pondered over the Prison Visitor’s well-meant words, applying them in his own manner, but in a sense very different from that implied by his mentor. Jeff had just served a three-month sentence, and he had had plenty of time to think while he was “inside.”

The final talk with the official visitor had, to Jeff’s way of thinking, “just put the cap on it.” Wasn’t he always thinking—thinking hard? He had been using his wits ever since he was a small boy.

“Our Jeff, he’s a live wire, he is! You’d never believe a nipper could be so smart!”

Jeff’s father had been full of pride in his offspring once, and yet now, at the age of fifty, Jeff Lorimer was leaving prison to start again at scratch, in his mind a sense of grievance that his abilities had brought him no reward.

“Use your brains——”

Jeff Lorimer fairly laughed when he remembered the words. “Not half I won’t!” he chuckled to himself. “If only they’re still at the same old game, I reckon I’ve got them bending!”

Jeff had plenty of friends. He used his first days of liberty to get into touch with them again, and to inform them about the results of his “thinking” while he had been absent from them. Bill Higgins, an out-of-work navvy, and Bert Simpson, a powerful ex-stevedore, were old allies of Jeff. Truly, their association had brought them little profit so far, but, as Jeff said, “Luck had gone against ’em.”

“It’ll be all right this time, mates,” he declared, with the optimism which had earned him the sobriquet of “Sunny Jeff.”

“That beats the band! Cripes! How you think of it I don’t know. That’s what I calls brains!” gasped Higgins. “I should never ’a thought o’ that if I’d tried till I was pink!”

“Now don’t you bother with thinking, mate. Leave that to me,” said Jeff. “You just do what I says—and then we’ll see!”

Having organised the necessary assistance, Jeff Lorimer spent some days in observing the scene of his objective. He was much too intelligent to try to bring off a coup until he had studied the conditions under which he would have to work.

Jeff spent a long time pondering over the time-tables so generously supplied by the railway company of his choice at its London terminus.

He put some of the funds supplied by Higgins and Simpson to the unaccustomed eccentricity of paying railway fares to various places within a short distance of London. Jeff did not habitually pay railway fares. He knew a few tricks which rendered such an extravagance redundant, but on these occasions Jeff was full of virtue. He was thinking.

Money had also to be expended on essential apparatus. Jeff bought some yards of strong steel chain. He knew just where to get what he wanted, and he bought the best. Higgins and Simpson tested the strength of that chain, and pronounced it “O-kay.”

Finally Jeff bought a steel grapnel—a well-made gadget, whose jaws gripped tight with the simple law of the lever when the chain attached to it narrowed the compass of its business ends.

During several evenings Jeff sat with his chain and grapnel practising pitch and toss. He had a good eye and threw unerringly, with the skill of a lassoist—an art he had learned in a circus in his younger days.

“Funny how things comes in useful when you *thinks*,” pondered Jeff darkly, harking back to the Prison Visitor. He remembered, too, the thrashings he had received from the circus owner while he fumbled with a lasso, years ago.

“Just shows—you never know when a chap’s doing you a good turn,” he said to his friend Bill, speaking with the optimism which had never quite left him. “I reckon I got this turn just so, mates!”

“Beautiful I call it!” agreed Higgins. “Seems you can’t miss. ’And and eye workin’ together. Oh, pretty!”

Zero hour was fixed for nine o’clock the following Monday morning at the London station. The departure platform for West Wensley suburban trains (non-corridor) was the rendezvous for Bill and Jeff. Bert was given his own post on the permanent way a couple of miles down the line (down side), having previously worked out a means of arrival and departure in which the railway regulations were not consulted.

Shortly before zero hour, Constable Jones, of the railway police, was standing by the carriage-way, on duty beside the vans of a long-distance train. The van was being unloaded, and Jones was keeping his eye on the packages which were being lifted from the train.

These packages were square wooden boxes, about twelve inches long by eight inches deep—very uninteresting objects to the casual observer.

