



LAUREL AND HARDY THE BUSBOYS

Short Story

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The Grand Imperial Hotel stood like a majestic monolith of polished granite and gilded dreams amidst the steel canyons of New York City. Its very name whispered of old money, hushed extravagance, and the kind of pristine silence that only a truly dedicated staff could maintain. It was, in short, a temple of refined luxury. And into this temple, on a Tuesday morning, stepped Stanley Laurel and Oliver Hardy, freshly minted bus boys.

Mr. Sterlingworth, the hotel manager, a man whose suits were always immaculate and whose patience was currently threadbare, paced his office. "They come highly... recommended," he muttered, reviewing the surprisingly brief and vague references. "Resourceful. Adaptable. Good with... *dishes*."

Mr. Fitzwilliam, the headwaiter, a man so ramrod straight he appeared to have ingested a yardstick, sniffed. "Mr. Sterlingworth, with all due respect, our previous bus boy, young Timothy, never once tripped over his own feet carrying a stack of thirty plates. These chaps... they look as if they might trip over a shadow."

Just then, a tentative knock sounded. The door opened slowly, revealing Stan, head bowed, sheepishly clutching a small, splintered tray. Behind him, Ollie, trying to look dignified, squeezed through, his bowler hat askew.

"Ah, gentlemen!" Mr. Sterlingworth forced a smile. "Welcome to the Grand Imperial. Mr. Fitzwilliam here will be your immediate supervisor. He'll show you the ropes."

Ollie puffed out his chest. "Indeed, sir! Ready to serve, ready to impress!" He gestured grandly, accidentally knocking Stan's tray, sending a solitary, highly polished butter knife clattering to the floor. Stan looked like he was about to cry.

Fitzwilliam's eyebrow twitched. "Right. Follow me."

Their first assignment was the Silverfish Room, preparing for the annual Philatelists' Gala. One hundred settings, each requiring meticulous placement of cutlery, crystal, and linen.

"Observe, gentlemen," Fitzwilliam intoned, demonstrating with crisp precision. "Fork, left. Knife, right, blade facing in. Spoon, to the right of the knife. Napkin, folded into a swan, atop the plate." He completed a perfect setting in seconds. "Now, replicate that. One hundred times."

Ollie clapped his hands. "You heard him, Stanley! Precision! Elegance! Let's show him how it's done!"

Stan nodded, then immediately picked up a fork and tried to balance it upright on his nose.

"Stanley!" Ollie snapped, swatting the fork away. "What are you doing? We're on the clock!"

They began. Ollie, adopting the posture of a seasoned artisan, carefully placed a spoon. Stan, meanwhile, attempted to replicate the napkin swan, but his efforts resulted in a crumpled, damp lump resembling a dead pigeon.

"No, Stanley, no!" Ollie sighed, snatching the napkin. "It's a swan, not a soggy duck! Watch me." He deftly folded another. "Now, you try."

Stan tried again, diligently, but his fingers seemed to have a mind of their own. He ended up wrapping the napkin bizarrely around his hand, getting tangled.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Ollie rolled his eyes, turning to the silverware. "Just get the silverware sorted. Forks on the left, knives on the right."

"Forks... left... knives... right..." Stan chanted, picking up a handful of forks and meticulously placing them all on the right.

Ollie's face began to redden. "Stanley! That's a *fork*! It goes on the *left*!" He demonstrated, exasperated.

Stan looked at the fork, then at his hand, then at the table. "Oh. But... aren't all these for... uh... eating?"

"Yes, they're for eating, you numbskull! But there's a system!" Ollie bellowed, reaching across to correct Stan's work. In his haste, his elbow swept across a pyramid of champagne glasses, sending them cascading to the floor with a magnificent tinkling crash.

Fitzwilliam, hearing the commotion, reappeared, his face a mask of horrified disbelief. "What in blazes?!"

Ollie straightened, trying to look innocent. "Just a minor... adjustment, Mr. Fitzwilliam. A... structural integrity test."

Stan, meanwhile, had begun sweeping up the glass shards with his bare hands, wincing with each prick.

"Stanley, stop that! You'll cut yourself!" Ollie cried, grabbing a dustpan. He swept the glass, but accidentally swept it directly into a flower arrangement.

The first incident of many.

Their debut was merely the warm-up. The main event was the evening's pièce de résistance: Lord Bartholomew Butterfield's 70th birthday dinner in the opulent Gold Leaf Dining Room. Lord Butterfield, an industrial magnate known for his philanthropy and his explosive temper, demanded perfection.

"This is a delicate operation, gentlemen," Fitzwilliam had explained, his voice strained. "The soup must be served simultaneously. The roast, carved tableside. And the cake... it must be presented with the utmost reverence. No... *mishaps*." He glared pointedly at them.

