

## Smart Move

Their friends were so exalted that they called the Queen, '...the Kraut'—yet so strapped that they touted for plebs to tramp through their crumbling estates.

The Thorntons, however, were rolling in it. No peasant boots sullied their country seat—an ugly pocket-palace which Lord Thornton referred to as 'Bleeding Piles'. But they were bored with its mouldering splendour. It was a money-sink and impossible to heat. Besides, they were jaded with entertaining and too elderly for the hunt. So they bought a residence in Chelsea for a bargain price and put the manor on the market.

Their problem, now, was relocating all they owned.

They strolled through the lofty rooms, surveying the furniture, art, sculptures. The silver service and gold-trimmed tableware. The library stacked with dusty volumes. The huge antique cabinets and ornate four-poster beds. The billiard table. The elaborate home gym. The harp and the Steinway in the music room...

'How on earth,' his wife said, 'will we fit all this in the townhouse?'

The 'townhouse', admittedly, was large, with four reception rooms, five bedrooms, four on-suites, plus servant's quarters. But it wouldn't hold a fifth of what they had.

'We'll have to auction most of it off,' he said. 'I'll ring Larwoods. That's what the McDonald's did. Jamie said they did a sterling job.'

'Oh dear,' her Ladyship sighed. 'I'll hate to see it go. But we're getting on and must be sensible, I suppose.'

'God, yes. Bite the bullet. Too much stuff. One has to dust it, polish it, insure it. And maintaining this ruin never stops. I've become a bleeding slave to it and I want some time to myself.'

She sighed. 'I know. I know. It's time we both wound down a smidge.'

They auctioned off most of the bigger cabinets, sculptures, ornaments and art. Also silver, crockery, casual furniture, the gym equipment and the harp.

'Now,' he said, 'we have to shift what's left.'

As most bluebloods in their social set were slaves to their stately homes, none could recommend a removalist. So they asked the maid to find one, because she understood the infernal internet. The three of them crammed into her small parlour and peered at her laptop. She found hundreds.

'We need to be careful,' he told her. 'Things go missing, don't you know? The beggars always rip you off.'

She refined the search to firms specialising in expensive items for high-end customers. There were fewer of those. Then an entry caught her Ladyship's eye.

***Luxury removalists.*** *We cut the biggest moving problems down to size. No item too large or heavy. Our expert team can handle anything. Ask for our free demonstration.*

They clicked on the website. It looked tasteful and well designed. The firm offered to demonstrate their expertise with the largest item in the home.

'A novel proposal, don't you think?' she said. 'Why not give them a bash?'

On the morning of the demonstration, a small van crawled apologetically up the drive and stopped outside the grand entrance. A small man in a yellow waistcoat got out, shuffled up the expansive stone steps and looked around for a doorbell.

The butler ushered him to the music room where the Lord and Lady stood ready to receive him near the gleaming-black full-sized Steinway.

'And you are....?'

'Er, Cram, sir. Mr Robert J. Cram.'

'How do you do, Mr Cram. We're the Thorntons. And we understand you're here to demonstrate your removalist prowess.'

'That I am indeed sir and madam. Am indeed.'

'Then we suggest you try with this.' He tapped the closed lid of the concert grand. 'Though I don't see how one man with a small van can move it an inch. It weighs a ton.'

Cram smiled. 'Don't concern yourself about that, sir. The demonstration you shall have. We cut the biggest moving problems down to size. It's our motto, sir, and we stand by it. Now, if you'd just wait over there by the window...'

They were puzzled but did as he asked.

Cram undid his shirt cuffs, rolled them halfway up his forearms, then walked slowly around the huge instrument which brooded in the centre of the room, as immovable as a sarcophagus. Then he stood at one end of it, touched his palms together in front of him and rubbed his hands. 'Won't be long now, sir.' With hands suitably warmed, he extended them in front of him, palms facing the piano, and murmured an inaudible incantation.

Nothing happened for long moments. Then the light seemed to shudder in the room. And before their incredulous eyes, the piano began to shrink.

The little man still stood there, arms out, palms raised before him, apparently willing the great instrument to diminish.

Thornton gasped with astonishment. His wife shrieked and covered her face, then peeped through her fingers, aghast.

The piano was now the size of a small suitcase and looked like a ruinously expensive child's toy.

Cram stepped forward and lifted it easily. 'I think your Worships will agree that it'll fit in the van.'

