

## Memoirs of a Delivery Boy

David Wheldon

On Monday morning I presented myself before the manager of the local Lipton's branch, in the High Street, enquiring about temporary employment during the summer vacation. It had been raining like anything and I was wet. I had taken off my raincoat, shaken it, and now held it over my arm.

'You'll do,' he said. 'Go and dry yourself. Stop fidgeting.'

Then he called me back.

He was a short, thickset man wearing a grey warehouse coat. He had a fattish face and a greyish complexion and his thin black hair was pomaded across the top of his head from one temple to the other; it seemed hardly worth while. He looked as though he never saw the sun. 'When you are not doing deliveries you'll work mostly in the provisioning floor, but as necessary you'll stack up and mend the Special Offers dumps as necessary. Unload the firm's lorry with the others. Mr Withers will be your supervisor. You'll do as he says.'

After drying and combing my hair and hanging up my coat on a spare peg in the staff-room I appeared before Mr Withers.

'You are the new boy,' he said, in his South Welsh dialect. 'Your first job will be to repair the trade cycle.'

'I thought that that was a job for politicians,' I said.

'I don't get you,' said Mr Withers. 'Don't try to be funny with me, boy. Here's the key of the shed. Go down to Hauser's in Fore Street and buy a new inner tube for the back wheel. Make sure you get one the right size. Put it on our account. Don't spin out the work. I know all about repairing bicycles: I know how long it should take. You should know that I know something about all these tasks. I was a boy once.'

He paused and looked at me, sizing me up.

'Here's the shed-key. Get on with it. And stop fidgeting.'

I took the key in my hand. It had an octagonal thumb plate: rather unusual. I stood, looking at it.

'Run, boy. Boys must run. Get on with your work.'

'Where is the shed?'

'In the yard. At the back. By the side of incoming conveyer. Fisher's down there: he'll tell you.'

So I went down to the back yard. I unlocked the door of the shed. The rain had more or less stopped but big puddles reflected an uneasy sky. A delivery was arriving, and a young man with a reddish face — that of a butcher — called me: 'Come here and help us.'

I spent half an hour in heavy work taking cases from the lorry and loading them onto the upward conveyer. Fisher was pleased. I remarked, holding one heavy case of tinned meat: 'It's called XOUN. A strange name; I've never heard of it before.'

Fisher, who was wearing a butcher's apron, rather slippery-looking, said, 'it's UNOX, young man. Ha! ha! You are holding the case upside-down, you dolt.'

I actually knew that I was holding the case upside-down, but I was just playing dumb. I'm quite good at playing dumb, if you want to know. My aunt calls me Owl-Eyes when she detects me playing dumb, though I don't know who Owl-Eyes was. I live with my aunt.

So, in my time in Lipton's, on the first morning, from the ordinary staff members, I received the name of Xoun. The managers just called me *boy*.

And Xoun I was.

I repaired the Trade Cycle — going from bust to boom in about half an hour. Mr Withers stood at the doorway.

'You've done it: good. Now, boy, off to the Pier View Hotel with their order.'

So I cycled to the Pier View Hotel with a heavy cardboard box in the steel cage on the front of the bicycle. This was intrinsically unbalanced, and, as I am a slim boy, of about average height but underweight, I was always in danger of coming a purler on encountering any potholes. The cycle was rather old, with a badly adjusted rodded brake linkage; this made stopping hazardous.

I cycled in at the Pier View Hotel's garage entrance, parked the cycle against some malodorous waste-bins and made for the kitchen-door which was propped open with a 7 pound culinary weight. I knocked and entered.

A very fat man glowered at me through the blue haze. He was obviously the chef. He wore a knotted kerchief over his head, cooks' trousers with a blue and white chequered pattern and a dirty white tee shirt. His hands were broad and fleshy, and his fingernails were chewed down to the quick. He was eating something. 'Another skinny boy from Lipton's,' he said, his voice indistinct.

Well, if you are a delivery boy you find that people treat you in many different ways. Cooks and such-like — though there are fine exceptions — generally treat you like dirt: a kind of kicking the cat, so to speak. This was the case at the Pier View Hotel.

'Put it over there,' said the chef, pointing with a hand which held a ladle. 'Skinny boy.'

This I did. I made a mental note never to eat at this establishment.

The chef checked the contents of the box against a list. 'Where's the bloody cake-cases?' 'What bloody cake-cases?'

'I'll do the bloody swearing, thank you. Cut it out. And stop your fidgeting. The paper cake-cases, skinny boy.'

'I don't know. I don't know what's in the box. Withers just said "off to the Pier View Hotel."'

'Well, don't just stand there. Go back and get them, skinny boy.'

I retrieved the cycle from the waste-bins and cycled back to the store.

'Mr Withers?'

'What is it, boy?'

'I've delivered the Pier View Hotel their stuff.'

'Order, boy, not stuff.'

'I've delivered the Pier View Hotel their order. The cook said there should have been some cake-cases.'

'Did he now?' Mr Withers went to the office and emerged with a form. 'We sent them,' he said. 'Three packets. Are you attentive, boy?'

'I'm very observant,' I said.

