

Harvey Leake's Fortune

He weren't a bad lad, Harvey Leake, not by the standards of some. Least, he never killed no-one, and o' course he stole things, but no-one ever suffered by it, not really, 'cos he only ever stole things as folks didn't really need, luxury items, as you might say. He weren't no Robin Hood, neither, mind, stealing off of the rich and giving to the poor, no. He stole from the rich alright, but he kept the proceeds for himself, and why not?

He never got a proper start in life, what with his Ma going off with a sailor, and his Pa being what the upper classes call feckless and the rest of us call drunk. If there's nothing on the table, you still got to eat, and so Harvey had no choice. He'd get a meal at school lunchtimes, but there'd never be anything at night, so by the morning he'd be half-starved. His hunger would wake him up, so he'd go out early while it was still dark, and go looking round. When he found a house with one of them things with a little dial on it pointing to a number and a little message saying, Dear Milkman Please Leave So Many Pints, he'd nip in and turn the dial so the household would get an extra pint. Then, when the milkman had delivered, he'd help himself to the extra pint, keep him standing for the morning.

The way Harvey had it figured, as the people he swiped the milk from hadn't ordered it, he weren't really stealing. He never went back to the same place before two months had passed at the very least, so nobody could ever see a pattern. It just seemed that occasionally the milkman got his sums wrong, which could happen to anyone, and no-one knew they were being stole from, and no-one suffered. It was simple, and it kept him alive.

As he got bigger, and a pint of milk didn't fill him up anymore, he started casting about for something better. One day, in the summer holidays, it was, when

there wasn't even school meals to feed him, he came into my shop, half-crazed with hunger.

I had a shop selling Sundry Items of Interest to the Social Historian, sometimes referred to by them as knows no better as bric-a-brac, a phrase I despise. This town being besides the sea, I get a lot of passing trade in the summer months. I used to get people from the television coming in looking for authentic cans and cereal boxes, and I always had a steady supply of the genuine articles that I made out the back, and they'd pay a load of money for them.

Well, this day, Harvey came in to me, desperate for a job. I didn't really have one to give him, but I said he could help out and I'd pay him what I could. At the end of the first week, I offered him a bit of money, but he asked instead for an item he said he'd had his eye on.. It was an old London bus-conductors ticket machine, one of them noisy old ratchet things with a big handle and lots of number dials down the front. It even had some ink and some rolls of paper with it. I said he ought to take the money, as he couldn't very well eat bus tickets, and he said to me something I've never forgotten. I don't know whether he made it up himself, or if he'd heard it somewhere, but he said 'give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, teach him to fish and he'll eat for life.' I didn't know what he was on about. At least I understood what it meant, but I didn't see what it had to do with a ticket machine.

I didn't hear from him again until the holiday season was good and proper over, and then he turned up in my shop looking all dapper in a new suit of clothes, and took me out for a pub lunch.

Once we were settled with our drinks, he started telling me how he'd managed it. He'd been on tour, he said, up and down the east coast. At this time of year, he said, there was a lot of holiday money asking to be spent, he thought he might as well

get his hands on some of it. Weren't his fault he couldn't do it straight. If no-one would give him a job, on account of his having had a rotten schooling, and got no qualifications, he'd jolly well help himself. That troubled me a bit, I don't mind saying. Help himself? I couldn't believe he'd been on the rob, not Harvey. I'd known him since he was a grubby little kid, and apart from the milk he'd never stole nothing.

I didn't like to ask, but he put my mind at rest. All he'd done was use the thing all his teachers had told him he didn't have: his initiative.

One thing he knew from having lived all his life near the sea was that every resort had a prom, a beach and at least one park. The one thing they all had in common was deckchairs. Hundreds of them, all run by the council of whatever town they happened to be in, and never enough attendants to go round collecting the money. He'd seen a job collecting come up once, and he'd gone up for it, but the council said he had to have an exam in maths, and didn't have one, so that was that. That had made him proper cross, that had. All it was was taking money and giving out a ticket, and he needed an exam.

