

The Landlady

Billy Weaver had travelled down from London on the slow afternoon train, changing trains on the way, and by the time he got to Bath it was about nine o'clock in the evening. The air was very cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'but is there a fairly cheap hotel not too far away from here?'

'Try the pub down the road,' a man at the station said, pointing. 'They might take you in. It's about a kilometre along on the other side.'

Billy thanked him and picked up his suitcase and set out to walk to the inn. He had never been to Bath before. He didn't know anyone who lived there, but his boss at the Head Office in London had told him it was a splendid city. 'Find your own accommodation,' he had said, 'and then go along and report to the Local Manager as soon as you've got yourself settled.'

Billy was seventeen years old. He was wearing a new dark blue overcoat, a new brown hat, a new brown suit, and he was feeling fine. He walked briskly down the street. He was trying to do everything briskly these days. All successful businessmen, he had decided, were brisk. The top men at Head Office were brisk all the time. They were amazing.

There were no shops on this wide street, only a line of tall houses on each side, all of them looking the same. They had grand entrances and four or five steps going up to their front doors, and it was obvious that they had been very grand houses indeed. But now, even in the darkness, he could see that the paint was coming off the doors and windows, and that the handsome white exteriors had cracks and patches from lack of repair.

Suddenly, in a downstairs window that was illuminated by a

nearby street lamp, Billy saw a printed notice leaning against the glass in one of the windows. It said BED AND BREAKFAST.

He stopped walking. He moved a bit closer. Green curtains were hanging down on each side of the window. He went right up to it and looked through the glass into the room, and the first thing he saw was a bright fire burning in the fireplace. On the carpet in front of the fire, a pretty little dog was curled up asleep. The room itself, which he could only see in half-darkness, was filled with pleasant furniture. There was a piano and a big sofa and several comfortable armchairs; and in one corner he saw a large parrot in a cage. Animals were usually a good sign in a place like this, Billy told himself, and it looked to him as if it would be a pretty decent house to stay in. Certainly it would be more comfortable than a pub.

On the other hand, a pub would be more friendly than a guesthouse. There would be beer and cards in the evenings, and lots of people to talk to, and it would probably be a lot cheaper, too. He had stayed a couple of nights in a pub once before and had liked it. He had never stayed in any guesthouses and, to be perfectly honest, he was a tiny bit frightened of them. The word 'guesthouse' suggested watery vegetables and greedy landladies.

After hesitating like this in the cold for two or three minutes, Billy decided that he would walk on and look at the pub before making up his mind. He turned to go.

And now a strange thing happened to him. He was just going to step back and turn away from the window when his eye was caught and held in the most peculiar manner by the small notice that was there. BED AND BREAKFAST, it said. BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, holding him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was actually moving across from the window to the front door, climbing the steps that led to it and reaching for the bell.

He pressed it. Far away in a back room he heard it ringing, and then *at once* – it must have been at once because he hadn't even had time to take his finger from the bell-button – the door swung open and a woman was standing there.

She was about forty-five or fifty years old, and the moment she saw him, she gave him a warm welcoming smile.

'Please come in,' she said pleasantly. She stepped to one side, holding the door wide open, and Billy found himself automatically starting forward into the house: the force or, more accurately, the desire to follow her was extraordinarily strong.

'I saw the notice in the window,' he said, holding himself back. 'Yes, I know.'

'I was wondering about a room.'

'It's *all* ready for you, my dear,' she said. She had a round pink face and very gentle blue eyes.

'I was on my way to a pub,' Billy told her. 'But I noticed the sign in your window.'

'My dear boy,' she said, 'why don't you come in out of the cold?'

'How much do you charge?'

'Nine pounds a night, including breakfast.'

It was amazingly cheap. It was less than half of what he had been willing to pay.

'If that is too much,' she added, 'then perhaps I can reduce it just a tiny bit. Do you desire an egg for breakfast? Eggs are expensive at the moment. It would cost less without the egg.'

'Nine pounds is fine,' he answered. 'I would like very much to stay here.'

'I knew you would. Do come in.'

She seemed terribly nice. She looked exactly like the mother of one's best schoolfriend welcoming one into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays. Billy took off his hat and stepped inside.

'Just hang it there,' she said, 'and let me help you with your coat.'

There were no other hats or coats in the hall. There were no umbrellas, no walking-sticks – nothing.

'We have it *all* to ourselves,' she said, smiling at him over her shoulder as she led the way upstairs. 'You see, I don't very often have the pleasure of taking a visitor into my little nest.'

The old girl is slightly mad, Billy told himself. But at nine pounds a night, who cares about that? 'I should've thought you'd be simply full of visitors wanting to stay,' he said politely.

