

The Garage Job

by Alex Dunlevy

The job came through old friend Paul, who was already working there. It was to man the Esso pumps at weekends, run the little shop and answer a phone that never rang. It was an absolute doddle and quite lucrative with the added scams, according to Paul. Kit would do mostly Saturdays; Paul the long, lonely Sundays.

Saturdays, the guys were there all morning. The manager, Carl Silver, was a rumple-faced, Jewish man of about forty, always smiling. Dodgy? Probably yes, but in a kind way. He seemed to care about his family and would often bring his plump and useless twelve-year-old son Aaron into work, where he messed up the takings and ate all the sweets. His chief mechanic, Dick Ripley, was a shorter, more pugnacious character - good-looking but flash with it and uppity. You'd want to count your fingers after shaking hands with him.

Each drove a 3.8 litre Jaguar Mark II and sometimes they raced each other dangerously through the Buckinghamshire lanes. Meanwhile, the barely recognisable hulk of an XK-150 DHC lay rusting to the side of the garage. They said it was valuable and they dreamt of restoring it one day, but, to Kit, it looked like a heap of scrap.

It was always fun when they were around. Kit filled fuel tanks, checked oil, measured out Green Shield Stamps and occasionally sold some windscreen wipers or a car mat. Carl would be smarming some hapless customer and wringing his hands like Uriah Heep while Dick was under the ramp in his baby-blue overalls, bashing metal and singing something lewd or wiping his hands on a rag and shaking his head as another expensive repair was sadly inevitable.

One of those repairs was occasioned by Kit on the day he managed to fill both tanks of an XJ12 with an enormous quantity of diesel, not petrol. A scintilla of doubt formed in his mind as the car left the forecourt and it grew over the following hour to a dread certainty, confirmed when the car limped back, trailing black smoke and backfiring, the driver fuming at his idiocy. Kit was surprised not to be killed, or at least fired on the spot, and kept a low and grateful profile for the rest of the day while Dick gave him withering looks every time he flushed more petrol through the stricken beast. But they did not even dock his wages.

The workshop always closed by two at the latest, the Jaguars raced away and then Kit would work alone until the seven pm closing time. It was quiet on those hot, lonely, summer afternoons. Between customers, he would read snatches of his French A-Level texts.

The job was well-enough paid, really, but Paul had shown him how to *augment* his income. There were the tips, of course, and Kit found himself studying customer-types and switching styles between matey, politely helpful and obsequious in his efforts to win greater rewards. He found that a liberal allocation of green stamps usually led to a larger tip and he made sure that the customers knew he was doing them a special favour. It was astonishing how a few lousy, extra stamps could lead to quite a large tip, often given with a conspiratorial wink. Pathetic. Also, he would always offer to clean the windscreen and check the oil. The women always went for this but then they would make him do the tyre pressures as well, which was a pain, and then tip him a feeble five pence like it was a crock of gold. The men were more generous, always, and understood that you had to tip anything, over and above pouring petrol, and that anyway, it was only right to reward a polite, young man working hard to better himself.

His friend Paul ripped off the stamps to a massive extent, filching great sheets of the things and making up his own books to claim gifts but Kit couldn't be bothered with all that faffing around for a toaster or something. He preferred the shop-based scams.

The basic scam was simply to sell things from the shop without ringing them up. Of course, you would have to ring it up if the customer commented or they needed a till receipt but that was almost never and, if the till was open anyway, you would get away with it or you could ring up *no sale* once in a while just to get in. You would just pop the customer's money into the till, give them their change with a smile and pop it shut again. All very professional. And, when you next had the till open, you would remember to help yourself to what they had put in. Of course, you had to do this only with plentiful things where stock checks were less likely, and any losses could be put down to customer theft. One of the zillions of £2.99 rubber mats would be okay but the only baby chair at £39.95 would be asking for trouble.

