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Live Now, Pay Late

Jack Trevor Story



PENGUIN BOOKS

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For Bill Johnson

PART ONE

Jam Today

ALBERT was late.

This was a feeling in his stomach rather than a matter of fact. There was nowhere he had to be this morning by any particular time; the tyranny of school had decided him into a career which made no demands of punctuality or personal convenience. He had purposely flopped the eleven-plus because he had heard that the local grammar school had a Saturday-morning attendance.

'There are two sorts of people in the world,' he used to tell his mother; 'slaves and masters.'

His mother, by the time he was fifteen, was already aware of this fact.

Now twenty-four and living in a bed-sitting-room, Albert was ironing yesterday's shirt by heating a table spoon in the gas-ring and rubbing it over his chest. Orphaned and alone, he had discovered most of the short cuts which make women unnecessary. He could cook a three-course meal on a gas ring in fifteen minutes flat, putting all the vegetables into one saucepan and sharing the flame with a frying-pan and then washing up in the potato water. The woman's confidence trick lay in creating a three-act drama out of their place in the kitchen.

'Feel my chin,' he would say to his girl-friends if he detected the possessive instinct. Then he would say: 'I have shaved for years in boiled-egg water without getting a single wart.' It always defeated them.

Albert struck two matches, blew them out, scraped off

the carbon with his finger-nail and inserted the sticks into his collar slots. In selecting a tie to go with the continental-cut grey tweed suit Albert looked out of the window at the weather and decided it was probably spring; people were beginning to go to work without their coats. He whistled a passing girl and hailed her when she looked up at him; it was a pale, early-morning stranger's face, still inanimate and with the make-up predominating; but it lifted as she came alive a little and walked on, encouraged.

Albert smiled and selected the green-spotted bow tie; to the man who sold charm the early-morning whistle was the full extent of his early-morning exercises; everything was still working. He was big and blond and handsome and he had a way with him again today. He would do a lot of selling and a lot of collecting and somehow he would put back the ten pounds he had borrowed from the kitty.

The feeling of lateness came from being broke again. Like most men who dispense with authority and discipline and insist on being their own master, Albert's most pressing and urgent appointments were with himself. If you're broke, you're late; if you've been slacking, you're late; the self-employed man is either asleep or running.

Albert was not entirely self-employed - though this would be news to Mr Callendar, his boss; his card, gold-embossed, would prove that he was senior sales representative for Callendar's Warehouse who sold everything from vacuum cleaners to shoes, cocktail cabinets to transistor radios on a weekly door-to-door basis. He earned twelve pounds a week basic, plus commission on all he sold. And he spent rather more than this, whatever it was; thirty or forty pounds he could accurately predict and overspend.

‘The most important thing if you want to be a success,’ he used to tell his mother, ‘is to keep up appearances.’

His mother, dragging herself off to work with her varicose veins and ulcer, was too tired to argue the point.

Ready now, Albert had a quick think for things forgotten. It was Wednesday, a neither here nor there day. He opened the flap of a cocktail cabinet and wardrobe combined – a strong Callendar line in a bed-sitter community. With a six-inch rule he measured the level of whisky in one bottle and gin in another, noting the figures on a card and initialling them with the date. This one solitary attention to a meticulous economy started him off into the day with the feeling that he was a methodical man. The man who doesn’t know where forty pounds a week goes can live with himself if he knows definitely where five shillings of it goes.

And in fact the reason Albert had chosen the spirits to be meticulous about was that for one thing it was easy to do, once he had remembered it, and for another he didn’t like people like Jeff and Arnold drinking his spirits for nothing and not replacing. Considering that he was doing them a favour by letting them bring birds in; they paid him for it, but it was still an inconvenience. More than once he had had to stand out in the rain while one of them finished, and there was always the risk that it would get talked about and he would lose the room.

In the beginning it was agreed between the three of them that they would stick to vintage cider which was getting almost one hundred per cent results back in nineteen fifty-eight and fifty-nine; but either the girls had become immunized to the apple or else they had got wise to it and now straight scotch or gin-and-tonic was the usual request. And some of the girls Jeff and Arnold found weren’t worth either.

Albert clattered down the stairs and across the second-floor landing feeling like a polished diamond in a pig-iron setting. In the big old Victorian house the bed-sitting-rooms were kept according to their occupants' tastes, but the stairs and passages were a no-man's-land of bare boards, peeling wallpaper, and brown paint; nobody's responsibility.

Through a partly-open door he saw a black man shaving.

'Moh'n baas!' Albert called.

'Hi, white man!' came the reply.

Albert ran on down to the ground floor, feeling pleased; he had never seen the Negro before, yet his cheerful crack had been accepted in the right spirit. There was a secret in getting on with people, with strangers, and Albert felt that he knew it. It was a skilled business, a stock-in-trade. He would never starve; if you could sell yourself you could sell anything. He lost no opportunity in giving people gratuitous samples of himself and thus reinforcing his ego and his belief in himself.

Checking himself, checking the effect he had upon people, checking their reactions to what he was selling – the smile, the word, the package – was a continuous process with Albert. As he often looked into a mirror to rehearse his smile, a new wry or waggish facial expression or a new wisecrack, so he looked often at his personality as reflected in other people's reactions.

His ability to manipulate people gave him a sense of power – the first essential in salesmanship. Or acting, or statesmanship, come to that. He also felt that he had all the other essentials; charm, honesty, humility, sincerity. Sincerity above all. Sincerity really paid off; with selling, with girls, with getting out of a scrape.

