

Love 'em and Leave 'm Len

to the prompts: Gardener, Village, Vase, Knife and Ball of string

After having run his own Insurance Business for over thirty years, Len Morris had now retired. Not through choice, I might add, but because of the financial downturn he had experienced during the Covid epidemic a few years ago. He hadn't really reached retirement age either, and he was very lonely. In the past he had never needed anyone to share his life with. 'Love 'em and Leave 'em Len' they called him but now, much to his regret, he was sorry he hadn't a partner. He needed something to occupy him.

Consequently, when he saw a position advertised in a national newspaper, he applied for it. It was for an agency that supplied cleaners and gardeners to people who were at work all day, and so the people they employed had to be squeaky clean and honest. Len was quite a keen gardener and lavished lots of attention on his beautiful piece of land, although only he himself and those living nearby could see it, as he had very few visitors. If successful at the interview, he would need to call in at the agency when needed to collect the key for the property he was to visit on that day.

Len, having been an insurance assessor for so long, had always thought this rather strange, leaving the keys to your house to be used by someone you had never met, although some had side entrances so he need only unlock the gate and access the garden. But even so, as he was there all day, he would need to use the indoor toilet and wash his hands from time to time.

Anyway, Len had now been working for some years for this agency and was often told how pleased clients were with his work, which made him very happy. On this particular day Len was to drive quite a long way to a house on the outskirts of a small village in deepest Essex. He was paid mileage, so distance didn't matter, and the scenery was beautiful. He enjoyed the ride. Apparently the owner was a doctor who was currently working abroad but would soon be returning home and wanted the garden made useable again.

Now actually, this new job of his proved rather lucrative for Len. His previous experience in the insurance lark had made him aware of all the hiding places where clients would attempt to secrete their valuables, although he still couldn't understand why anybody would want strangers wandering around their properties. Wearing cotton gloves, he let himself in and searched around for any bugging devices, but aside from the burglar alarm, for which he had the code, he found none. There was no money in the fridge or freezer, washing machine, or hidden away in blankets

under the bed. He'd found a good few items this way and nobody had noticed anything missing. In the old days he would be able to flog his finds in an East End pub, although that could be dodgy – you never knew if there was a snout there to grass you up. Nowadays, with the help of a few box office numbers and various false names he could sell the stuff on the net – much safer! He swore he'd even seen some of his purloined items for re-sale on there too!

Digging deep into the piles of old clothes in the cupboard under the stairs, he found what he was looking for – a Ming vase, and it looked rather familiar too. No need to search any further then – this hoard would do nicely. Not wanting to be greedy, Len opened the back door and went out into the garden. It had once been beautifully landscaped and even had a large swimming pool which nobody had thought to cover up. It was full of stagnant water, rotting leaves, and other garden debris.

Equipping himself with tools from the shed, Len began work, even though he had lately been troubled by a number of dizzy spells but had not wanted to investigate them for fear he would be told to give up his job. The grass was overgrown and plants were spreading onto the paths, so he decided to straighten them. Some of the bushes needed staking and tying back. As some had now grown very high he needed a ladder, a ball of string and a knife to cut it with.

Whether it was the exertion of carrying the ladder from the shed, as he climbed to the very top rung he had one of these funny turns and felt himself falling into the pool, where he sank down into the dark, dank, slimy water. Then, as he gasped for air, he heard what he thought was an ambulance and breathed a sigh of relief.

But this was the last sigh Len would ever give. He was literally down in the deep end, and the sirens he heard were police cars. Len was not the honest, dependable man he claimed to be and 'Lovely Lucy' at the agency, who he had once asked out on a date, was plain clothes!

As he tumbled he realized he'd been rumbled. Len had actually been the brains behind many a large-scale heist, including one only the other month at the British Museum, but that wasn't enough for him. He just couldn't keep his fingers out of the pie – even with those cotton gloves he always wore 'because he had psoriasis!'

Myra Wasserman

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