

The last train from Liverpool



by Bill Corden

My friend Bobby Langley and I had been out for a night on the town to Liverpool, we cruised a few pubs and then went on to the Cavern club in the hopes of meeting up with a couple of chicks.

Fat chance! But we were only about 18 years old and that's what you did at that age. We didn't have much chance of success 'cos we were both penniless and stupid.

Bobby was a big strapping lad from Hoylake (where John Lennon's first wife came from) He worked as a butcher in the Co-op store on the main street of our town (Birkenhead) and his ambition was to one day brag that he made 20 quid a week (that's English Pounds for those who don't know, or \$35 in real money!)

Me? I was working at the Lever Brothers plant in Port Sunlight as a lab assistant analyzing, among other things, the moisture content of peanut oil, the fat content of milk and the protein content of "chicken feed pellets". Appropriately I was making human chicken feed wages at the rate of about \$10 a week.

We had met at our bike club, the Birkenhead North End C.C. as it was known, and I don't know how, but we became firm friends for a while.

He had a great personality and he was a really talented bike rider, leaving me in the dust any time the going got tough, and he regularly wiped the floor with me in the bike races we entered around Merseyside.

Being a butcher had made him very strong and fit with having to move all those sides of beef around and he was always showing off, in a very lighthearted manner, just how much physically stronger he was than me.

He could lift more than me, he could sprint faster than me, he had bulging biceps and was twice the size I was, but inexplicably there was one feat of strength where he couldn't break me and that was a matter of who had the strongest grip.

No matter how hard he squeezed in a strongest grip contest, I could always squeeze back harder and he would have to cry "Uncle" first

This frustrated the hell out of Bobby, and, determined to get the better of me, he invested in a pair of those "grip strengtheners", you know the ones, concertina shaped and about 5 inches by 3 inches in size.

Every free moment he got he would be working the tension on these things, but I was so far ahead of him in this department that he could have trained all of his life and never beat me.

This went on for quite a while, this grip thing, and Bobby just couldn't accept that a little skinny runt like me could smack him down like a baby in this most important of manhood rituals.

And so we come to the last train home from Liverpool.

As you would expect, we were unsuccessful in pulling any of the fairer sex but we got ourselves quite merry from the pub cruise until it was time to go home.

I was going to stay the night at his house in Hoylake (his Mom and Dad treated me like a second son) and so we picked up the train at the Central Station in Liverpool.

It was the same time as all of the pubs closed so the train was very busy with lots of strap-hangers, and it got even busier by the time we

had gone under the Mersey and reached the Birkenhead side of the river.

There were no seats available and all the straps were taken, so I had to steady myself by holding on to one of the vertical poles. I can still see it now, it was stainless steel and my grip was just about at shoulder level. We went on for about two more stops when Bobby started to give me a peculiar, half simpering look, grinning as he looked directly into my eyes. I thought it was odd but as I said, I was quite merry so I just thought he was drunker than I was.

Then the half simpering look turned into a teeth clenched grimace and the stare more penetrating and although it registered somewhere in my brain I still didn't think anything was unusual. As we pulled into our station, the grimace relaxed and a look of awe came over his face, I still couldn't figure out what was making him act this way but he wasn't saying anything so it remained a mystery until we got off.

The doors closed and the train pulled away and Bobby gasped in admiration, "I can't believe you didn't even register any pain, I crushed your hand on that post as hard as I could, so hard that I thought the post was going to buckle, but you didn't even flinch!"

I said, "I didn't flinch because it wasn't my hand you were trying to crush, it must have been some other passenger on the train because it certainly wasn't me!"

Somewhere in the Wirral Peninsula later that night, a man must have had his hand in a bucket of ice water wondering what he had done to deserve such an assault. Not a peep out of him on the train, so we have a true story validating the belief that the average Englishman will endure no end of misery before he will complain!

News reached me about twelve months ago that Bobby was working as a chef at a Drug Recovery Centre somewhere near Bath, the memory of that evening always makes me laugh out loud, my grip's still as strong as ever!