They were uninteresting to Constable Jones, too. He had seen dozens of them: sometimes they were being brought in from abroad, sometimes being sent from England overseas, sometimes to destinations inside England.

In his own slow, rather dull way, the constable connected those prosaic-looking boxes with a newspaper phrase of some years back, “The Gold Standard.”

The boxes contained bullion; they were packed with gold ingots—that strange, incalculable, precious metal, the possession of which had been likened to the Army by some wit. “You must have it, just so that you need never employ it.”

Such witticisms were alien to the slow-moving minds of Constable Jones and his mates. He just thought of the boxes as the cause which brought him to the easy duty of standing by at the station. An easy job, but dull. Not any hope of advancement in it. Nobody had ever tried any liberties with those boxes at the station. They were too well guarded.

It was those same boxes which had been the basis of Jeff Lorimer’s thinking while he was in prison. It irritated his nimble wits to think of gold—real solid, hundred per cent, indisputable gold—lying about on a station platform almost within reach of his fingers.

There *must* be a way of getting hold of it, Jeff had argued to himself, if you only figured it out, just thought a bit.

Jeff had thought, good and hard. He knew that the railway vans in which the boxes travelled were locked and guarded. He knew that the boxes were transferred to lorries for transit to the vaults of the various banks. No hope of getting hold of them *en route*.

The only time the boxes could be touched was during the short period when they were being transferred from train to motor van. Then, Jeff had observed, some of them lay on the platform for a bit. That was the crucial point on which Jeff’s thinking had turned.

On the Monday morning Constable Jones watched the boxes of bullion being unloaded. There were bank officials standing by, to check the unloading and loading. The railway men who moved the boxes were all trusty fellows of known character. Jones felt a little morose. He wanted a chance to do a bit of smart work which would bring him to the notice of the authorities so that he could get his transfer to the plainclothes branch.

He looked around the platform and sighed. The train which was being unloaded was standing towards the end of the platform; the motor van, ready to receive the gold, was backed up conveniently by the train. There was no one within twenty yards of them.

Across the carriage-way which divided the two platforms, a little distance nearer the booking hall, the usual local train was standing. It had disgorged its crowded complement of passengers some minutes ago.

The driver had come forward to his cab; the guard was standing with his flag at the rear. One minute to nine. Jones nearly yawned. He knew a girl living in West Wensley. Pity he couldn't get into that train——

The guard's whistle blew. Jones turned his eyes resolutely back to his inanimate charges, and the local train began to draw out.

The first thing that Jones knew about any departure from the normal was a metallic rattle just behind him, and then a yell from one of the porters close by.

His slow wits galvanised into activity, the constable jumped round and saw with unbelieving eyes one of the boxes moving past him, attached to a chain and grapnel which issued from one of the windows of the local train which was accelerating on its non-stop journey to West Wensley.

The porter—Walter Bream—was the only witness to Jeff's skill in casting his grapnel. It was a beautifully calculated throw, made just as the train drew level with the boxes. In a graceful parabola the grapnel fell dead over the box and gripped it, a triumph of skill and thinking on the part of Jeff.

Jeff, crouching alone in an empty compartment, had his thrill of triumph at last. "Use your brains!" he thought delightedly.

His hands still gripped his chain, but its end was made fast to the radiator under the seat. At its other end the grapnel bit the box good and true, and those solid ingots of gold were being drawn down the platform with all the power of the local electric train to motivate them. It was the triumph of mind over matter—Jeff's mind.

"By gosh, it's jam!" he chortled.

Constable Jones felt as though an electric shock had run through him, too. He had no time to think, but as the box drew past his feet he flung himself on it. His action was instinctive. The box was going.

"Stop it!"

Gripping it like a bulldog with his powerful hands he was pulled off his feet in a trice, and was dragged along the platform.