'Oh, I am, my dear, I am, of course I am. But the trouble is that I am just a tiny bit careful about whom I choose – if you see what I mean.'

'Ah, yes.'

'But I'm always ready. Everything is always ready day and night in this house just in case an acceptable young gentleman comes along. And it is such a pleasure, my dear, when now and again I open the door and I see someone standing there who is just *exactly* right.' She was halfway up the stairs, and she paused, turned her head and smiled down at him. 'Like you,' she added, and her blue eyes travelled slowly all the way down the length of Billy's body, to his feet, and then up again.

On the first floor she said to him, 'This floor is mine.'

They climbed up more stairs. 'And this one is *all* yours,' she said. 'Here's your room. I do hope you'll like it.' She took him into a small but charming front bedroom, switching on the light as she went in.

'The morning sun comes right in the window, Mr Perkins. It is Mr Perkins, isn't it?'

'No,' he said. 'It's Weaver.'

'Mr Weaver. How nice. I've put a hot water bottle between the sheets to warm them, Mr Weaver. And you may light the gas fire at any time if you feel cold.'

'Thank you,' Billy said. 'Thank you very much.' He noticed that the bedclothes had been neatly turned back on one side, all ready for someone to get in.

'I'm so glad you appeared,' she said, looking seriously into his face. 'I was beginning to get worried.'

'That's all right,' Billy answered brightly. 'You mustn't worry about me.' He put his suitcase on the chair and started to open it.

'And what about supper, my dear? Did you manage to get anything to eat before you came here?'

'I'm not hungry, thank you,' he said. 'I think I'll just go to bed as soon as possible because tomorrow I've got to get up rather early and report to the office.'

'Very well, then. I'll leave you now so that you can unpack. But before you go to bed, would you be kind enough to come into the sitting room on the ground floor and sign the book? Everyone has to do that because it's the law, and we don't want to break any laws at *this* stage in the proceedings, do we?' She gave him a little wave of the hand and went quickly out of the room and closed the door.

The fact that his landlady appeared to be slightly crazy didn't worry Billy at all. She was not only harmless – there was no question about that – but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous person. He guessed that she had probably lost a son of her own or something like that, and had never recovered from it.

So a few minutes later, after unpacking and washing his hands, he walked downstairs to the ground floor and entered the sitting room. His landlady wasn't there, but the fire was still burning and the little dog was still sleeping in front of it. The room was wonderfully warm and comfortable. I'm a lucky fellow, he thought, rubbing his hands. This is great.

He found the guest-book lying open on the piano, so he took out his pen and wrote down his name and address. There were only two other names above his on the page and, as one always

does, he started to read them. One was a Christopher Mulholland from Cardiff. The other was Gregory W. Temple from Bristol.

That's funny, he thought suddenly. Christopher Mulholland. That name sounds familiar.

Now where had he heard that rather unusual name before? Was he a boy at school? No. Was it one of his sister's numerous young men, perhaps, or a friend of his father's? No, no, it wasn't any of those. He glanced down again at the book. In fact, thinking about it again, he wasn't at all sure that the second name wasn't as familiar to him as the first. 'Gregory Temple?' he said aloud, searching his memory. 'Christopher Mulholland . . .?'

'Such charming boys,' a voice behind him answered, and he turned and saw his landlady walking into the room carrying the tea tray in front of her.

'They sound somehow familiar,' he said.

'They do? How interesting.'

'I'm almost positive I've heard those names before somewhere. Isn't that strange? Maybe it was in the newspapers. They weren't famous in any way, were they? I mean, famous footballers or something like that?'

'Famous,' she said, setting the tray down on the low table in front of the sofa. 'Oh no, I don't think they were famous. But they were extraordinarily handsome, both of them, I can promise you that. They were tall and young and handsome, my dear, just exactly like you.'

Once more, Billy glanced down at the book. 'Look here,' he said, noticing the dates. 'This last entry is over two years old.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, indeed. And Christopher Mulholland's is nearly a year before that – more than *three* years ago.'

'Oh dear,' she said, shaking her head. 'I never would have thought it. How time flies away from us all, doesn't it, Mr Wilkins?'

'It's Weaver,' Billy said. 'W-E-A-V-E-R.'

'Oh, of course it is!' she cried, sitting down on the sofa. 'How silly of me. I do apologize.'

'Do you know something that's extraordinary about all this? Both those names, Mulholland and Temple, I not only seem to remember each one separately but they appear to be connected as well. As if they were both famous for the same sort of thing, if you see what I mean.'

'Well, come over here now, dear, and sit down beside me on the sofa and I'll give you a nice cup of tea and a biscuit before you go to bed.'

