

April's Fools

By Rick Cogbill a.k.a. Slim Shambles
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It was a fine spring morning in April, with all the prospects of being a pretty good day. Of course, Tooner hadn't arrived for work yet, so there was still an unknown element to the equation.



“Some more coffee, Slim?” Quigley, our service writer, was making the rounds with the pot.

“Don’t mind if I do,” I replied. Ever since I’d learned the secret of making great Java from Spoke Lee over at The Alignment Shop, it was getting harder and harder to keep coffee breaks down to the allotted 15 minutes.

“Say, while you’re up...” Basil held out his mug with one hand while he studied his playing cards in the other. “And I believe I’ve got a Royal Flush, Beanie.”

Our apprentice groaned loudly. His skill at cards was abysmal. “How d’ya do that, Basil? I’ve now lost six hands in a row!”

Basil chuckled. “I know, hardly seems fair, doesn’t it?” He stirred some whitener into his coffee. “I must confess to employing some techniques learned years ago from a Tibetan monk.”

Beanie’s eyes widened. “Wow, you’ve been to Tibet?”

“No.” Basil tested his coffee. “I met him on a bus trip to Reno.”

Just then the door burst open and Tooner noisily stomped in. “Hey, what’s up, Toon?” I glanced at my watch. “You’re running late today – it’s not like you to stop and smell the roses.”

“Rotten neighbours,” Tooner growled as he struggled into his coveralls. “I got nabbed by Buck Pincher as I came out of my house this mornin’. Said his car wouldn’t start, so ‘would I please take a quick look at it before coming to work’!”

I tossed that one around in my brain. “But Buck’s not your neighbor; he doesn’t even live near you. His motel is out on the highway.”

Tooner poured himself some brew. “Tell me about it. But that didn’t stop ol’ Pincher from ridin’ his rusty bicycle ‘cross town to hide behind my hedge an’ bushwhack me.” He took a large gulp. “T’ain’t fair to hit a man before he’s had his mornin’ coffee.”

I sighed. Buck Pincher was a buddy of mine, but he was also the biggest skinflint in town. By snagging Tooner on his way to work, Buck was hoping for free advice. “So, what was the problem with his car?”

Tooner sank into a chair. “Dead battery. He’s peddlin’ up here t’ get a new one.”

Basil shook his head as he dealt the cards again. “No doubt he’ll want to install it himself and save money.”

I shrugged. It was such a nice day that not even Buck’s penny-pinching ways could ruin it. When he finally arrived out of breath 20 minutes later, I had a new battery charged and ready to go. Even an argument over the recycling tax failed to dampen my spirits – it was just too nice outside.

That all changed an hour later. “Dutchy’s tow truck just pulled in,” announced Quigley, coming into the service bays. “And he’s got Buck Pincher’s Jetta on the hook.” He looked at Tooner. “Buck’s on the phone complaining that you gave him bad advice, and now he wants his money back for the battery.”

I sighed. “Let me guess; he also wants the tow bill charged to us, right?”

“Ja,” boomed a loud voice. “Und you can just sign here.” Dutchy shoved the towing invoice under my nose. My fine spring day had just sprung a leak.

After Dutchy left, we crowded around the engine compartment of the Jetta while Basil tried the key. The headlights would come on and the engine cranked over, but it wouldn’t fire. Tooner checked for spark. “Nothin’,” he muttered.

Beanie got down near the rear of the car as Basil tried it again. “And the fuel pump’s not cycling, either.”

“There’s somethin’ goofy here,” stated Tooner. “When I checked it at Buck’s house this mornin’, it wouldn’t even turn over. There were no lights, buzzers – nothin’.”

Basil joined us up front. “Possibly a faulty Logic Relay,” he suggested. “That controls things like spark and fuel.” He rubbed his chin. “Still, I don’t know...we’re talking about Buck Pincher here...”

I snapped my fingers. “Exactly, Basil! First rule of thumb – always check what the customer just did.”

“Or didn’t do,” growled Tooner. He began checking the connections on the new battery that Buck had just installed. After a few minutes he let out a satisfied grunt. “Looky what we got here!” He held up a critical ground wire from the ECU that wasn’t attached to anything. “Found it lyin’ underneath the washer bottle.” Once the wire was properly connected to the negative battery terminal, the car started and ran fine.

I called up Buck to explain what we'd found. He wasn't exactly what you'd call appreciative. "Just lock it up outside," he grumbled. "I'll come get it this evening with my extra key."

"Whoa, you're just trying to get out of paying that towing bill!"

"Durn tootin'," he shot back. "I figure this mess is your responsibility."

I frowned into the phone. "How so?"

Buck snorted at my ignorance. "Because it's your own fault for allowing inexperienced people like myself to work on such complicated mechanical devices as my automobile. There ought to be a law against it!" And with that, the connection went dead.

I was at a loss for words. Buck Pincher and I had finally found something we could agree on.