Mr Withers looked at me very shrewdly. 'And you'll vouch for the fact that there were no cake-cases in the box?'

'No cake-cases, Mr Withers.'

'Are you sure of that, boy?'

'Quite sure. I watched the cook check off everything against his list, the one of which you have the carbon. No cake-cases.'

Mr Withers leaned over the stairs. 'Send up Miss Dummett, girl.'

A startled girl with mouse-coloured hair scuttled away. She returned with a severe looking woman with black hair sternly plaited round the back of her head and secured by a tall ebony hair-comb. Her complexion was unusual; a grey cast lay over her cheekbones. 'What is it, Mr Withers? Nothing untoward, I hope?'

'You packed the order for the Pier View Hotel, Miss Dummett?'

'I did, Mr Withers.'

'Do you remember packing three cartons of cake-cases?'

'I do, Mr Withers. "Excelsior" brand.'

'Certain?'

'I am, Mr Withers.'

'This fidgeting boy says there weren't any when he arrived at the Pier View Hotel.'

'Oh!' Miss Dummett looked most affronted. Her face went bright red beneath its greyish overcast.

There was silence.

'Oh!' Miss Dummett repeated. 'Am I being accused of something? Of failing in my duties?' Her thin face was very angry. 'I have worked for Lipton's for fifteen years. Is my work wrong? This is the boy's first day, and is he already accusing me of slackness? Inaccuracy? Is his finger already pointing at me?'

'Well, someone has made a mistake. You have a good record, Miss Dummett. There are a number of possibilities. We can rule none of them out. It is possible that you forgot, Miss Dummett.' Mr Withers looked at me suspiciously. 'Did you take them out after Miss Dummett had put them in?'

'What would I want with cake-cases?'

'You could have taken them for your aunt.'

He knew I lived with my aunt Dora.

'My aunt Dora doesn't fool about making dainty cakes. She's a good cook, but she doesn't waste her time on stuff like that.' I was really very angry at the accusation.

'Or the cook could have concealed them.'

Miss Dummett glared at me. Her face had reverted to its greyish tinge.

'Yes,' I said. 'Excelsior — the upward trend. "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."'<sup>†</sup>

'You are right there, boy. Quite right. A noble sentiment. Take three more packets of cake-cases to the Pier View Hotel. We can't offend them; they are good customers and it won't take much to send them to the International Stores. Is the Trade Cycle holding up?'

'Yes. Economically it fluctuates, and its brakes aren't much good. The back brake is little more than an ornament.'

'You do talk nonsense, boy. Now be on your way. Boy. Quickly, now. You aren't paid for your brain but for your arms and legs. On your way.'

So I took the cake-cases to the Pier View Hotel. They were, as Miss Dummett had said, "Excelsior" brand. The packet-tops had a pleasant sketch of a young mother and her little girl smiling at each other as they collaborate in making a batch of fairy cakes. How different that was from the present reality.

'You took your bloody time, didn't you?' said the cook, who was eating something which he held in one hand while holding a spoon and stirring a large saucepan with the other. The air was bluer than ever. He put the remainder of what he was eating in his mouth, and wiped his hands on his dirty apron.

'Is there a single moment in the day when you aren't eating?' I asked.

'None of your sauce, skinny boy.'

'And certainly none of yours, either,' I said. 'I wouldn't eat here if I were paid.' I dodged the flying egg-whisk.

Then the next duty was to take sugar to Chapiarelli's, the ice-cream and candy-floss seller in Victoria Street. This turned out to be very laborious. The sugar was wholesale, in 28lb bags, and I had an argument with Mr Withers as to how many I should put on the front of the Trade Cycle without it becoming unstable.

'Trade Cycles are like that,' I said. 'Best to be cautious. We could go from boom to bust in seconds, and there would be four stone of granulated over Victoria Street's cobbles, and there's not much call for sugar once it's been spread about the floor. I can't help being skinny; I'm not much of a counterbalance; the weight's all at the front. I'm all for front-loaded capitalism: supply and demand privately owned and governed by market forces, and I agree with the reinvestment of profits, following corporate bonuses, of course, but I am dead skinny, and not particularly muscular. One pothole: one tramline, and I'd be powerless and the Trade Cycle would be out of control and the commodity would be all over the floor. "In solving a problem of this sort, the grand thing is to be able to reason backward."'<sup>†</sup>

'True, boy. Stop your fidgets and listen to me.'

'I'm not thinking about myself, you understand, but the insurance might be inconvenient.'

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<sup>†</sup> The delivery boy quotes Sherlock Holmes.

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I take it I'm not insured.'

'That's neither here nor there, boy.'

'I'm studying to be a loss adjuster specialising in non-fungible commodities,' I said, which was a complete untruth, commodities being by definition fungible, though I admit there are aspects of an independent loss adjuster's work which might appeal to me. 'Though refined white sugar, unlike brown, might well be considered a fungible.'

Mr Withers sighed. He looked at me suspiciously. 'Have it your own way, boy. Just get on with it.'

I could somehow tell that he had no idea what the word *fungible* meant.

*[This is a preview. The complete story is about 7,000 words.]*