'My God!' Thornton grasped the window ledge to steady himself. 'And what happens at the... at the... at the... other... other... end?'

'The other end, my Lord?'

'When you deliver the bally thing. Can you make it the... same size again or what?'

Cram chuckled. 'That's the easy part, sir.' He put the toy piano back on the floor and clapped his hands. Immediately it became, again, the great brooding, shining blackness that had dominated the room.

The wife fainted and the two men spent the next minute fussing on the floor beside her. The maid who had arrived with Devonshire tea, shooed them away, revived her and insisted she rest.

'That's truly remarkable, Cram,' Thornton said when his heart stopped pounding in his chest. 'Where on earth did you learn such a skill?'

Cram spooned more jam on his scone. 'Trade secret, m'Lord. Afraid I can't discuss it. The point is,' he sipped his tea, 'I can reduce everything in this house, sir, to a size that would fit in my van.'

'Everything?'

'Without doubt, sir.'

'Incredible! Incredible! Even... I mean even a... full-sized Victorian billiard table with six carved legs and a two-inch thick slate base?'

'Oh, no, James. No!' his ashen-faced wife pleaded. 'Please don't make him do it again.'

'You don't have to come, dear heart.' He patted her knee. 'Just like to be quite certain before we move forward, what, what?'

He piloted Cram to the billiard room with its reinforced floor. The little man walked around the gargantuan table twice then repeated his hand gesture and incantations. The air shuddered. And the table shrank to the size of a foot-stool.

Then he clapped his hands and brought it back to size.

Thornton turned in circles, stamping, raving. 'Incredible! Incredible! You're an amazing, amazing man and you've got the job. Now Cram... we need everything in this house removed to a billet in Chelsea.'

'We're quite expensive, sir. I'll have to give you a costing.'

The two men spent the rest of the morning tramping through the cavernous, freezing rooms while Cram made notes in a dog-eared notebook. He eventually named his price. Eleven thousand pounds.

To Thornton, it seemed more than reasonable. He clapped Cram on the shoulder. 'Good man! Done! Agreed! Now when can you book us in?'

The move went wonderfully, impeccably, seamlessly.

Cram arrived on the appointed day with two fit lads and a slightly larger van. He moved through the house, reducing everything to miniatures while the two youths carted them to the truck and packed them carefully inside.

The Thornton's had done their homework and prepared a plan of the rooms in the townhouse with every item numbered and positioned. So each item was placed correctly and restored to its original size—except some of the larger furniture, such as the huge carved sideboard from the dining room.

Thornton asked Cram if he could possibly make it three quarter size.

Cram said, 'Certainly, sir.' And did.

The great artefact then fitted perfectly and its carvings looked even more intricate.

The Thornton's were overjoyed that everything had gone so smoothly and settled contentedly into their new home with their best-loved possessions around them.

But, on their second night in Chelsea, they were woken by a bass beat that shook the building. It came from the residence next door and sounded like a heavy metal band. His Lordship checked the bedside clock. It was 3am. He cursed, donned his ermine-trimmed dressing-gown, went next door and rang the bell.

No one answered. Through its frosted glass panels he could see the shadows of dancing figures.

He pounded on the door. Eventually someone opened it—a gaunt, long-haired, half-stoned fellow, no longer young, in dirty net-singlet and leather tights. His famous cadaverous face even Thornton recognised. He was the lead singer of a band with an international reputation—someone with more than enough money to do anything he liked and to bribe anyone to let him keep doing it.

Thornton told him to turn the noise down or he'd phone the police.

The man gave him the middle finger and slammed the door in his face.

Thornton stormed home and rang London's finest.

They arrived in half an hour. But, by then, the music had stopped. They knocked at the door of the house and were assured nothing untoward had gone on. When they left, it started again, even louder than before.

Next morning, they found garbage tipped over the fence into their back garden.

The following night, the ruckus started again. Thornton rang the police once more. But again the noise stopped just before they arrived—almost as if they'd had a tip-off from someone in the force. And it started again when they left.

Next morning Thornton, who'd parked his Bentley in the drive, found the paintwork scored along both sides.

And so it went. Night after night.

Lady Thornton was faint from worry and lack of sleep. Thornton raged around the house, plotting to hang, draw and quarter his neighbour. He cleaned his Purdy shotgun and loaded it with buckshot but then realized that he could be rushed before he could reload. So he uncased his autoloading Remington, which made more sense. It took five up the spout and one in the breech.