"Understood, Mr. Fitzwilliam!" Ollie declared, adjusting his tiny bus boy apron. "We shall be paradigms of professionalism!"

Their first task: the Consommé Royale. Stan, tasked with a tray of hot soup bowls, shuffled nervously. Ollie held the swinging kitchen door open.

"Careful, Stanley, careful!" Ollie urged. "Small steps, eyes forward!"

Stan nodded, took a small step, and promptly tripped over an invisible floor imperfection. The tray tilted precariously. Ollie, seeing the impending disaster, lunged forward, trying to catch it. He succeeded, but in doing so, his head collided with Stan's, sending a ripple through the tray. Three bowls of Consommé Royale launched into the air. One landed squarely on the bald head of a startled diner, Baron Von Schnitzel. Another coated Mrs. Van Derbilt's pearl necklace. The third splashed across the pristine white tablecloth of Lord Butterfield's own table.

A collective gasp went through the room.

"Oh, dear," Stan whimpered, looking at the Baron's steaming scalp.

Ollie rushed forward, fumbling for a napkin. "My sincerest apologies, Baron! A trifling... culinary mishap! Fresh from the kitchen, a complimentary... hair rinse!" He began vigorously dabbing the Baron's head, only to realize the napkin had just been used to wipe up a previous spill and was now covered in gravy.

The Baron roared, his face turning purple. "You imbecile! You've ruined my hair, good sir, and possibly my evening!"

Fitzwilliam materialized, his eyes blazing. "Hardy! Laurel! What is the meaning of this?"

"Just a minor... distribution error, Mr. Fitzwilliam!" Ollie stammered, pulling Stan back. "We're on it!"

Next came the main course: the Glorious Grand Imperial Roast of Beef. A massive, glistening joint of meat sat on a specialized carving trolley, wheeled in by a flustered chef. Their job was to assist with the serving.

"You, Stanley," Fitzwilliam instructed, pointing at Stan. "Push the trolley from behind. Hardy, you guide it from the front."

The trolley, however, had a mind of its own. One of its ornate, brass-rimmed wheels seemed to be stuck. Ollie pushed, grunting. Stan pushed from behind, grunting even more.

"Push, Stanley, PUSH!" Ollie yelled, his face red.

"I *am* pushing, Ollie! It's stuck!" Stan whined, pushing with all his might. The trolley jolted forward, then back, then forward again with a sudden lurch. The stuck wheel finally dislodged, sending the trolley careening across the polished floor.

"Whoa, whoa!" Ollie cried, trying to steer. But the trolley had developed a mind of its own, veering erratically. It narrowly missed a candelabra, then scraped against a velvet curtain, pulling it partially off its rail.

"Stanley, help me steer!" Ollie shrieked, wrestling with the recalcitrant cart.

Stan, in his eagerness to help, ran in front of the trolley, trying to push against it. This only made it swerve more wildly. With a horrifying momentum, the trolley shot towards Lord Butterfield's table.

"Look out!" someone yelled.

Lord Butterfield, mid-sentence, looked up just as the carving trolley, with its magnificent roast, slammed into the leg of his table. The table shuddered, then tilted. The roast, freed from its precarious perch, launched into the air. Time seemed to slow. The glistening, tender meat spun end over end, gravy trailing in its wake, before descending directly onto Lord Butterfield's lap. It landed with a meaty *thwack*, sending a shower of hot gravy and carved potatoes over his freshly pressed tuxedo.

A hush fell over the room, broken only by a small *plink* as a rogue Yorkshire pudding landed precisely in Lord Butterfield's champagne flute.

Lord Butterfield's eyes, normally the colour of dull pewter, now glowed like hot coals. He slowly pushed the roast off his lap, which slid onto the floor with a pathetic squelch.

"My...dinner...jacket," he rasped, his voice dangerously low.

Ollie, frozen, finally found his voice. "Well, here's a fine mess you've gotten us into, Stanley!"

Stan's lower lip began to tremble. "But I was just trying to help, Ollie!"

"Help? You nearly turned Lord Butterfield into a human buffet!"

Fitzwilliam approached, his face pasty. He looked as if he might spontaneously combust. "You... you... you've soiled the Lord! You've ruined the roast! You've... you've... oh, I can't even look!"

But the ultimate test was still to come: the birthday cake. A magnificent, seven-tiered confection, adorned with sugar roses and spun silver, it was a masterpiece created by the hotel's finest pastry chef. Two other waiters, their faces pale with terror, wheeled it out.

"Alright, you two," Fitzwilliam hissed, eyes darting from Lord Butterfield's furious face to the cake. "You will simply stand to either side of the cake. Do not touch it. Do not breathe on it. Do not even *think* about it. Just... stand there."