He'd decided then and there that he'd show them, but he didn't know how to go about it, leastways not until he saw the bus conductors kit in my window, and it all fell into place. He got himself a money belt, and made a little ID card with a photo on, all official-looking, and he was away.

He'd go out early, before the real attendants started, with his ticket machine slung over his shoulders, into the parks, onto the proms and along the beaches, and he'd issue bus tickets for a quid a chair, and then he'd disappear a bit sharpish when the real council men with their maths exams came on.

Next day, he'd move on up the coast a bit, and pull the same stunt, and so on up the coast. I asked him didn't he ever get caught and he said no-one ever looked at the tickets hardly, and if they did and said this is for a bus, he'd just say cutbacks, and everybody was happy. They didn't suspect, because he had an official card, even if it was a picture of Rock Hudson out of a magazine, and all covered with cling film to make it glossy like the real ones. They were on their holidays, they wanted somewhere nice to sit, and it was only a quid. Didn't matter. He wasn't robbing anyone, except the council, and he didn't care about robbing them. They'd run the rotten school where he didn't get his maths exam, and then not given him a job because of it, so they deserved it.

What about the real attendants, though? Didn't they notice? According to Harvey, they were all trousering half the takings anyway, and they didn't care. If someone said they'd already paid, they accepted it and moved on. People were coming and going all day, anyway, you couldn't keep track of them all. By the August Bank Holiday, Harvey'd got so cocky, he'd work side by side with the real attendants, and none of them knew he wasn't official. One of them did ask why he was giving out bus tickets, and he just said he didn't know, the council had given him the machine, and wasn't it typical of them. Well, as Harvey said, you couldn't argue with that.

So, there it was. He'd made enough to last him a good while, tax free to boot, and now he was fancy free, and looking to enjoy himself. He weren't going to just squander it though. He was going to plough it back into the business, which is where I came in.

I didn't like the sound of that much, if I'm honest. I didn't want to get involved in anything that wasn't completely sound. I'm not averse to bending the rules, I

admit. That's the way in business. I buy stuff for much less than it's worth and sell it for much more, and if I know a thing is valuable, I don't let on, and I don't feel bad about it because they should have done their research first. It may be a bit dishonest but it's legal. Harvey had spent his summer engaged in a criminal activity, never mind how much the council had asked for it, and never mind how clever it was, and I didn't want to get involved in anything bent, and I said as much. Harvey took umbrage at that, and said it was just a bit of selling he had in mind, and unless he was mistaken selling is what I'd been doing all my life, and he'd obviously been wrong to think that I was interested in turning a healthy profit.

I got him to simmer down, and asked him what he thought he was on about. I do *buying* and selling, and he was only talking about selling. Selling what? You could have knocked me down with one of the peacock feathers I keep in a World War One shell case in my shop window when he told me.

Beach huts.

We'd all read the stories in the local paper, and we all knew of people who'd had beach huts in their family since the year dot, suddenly up and selling them and making a fortune. We'd stopped finding it funny long since, because almost nobody from round here owned one anymore. We had all these folk up from London, with stacks of money and a sudden liking to have a beach hut, who buy them up for thousands of pounds, visit them once and then get bored and sell them on to someone else with too much money.

We all knew that there were giant lots of profit to be made on beach huts, but I couldn't help thinking that there was a fatal flaw to Harvey's get rich quick scheme.

He didn't own a beach hut.

Harvey just laughed, a bit rudely to my way of thinking, and said he didn't own any deck chairs either, but it hadn't stopped him hiring them out. He had an idea, he said, a solid gold one. No-one would get hurt, no-one would lose out, and everyone would end up better off. I told him he was off his rocker, and he said that being off your rocker and being a genius were two sides of the same coin. It was easy money, he said, and all I had to do was lend him my van.