Kit's favourite, shop-based scam was the oil. Every time he sold a gallon can of Duckham's or Castrol GTX, he would forget to ring it up on the till, then find a similar, empty can round the back, clean it up, bash out any dents and fill it glug by glug with SAE30 from the massive workshop tanks and then place it to fill the gap in the display. One day, Paul pointed out that Duckham's oil was, in fact, dark green whereas SAE30

was brown so, after that, he only dared risk the GTX, but then he sold more of that anyway. No-one ever complained about weaker performance, so Kit figured Castrol were even bigger scammers than him.

Somehow it seemed all right, par for the course, *expected* almost, to be ripping off these dodgy characters who were undoubtedly ripping off their own customers. It was as if his ingenuity would be admired, if discovered. Like a clever joke, well-told. They would all have a laugh about it, lovable rogues together. It never occurred to him that his kneecaps might be smashed with a baseball bat or some such horror.

But anyway, Kit needed the money. He wanted a car of his own. At his age that was essential if you wanted to ask girls out. And he made a principled point of never ripping off the customers by overcharging or short-changing them. That would clearly be wrong.

#

One Saturday afternoon in August, a petrol tanker drove up and the driver came into the shop.

“All right mate? Got eight hundred gallons for Carl. Okay to drop it down your tank?”

Kit didn't quite understand, and he noticed that a customer had just driven up to the pumps in a beige Volkswagen Beetle.

“Er..I dunno. Carl didn't say anything.”

“Well it's a regular arrangement we have. It's no problem.”

“Look. Can I just serve this bloke?”

“Sorry, mate. Really can't hang about. And Carl will be seriously pissed off if he misses out on this.”

Kit chewed his lip and stared anxiously at the driver.

“All right. Hang on. I'll call him.”

As the phone was ringing, Kit worried about the guy waiting. Making customers wait this long was not the way to get himself a decent tip.

“Hello Kit. What's up, buddy?”

Kit explained the situation.

“I wasn't expecting him today and I'd rather be there, to be honest,” said Carl, the irony of his chosen phrase passing him by. “But I guess it's okay. He gets fifteen pence a gallon. Have you got a hundred and twenty quid in the till?”

Kit checked.

“Just about, yeah.”

“All right. Let him start pumping and I'll come right over.”

The driver had overheard, gave a thumbs-up and headed outside. He swiftly brought the truck in, lifted the heavy, metal lid to the echoing, subterranean tanks and attached the fat, flexible pipes from the truck to the petrol tank. Kit heard the pumping start as he finally approached the customer.

“I’m awfully sorry to have kept you waiting, sir,” he started.

The big man was stepping out of his car.

“It’s all right, lad. I’m not in a hurry.” He grinned, but his eyes were not smiling. “And I don’t need petrol anyway. Just seemed like a good place from which to watch, actually. Perhaps we could talk in your shop?”

The man introduced himself as Gibson, Customs and Excise, Investigations.

Kit’s heart froze. This would be the end of everything and there was no way of warning Carl now.

“I’ve been following this tanker for weeks. It’s a common scam,” Gibson said, looking bored with the whole thing. “The driver short-delivers his big customers where he can. That way, when he’s finished all his deliveries for the week, he still has plenty of petrol on board. Then he drops the rest into a friendly tank and they split the money. Cash only. Easy money for him, half-price petrol for your boss to sell at a big profit.”

“I had no idea.”

“Lucky for you that you made that call, son. I assume the boss is on his way?”

“He’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Righto. I’ll just go and spoil the driver’s day then. You might want to put the kettle on; some strong tea with lots of sugar?”

As the kettle boiled, Kit’s eyes fell on his much-annotated copy of Camus’ “La Peste.”

Arrested before one’s A-Levels; that would have been deeply shameful, he sniggered nervously to himself. And then he felt sad, suddenly very sad, for the real-life plague that was about to be visited upon the house of good-hearted Carl. It didn’t seem fair, somehow.