Ollie puffed himself up. "Understood, Mr. Fitzwilliam! We'll be as still as... as... very still things!"

They stood. The other waiters began to cut slices, serving the eager guests. Stan, however, couldn't resist. He leaned in, fascinated by the intricate sugar work.

"Oh, Ollie, look at the little roses!" he whispered, and without thinking, reached out a finger to gently touch a delicate petal.

"Stanley, no! What did Fitzwilliam say?!" Ollie hissed, trying to swat Stan's hand away. But Stanley, engrossed, pulled his hand back, accidentally bumping his elbow against the lowest tier of the cake.

The cake, delicately balanced, wobbled.

"Oh, dear," Stan murmured, his eyes wide.

Ollie's eyes widened further. "It's tipping, Stanley! Catch it!"

Ollie lunged, arms outstretched, trying to steady the leaning tower of sugary glory. Stan, in his characteristic helpfulness, also lunged, but from the opposite side. Their hands met on the cake. One push from Ollie, one pull from Stan, and the entire structure began to sway wildly.

"Hold it steady, you nincompoop!" Ollie yelled, straining.

"I'm trying, Ollie! It's very... wobbly!" Stan whimpered, adding to the instability.

The cake, caught in a tug-of-war between two men who understood neither physics nor pastry, finally gave up. With a slow, majestic tilt, it began its descent. The top four tiers slipped free, then the next two, until it was a cascade of sponge and frosting. It didn't fall to the floor. Oh no, that would have been too simple. Instead, it tumbled directly towards Lord Bartholomew Butterfield, who was just standing up to deliver a fiery speech about the roast beef incident.

He opened his mouth to speak.

The seven-tiered birthday cake collided with him with a magnificent *splat*. Frosting, sponge, and sugar roses exploded outwards, coating him from head to toe in a sticky, sweet avalanche. The topmost tier, complete with a tiny marzipan figure of Lord Butterfield himself, landed perfectly on his bewildered nose, resembling a bizarre, edible monocle.

A collective gasp, then a stunned silence. Followed by a single, high-pitched giggle from Stan.

“Stanley!” Ollie groaned, his head in his hands. “Well, here’s *another* fine mess you’ve gotten us into!”

Lord Butterfield, now a living, breathing, frosting-covered monument to incompetence, simply stood there, dripping. He raised a hand, slowly, and plucked the marzipan mini-me from his nose, looking at it with an expression of profound, sugary despair.

Fitzwilliam, whose face had gone from pale to grey to a terrifying shade of puce, let out a strangled cry. “My career! My reputation! My sanity!” He clutched his chest.

Mr. Sterlingworth, alerted by the communal silence, entered the dining room. He took in the scene: the gravy-splattered floor, the broken glass, the dishevelled curtains, the Baron rubbing his wet bald head, and finally, Lord Butterfield, standing amidst a blizzard of cake, looking like a disgruntled snowman.

Sterlingworth’s eyes landed on Laurel and Hardy, who were now trying to discreetly wipe their hands on a nearby velvet tablecloth, only smearing it with more cake.

“You two!” Sterlingworth roared, his voice shaking the crystal chandeliers. “Out! Out of my hotel! Immediately!”

Ollie straightened his apron, trying to maintain some semblance of dignity. “But sir, we were merely attempting to... facilitate the festivities!”

“Facilitate?! You’ve decimated them! You’ve turned Lord Butterfield into a dessert! You are unequivocally, without a shadow of a doubt, the worst bus boys this hotel has ever employed!”

Stan’s lower lip began to quiver. “Are we... fired, Ollie?”

“Yes, Stanley,” Ollie sighed, massaging his temples. “It appears we are. Another promising career, ruined by unforeseen circumstances.” He gave Sterlingworth a stern look. “And entirely beyond our control, I might add.”

As they were unceremoniously escorted towards the service exit, Stan, reaching for the door handle, somehow managed to snag his apron on a fire extinguisher, pulling it from its mount. It clattered to the floor with a magnificent bang, activating its emergency alarm.

“WEE-OOOOH! WEE-OOOOH!” the alarm blared, echoing through the Grand Imperial Hotel, causing startled guests to jump and more crystal to tinkle precariously.

Ollie just shook his head, looking at Stan with a mixture of exasperation and resignation. “Well, Stanley,” he said with the familiar sigh, “here’s another fine mess you’ve gotten us into.”

They stepped out into the bustling New York street, the hotel’s alarm wailing behind them, a symphony of chaos. Stan, ever the optimist, looked up at the sky. “Say, Ollie,” he mused, “do you think they’d let us keep our aprons?”

Ollie just pulled his bowler hat down slightly, already contemplating their next venture. Perhaps a quiet life, far from fancy hotels and delicate cakes. Perhaps.