On the fifth night the noise was more intolerable than ever. They now understood why their new home had cost them so little—and why there were FOR SALE signs on the houses across the street.

Thornton stormed next-door with his automatic shotgun and pounded on the front door with the butt. The door was opened again by the same long-haired, wasted lout.

Thornton shoved the gun in the man's chest and forced himself into the hall. There were no dancing people this time. He followed the music, intent on blasting the sound system to bits. But there was no sound system—just a live five piece band of scrofulous misfits and a sound engineer in the next room behind a panel full of knobs and faders.

The music died when they saw the gun.

Thornton blasted the amps, put a couple more rounds in the panel then fired at the ceiling and roared. He dearly wanted to draw blood but suspected that even a Lord of the Realm would be censured for removing a neighbour's stomach or face.

He backed out of the house, yelling threats.

There was no more noise that night. Or the next. But they were woken by a smoke alarm. Smoke was pouring up the stairs. He stumbled down to the garage and found the Bentley on fire. They'd broken its windows and poured petrol onto the seats.

Fortunately the fire brigade arrived and doused it before the tank exploded.

They considered calling the police but feared the subsequent headline:

***Duke empties assault weapon into band.***

No, that wouldn't do at all. They were simple, peaceful people who never made a fuss and the family motto was *pax panacea*.

'We'll just have to leave this place,' his wife sobbed. 'We'll never win against all of them.'

Thornton thundered and stamped. 'I refuse to be forced out of my home.'

'But what else can we do?'

His Lordship slumped into a chair, put his head in his hands. 'God knows.'

Then the solution dawned.

He bounced out of the chair and almost skipped.

'Got it! Got it! We'll call Cram!'

'Cram? What on earth can *he* do?'

'Fix the rotten buggers. Remember his motto? Cuts the biggest problems down to size?'

'You mean get him to...'

'Why not?'

Through her tears shone sudden hope. 'Could he do it?'

'Soon find out.' He found Cram's card and grabbed the phone.

The little man answered.

'Cram? That you? ...Good! Good! James Thornton speaking.'

'Er, yes, m'Lord. Is everything satisfactory?'

'Topping, thank you kindly. But I have another project for you. Could you possibly pop over sometime soon?'

'Certainly, m'Lord. I could be there at, half a mo... 5pm tomorrow if that's not too late?'

'Not too late at all. Capital. Look forward to it.'

'Tell him,' his wife said, 'that we'll have scones and everything waiting.'

Next afternoon, over late tiffin, Thornton outlined the events of the past days.

Cram wolfed his Devonshire tea, frowning and shaking his head. 'Not good, sir. Not good. Not good at all.'

'...and as we're simple, peaceful people and really don't want to move again, we were wondering if you could help us cut the problem, as it were, down to size?'

Cram shifted uneasily in his chair. 'You mean...?'

'Precisely. But, of course, if it only works on inanimate objects...'

'Well, blow me down! That's a turn-up. Never been asked that before.' He braced himself with another scone. 'We'll, now. Well, now. Well. Let's see.' He gulped the scone. 'I've had *some* success with animals. A hippo, in fact. A South African chap had this baby hippo that wandered into his homestead. The family petted it and it stayed. His children used to pat it like a dog while they watched TV. But it soon grew so big it'd barely fit through the door. Hippos grow to considerable size,' he confided as if it wasn't generally known.

'Aware of that. Paddled past them in the Okavango, don't you know? Do go on.'

'Anyway, he asked me to try and reduce it. Of course, I couldn't make it any younger or cuddlier, but I got it down to the size of a St Bernard. And, as far as I know, it's still a much-loved member of the family.'

'Wonderful! Remarkable!' Thornton could barely contain his excitement. 'And could... could you do that to members of a band?'

'To humans?'

'Well, humans are just animals.'

'*This* lot certainly are,' her Ladyship groaned.

Cram spread jam on another scone. 'Well, now. Well. I've never tried. But don't see why not.'

'Marvellous! Remarkable! Wonderful!'

'Of course, there'd be a substantial fee.'

'Name your price.'

'Well...!' He scratched his head. 'Five band members permanently reduced to... what size exactly?'

Thornton's eyes sparkled at the thought. He spread his index finger and thumb. 'Say... three inches?'