It was a big van, and I'd always meant to get the name of my shop written on it but somehow I'd never got round to it. He told me I'd better not get around to it any time soon. He needed a plain van, and he needed it to be on standby every night once the season had finished. I told him that was inconvenient to me, and if wanted a favour he ought to be a bit more specific. He told me that it wasn't a favour, he'd pay me handsomely and he couldn't be more specific because the whole thing depended on the weather, and could he have my van, yes or no.

My head was proper reeling now, what with him having confused me something horrible and me having had one over the eight. Can't drink in the day. Never have been able to. When I got back to the shop, I pulled the blinds and slept it off. Cost me an afternoon's takings, Harvey did, but it didn't matter in the long run. Didn't matter at all.

So that was it. I didn't hear from him again until the middle of November in the middle of a filthy storm that had already been blowing for a day and a half. It was two in the morning, and I was a bit groggy on account of having taken a nip to keep out the cold. I eventually realised who it was and what he wanted and I handed over the keys but not before it and rained into my front hall. I didn't know why anyone would want to be driving about on a night like that, and as long as I didn't have to go

with them I didn't have to go with them I didn't care. I was cold and wet, and I got back into bed and pulled the covers right over my head and shivered myself to sleep.

I didn't see my van for a couple of days. Then it appeared in front of the shop door, with the keys put through the letter box.

There was no sign of Harvey until about two weeks later when he turned up on my doorstep and put three grand in cash in my hand. When I picked myself up off the deck, he produced a bottle of nice fizz, and told me he'd sold a beach hut, and made one hundred per cent profit, on account of it not being his to sell.

What would happen, I asked him, when the people who owned it first came along to use it and found new people in it? Had he thought of that? It was sure to catch up with him next summer and if it didn't bite him on the bum, it would me because of my van being an accomplice. He poured more fizz and told me to calm down. The previous owners, he said, would never know a thing about it, and musn't it be an expensive time for the insurance companies when the storms come and smash so many huts to match wood? I was getting a bit antsy by now, because I wasn't following anything he said.

Had I noticed, he asked me, that some beach huts had been bashed up in the recent storms? I had. Had I noticed that it happened every year? I had. And had I noticed that by the time summer came back around the huts had always been rebuilt thanks to the insurance man shelling out? I had. Finally, had I ever counted how many beach huts there were along the seafront? I hadn't, due to having a million and one better ways of passing my time.

Everybody, said Harvey, had better things to do than count beach huts, so nobody would notice an extra one here and there, particularly as one beach hut looks very like another.

Up the North end of the prom, the beach huts just stopped, for no apparent reason, even though the beach was always busy, and there was plenty of space for more. So no-one was going to say anything if a new one appeared at the end of the line. No more than they'd bat an eyelid if one of the ones at the other end went missing due to the storm washing it away.

So if you had a big van, a filthy night when no-one was going to be out and about, and a couple of burly mates who didn't mind getting a wetting, it wasn't too hard to dismantle a beach hut, stick it in the van, drive it up the prom and rebuild it at leisure at the other end. Give it a paint job and some frilly fretwork, and stick a new door number on it, no-one would ever know.

Advertise it in the posh London property pages as being on sale with a discount for cash, and they come flocking. So some rich toff had a new beach hut where there previously were none. The previous owners had a spanking new one courtesy of the insurance, and Harvey had forty five grand, cash on the nail.

That was just the beginning for Harvey Leake. I don't see him much now, because he lives in the South of France, but I do have holidays there sometimes. He has a beautiful wife, beautiful kids and a big villa by the sea that's never in danger of being washed away by storms.

I sometimes wonder what would have become of him if he had managed to get that exam in maths. Maybe he'd be working for the council and not be able to afford a beach hut. Who knows?

As for me, well, I sold my shop and made a nice little profit. I never paid into a pension, so I got myself a nice little retirement job to supplement my income. And Harvey was right. Nobody does ever notice that they're bus tickets.