Walter Bream flung himself on to Jones's back; two bank officials followed suit, and the box with its human convoy went down the platform like an electric hare. The chain was a good chain (Bill Higgins and Bert Simpson had "O-kayed" it, and they knew a bit about chains).

Old Tom Harris, platform man for twenty years, blew his whistle and yelled "Guard!" as the guard's van of the local went by. All to no avail. Jeff had thought of the guard and of the emergency brakes in the guard's van.

Bill Higgins was sitting on the guard's head in the darkest recess of the van. Bill had hidden himself there when driver and guard changed ends. Jeff had been very thorough in his observation.

Constable Jones never knew how long he had held on to that box. The few seconds which passed while he was dragged ever more swiftly down the platform seemed an eternity.

Walter Bream was clutching the stout uniform collar and unknowingly choking the senses out of the unhappy policeman. Two bank officials were gamely gripping Bream. The combined weight of four unofficial passengers attached to the nine o'clock local were no odds to the power of the electric train.

The end came when Jones bumped from the end of the platform on to the metals. He was half-throttled; his grip gave; and he bounced hurtfully on to the permanent way. For a brief second there was a tangle of humanity, four guardians of the country's gold, using their own peculiar idioms, as dynamic force flung them into painful contact with the metals and sleepers and clinkers of the permanent way.

Jeff saw them bounce. He saw them break apart, a whirl of arms and legs, and he saw his box still safe at the end of the chain. Small wonder he laughed! It was a good laugh, if his last.

He laughed so much that he forgot to draw in the slack of the chain when the human weight was released from it, and the box bounced merrily forward. Still laughing, Jeff felt a terrific blow as his chain fouled the live rail, and the current ran through him. Just a blow, he knew not from whence—nor had time to concern himself about it.

It was Walter Bream who saw the flash, when the chain contacted the conductor rail. It was the biggest fuse he had ever seen, and he thought for a moment he was dead, too. An intense blue light flashed across his vision, something crackled—and the train ahead began to slow down at last.

The signalman in the boxes said: "Blazes! Down line's dead——"

With the failure of power over the whole of that circuit the railway slowed down, stopped—as a man's pulse stops beating.

At his post two miles down the line, Bert Simpson waited in worried uncertainty. He knew to a minute the time the nine o'clock train ought to come in sight. He knew what his job was to be—salvaging the box when Jeff should release the chain and leave the loot to be gathered in by the powerful ex-stevedore.

Jeff himself was to drop off the train when it slowed down for the junction signals.

The whole thing had been worked out in detail by Jeff's calculating mind—but something had gone wrong. The trains which should have passed Bert did not pass. The whole section was dead. Uncertainty grew to fear, fear to panic.

"Cripes! I'm getting out of this. Something wrong somewhere," said Bert. "Time for me to git."

He got—just in time.

It was poor Bill Higgins who had to stand the racket. Jeff was no longer there to think for him. When the train drew to a standstill, Bill still straddled the inert form of the unconscious guard. True to his record for bad luck, Bill climbed out on to the permanent way just as the panting railway men drew level with him.

Bill gave them best. Six to one. He knew when he was beaten. Puzzled and unhappy, he saw Jeff being lifted from the train.

"Pore ole Jeff! He was a live wire, he was," said Bill sorrowfully, when he realised that Jeff was not playing possum.

"You've said it," said one of the railway men, not unkindly. "That's just what he was—a live wire. He forgot the current, mate."

When the Prison Visitor heard the story he was quite upset.

“He was a clever fellow,” protested the bespectacled philanthropist sadly. “No end of ability if he’d only used it properly. I did my best for him. These men just *won’t think*.”

Bill Higgins, working out his own sentence, came to a contrary conclusion.

“It was all that thinkin’ did for ’im,” he concluded sadly. “If he hadn’t thought so much, ’e’d still have been ’ere. Pore ole Jeff. A live wire, he was.”

[The end of *The Live Wire* by Edith Caroline Rivett (as E. C. R. Lorac)]