'I see. I see. Bit of a stretch. Bit of a stretch. But could be possible. Could be possible. Of course I could get into serious trouble if anybody found out.'

'Completely *sub rosa*, I assure you. You have my word.'

Cram nodded slowly. 'So... five band members at, say, fifty thou a piece for permanent reduction to three inches, comes to two hundred and fifty thou. It may seem a lot of dosh, sir, but these gents are famous the world over—household words. I have to think of my reputation and what'd happen if anyone sussed.'

Thornton scrambled for his cheque book and started writing. 'Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Yours! In advance.'

Cram took the cheque with pleasure. 'Much obliged, sir.'

'Capital! Capital.'

'Do have another scone,' his wife purred.

'I'd better not, m'Lady. I've had four.'

'Dear man. I'm sure one more won't hurt.' She gave him her most radiant smile and spread the cream and jam on it for him.

Thornton didn't want his wife involved. He said, 'You've suffered enough and it could be deuced unpleasant. Why not visit your sister next week? Take her to Ascot or some such.'

'God, yes! Thought you'd never ask. Actually, I'd gnaw off my left arm to get away from this place for a while.'

'Splendid.'

'But be terribly careful, James. Please.'

'Don't worry, my love. I know exactly what to do with them.'

'Don't tell me.' She covered her face.

'Wouldn't dream of it, old thing.'

With his wife safely out of the way, Thornton got to work. He bought a small square birdcage, a miniature padlock and reloaded his automatic shotgun. Then he waited till the next jam session and rang Cram. 'They're all in there. It's time.'

At two in the morning, they marched to the house next door. Thornton demolished the lock with the shotgun and stormed inside. Cram followed with the bird cage.

The band had barely registered the off-beat of the blast when they found themselves confronting the gun. The racket died. His neighbour thrust his mike back in its stand and pulled out his cell phone. 'Hey, dude. Don't you ever learn? Breaking and entering? Assault with a deadly weapon? This time, you're for it. You'll be nicked.'

'Put it down.' He fired between the man's feet.

His neighbour leaped back and dropped the phone.

'No one moves.' He waved the gun around and glanced behind him at the control room. There was no panel operator that night, which made things simpler.

The drummer raised his hands. The lead and bass guitarists looked uneasy. He definitely had their attention.

'Mr Cram?'

'On the job, sir.' The little man rolled up his shirtsleeves and extended his hands toward the group. Seconds ticked by. The room was fetid but the sweat beading Cram's brow was caused by effort, not the heat. Finally, the light shuddered. And the men began to shrink.

And shrink.

And shrink.

Until they were shorter than a smallish saltshaker.

Their instruments crashed around them, pinning one under his guitar. The drummer fell off his stool head first. Their astonishment was complete.

Cram put the cage on the floor, door-up. Thornton grabbed his neighbour by one leg and dropped him in. He retrieved the bass guitarist and dropped him in, too. Cram picked up the stunned drummer by the head and added him to the cage. The lead guitarist tried to hide in the bell of a saxophone but Cram dragged him out. And when the synthesizer player made a run for it, Thornton punted him into the skirting with the side of his shoe and caught him.

The five captives clutched the bars and yelled up at them—but their voices sounded like the twittering of birds. Thornton shut the small wire door and secured it with the padlock.

He pumped Cram's hand. 'Tickety-boo! Good man. Incredible! Fantastic! Capital evening. You're a pip.'

'Thank you, m'Lord. Call me if you need anything more.'

Thornton didn't need anything more. He'd had quite enough for one night. He returned to his house and ran a bath. He knocked the soap in when he turned on the taps but didn't bother to lift it out.

When the bath was full of water, he immersed the cage and, with satisfaction mixed with distaste, watched the revolting bounders drown.

Then he flushed them down the toilet one by one.

The Thornton's now live in peace. A pleasant, reticent couple bought the place next door and in due course became their good friends. The houses across the street sold to upper class scions like themselves. The neighbourhood's restored to genteel elegance and Thornton's new Bentley remains undamaged, even when parked in the drive.

The uproar about the band's disappearance rages on but there are still no firm leads or explanations. The vigils, suicides of fans and yearly tribute concerts continue.

'Dearest,' his wife asked him years later, 'what on earth did you do with those hideous people?'

'Washed the grotty buggers,' he grunted.

'Really! How appropriate!'

She's still puzzled by the comment but too well-bred to ask for particulars.