With the equipment, physical and mental, that Albert

now had he felt like a master puppeteer; for instance, housewives' psychology he had down to a fine art. In the affluent society of today the tally-boy was the new messiah, bible-punching the full-colour brochures which carried the cleansing needs of humanity. You get automatic temperature control, you get automatic time control, you get double penetration supersonic washrays. . . . Everybody was getting and the tally-boy was giving.

Albert was sufficiently cynical to know all this and sufficiently susceptible to believe it. He was trapped in hire-purchase debt as deeply as any of his customers. He would refuse to admit that this was a weakness – it was yet another facet of his technique. If you sell on easy terms you've got to live on easy terms: otherwise where's your sincerity? Where's your consumer identification? This he had explained to Mr Callendar the last time he had been caught raising a personal loan out of his takings to avert a judgement summons.

'Git the goods in the 'ouse, boy,' Mr Callendar had told him. 'That's all you have to do – this stuff sells itself.'

No wonder Albert despised his boss for his crude, unsubtle, unappreciative approach to the applied science of selling. But Albert felt that he also had power over Mr Callendar; if he left tomorrow and took his clients to another firm – or started up on his own, given the capital – he could put Callendar's Warehouse out of business.

Unknown to Albert Mr Callendar knew this and did not lose any sleep. Albert was a good tally-boy because he was like every other tally-boy; and Mr Callendar knew tally-boys. You give them a small basic wage, a Mini-Minor van, easy hours, and a lot of rope. You allow them ten per cent commission on sales and another ten per

cent fiddle on sales and expenses and you give them the sack or send them to prison when they go over this mark. Or you wait for them to get their sales up so high they ask for a partnership, then sack them.

Albert was the most brilliant door-to-door salesman Mr Callendar had ever had; this meant, by the same token, that he was a super show-off, a super-womanizer, a super-fiddler and confidence trickster – the last man to have in any business except as a tally-boy.

Unknown to Albert, all the power that he thought he had and all the power the other tally-boys thought they had was harnessed to Mr Callendar and his simple creed of gitting the goods in the 'ouse, boy. Tally-boys to Mr Callendar were just a means of getting the goods in the house. They were a necessary evil in the distribution of consumer goods. Tally-boys had no power of any kind because they had no money. Nobody with money would become a tally-boy. Nobody with any self-respect would become a tally-boy. No man with an ounce of real ability or even with any ordinary sensibility or human feeling could stand on a doorstep in his best suit and pretend that he was doing working people a favour.

The good tally-boy was the man who enjoyed the smart suit and the van and a pocketful of other people's money, the handling of new shiny goods and the vicarious pleasure – not always vicarious – of chatting up other men's wives while the children were at school. The good tally-boy possessed elements of delinquency, amorality and furtive adventure; showmanship, self-delusion, and self-aggrandizement. The good tally-boy was perennially and incurably improvident; when he bullied a woman for her arrears he really needed the money.

Mr Callendar therefore had the greatest respect for Albert as a tally-boy – and would never allow him within

miles of an executive position in the firm. He knew by Albert's increasing sales and growing arrogance that such an application was nearly due, but happily he did not even have to waste time considering it. Albert was a brilliant salesman but he could go tomorrow. What Albert didn't know, and what few salesmen knew, was that it was not the selling that made a business, but the buying. The executive brains of any business was in the buying. A bad salesman could lose you profits, but a bad buyer could bankrupt you.

Mr Callendar did his own buying. He bought wisely and well from those companies who backed every selling campaign and every new domestic appliance with a million pounds' worth of advertising. He bought the goods which were already sold by a system of mass-hypnosis through the mediums of television, newspapers, periodicals, films, and direct-mail. He dealt, not with that section of the buying public who sleep-walked their way into the shops as willing victims, but with those equally hypnotized people who were waiting to have the goods thrust into their homes. The tally-boy had no real selling to do, it had already been accomplished; his job was to insinuate the merchandise across the doorstep as painlessly as possible with no mention of money. Then, calling a week later when the customer had had time to become irrevocably addicted to spin drying or stereophonic sound, he started collecting the small, unmissable tally.

The good tally-boy, in the name of a higher standard of living, could trap half a family's income every week. If there was any difficulty in collecting the money, the good tally-boy could bully and threaten the length of a garden path and bring out the neighbours - the most effective system of blackmail; or if that failed he was

backed, because of the agreement which no hypnotized person remembered signing, with all the terrifying paraphernalia of the law from solicitors' letters to county court summonses and even prison. The good tally-boy, in Mr Callendar's opinion, was a low but essential form of life and Albert was the best tally-boy he had ever had.

Albert, starting his day and checking his charm and his power, was totally unaware of this view of himself – and his brother tally-boys Jeff and Arnold – held by their boss. If he had any knowledge of any part of the truth about himself and his job he successfully submerged it in the remotest regions of his subconscious. He was cynical about the people he trapped into high living on easy terms but was ignorant and blind to the fact that he was equally trapped by the same glossy snares. To keep up appearances, Albert was in debt up to his ears.

Besides such small things as electric razors, transistor radios, tape recorders, typewriters, radiograms, suits, shirts, coats, and shoes, there was a car which he was now running and another which had been reclaimed by the HP company but on which he still had a two-hundred pound liability. Had Albert kept up all his payments – an impossibility since he no longer knew what they were – his total weekly outgoings of easy payments would have totalled twenty-two pounds a week; ten pounds a week more than his basic wage.

And on top of all this, after two years he still owed ten pounds for his mother's funeral.

Albert was very late indeed and it was getting later.