Billy watched her as she busied herself with the cups and saucers. He noticed that she had small, white, quickly moving hands, and red fingernails.

'I'm almost positive I saw them in the newspapers,' Billy said. 'I'll think of them in a second. I'm sure I will.'

There is nothing more annoying than a thing like this which remains just outside one's memory. He hated to give up.

'Now wait a minute,' he said. 'Wait just a minute. Mulholland ... Christopher Mulholland ... wasn't *that* the name of the schoolboy who was on a walking tour through the West Country, and then suddenly ...'

'Milk?' she said. 'And sugar?'

'Yes, please. And then suddenly ...?'

'Schoolboy?' she said. 'Oh no, my dear, that can't possibly be right because *my* Mr Mulholland was certainly not a schoolboy when he came to me. He was a university student. Come over here now and sit next to me and warm yourself in front of this lovely fire. Come on. Your tea's all ready for you.'

He crossed the room slowly, and sat down on the edge of the sofa. She placed his teacup on the table in front of him.

'There we are,' she said. 'How nice and comfortable this is, isn't it?'

Billy started drinking his tea. She did the same. For half a minute, neither of them spoke but Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half-turned towards him and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him from over her teacup. Now and again he caught a peculiar smell that seemed to come from her direction. It wasn't unpleasant, and it reminded him – well, he wasn't quite sure what it was. New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital?

'Mr Mulholland loved his tea,' she finally said. 'I've never seen anyone in my life drink as much tea as dear, sweet Mr Mulholland.'

'I suppose he left fairly recently,' Billy said.

'Left?' she said. 'But my dear boy, he never left. He's still here. Mr Temple is also here. They're on the third floor, both of them together.'

Billy put down his cup slowly on the table, and stared at his landlady. She smiled back at him and then put out one of her white hands and patted him comfortingly on the knee.

'How old are you, my dear?' she asked.

'Seventeen.'

'Seventeen!' she cried. 'Oh, it's the perfect age! Mr Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a little shorter than you are – in fact I'm sure he was. And his teeth weren't *quite* so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr Weaver. Mr Temple was a little older. He was actually twenty-eight. I wouldn't have guessed it, though, if he hadn't told me. There wasn't a *mark* on his body.'

'A what?' Billy said.

'His skin was *just* like a baby's.'

There was a pause. Billy picked up his teacup, drank some more and then put it down again in its saucer. He waited for her to say something else but she seemed to have fallen into another of her silences. He sat there, looking ahead, biting his lower lip.

'That parrot,' he said at last. 'You know something? It completely fooled me when I looked through the window from the street. I thought it was alive.'

'Sadly, no longer.'

'It's very clever the way it's been stuffed,' he said. 'It doesn't look at all dead. Who did it?'

'I did.'

'You did?'

'Of course,' she said. 'And have you met my little Basil as well?'

She nodded towards the dog curled up so comfortably in front of the fire. Billy looked at it. Suddenly he realized that this animal had all the time been as silent and motionless as the parrot. He touched it gently on the top of its back. It was hard and cold but perfectly preserved.

'Good heavens,' he said. 'How very interesting. It must be awfully difficult to do a thing like that.'

'Not at all,' she said. 'I stuff *all* my little pets myself when they die. Will you have another cup of tea?'

'No, thank you,' Billy said. The tea tasted faintly bitter and he didn't really like it.

'You did sign the book, didn't you?'

'Oh, yes.'

'That's good. Because later, if I forget what you were called, then I can always look it up. I still do that every day with Mr Mulholland and Mr . . . Mr . . .'

'Temple,' Billy said. 'Gregory Temple. Excuse me for asking, but haven't there been *any* other guests here except them in the last two or three years?'

Holding her teacup high in one hand, moving her head slightly to the left, she looked at him out of the corners of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile.

'No, my dear,' she said. 'Only you.'

The Vicar's Pleasure

Mr Boggis was driving the car slowly, leaning back comfortably in the seat with one elbow resting on the open window. How beautiful the countryside is, he thought; how pleasant to see signs of summer again.

He took one hand off the wheel and lit a cigarette. The best thing now, he told himself, would be to drive to the top of the hill. He could see it about a kilometre ahead. And that must be the village at the top of it.

He drove up the hill and stopped the car just before the top of the hill on the outskirts of the village. Then he got out and looked round. Down below, the countryside was spread out in front of him like a green carpet. Perfect. He took a notebook and pencil from his pocket, leaned against the car and allowed his eyes to travel slowly over the landscape.

He could see one medium-sized farmhouse over on the right. There was another larger one beyond it. There was a house surrounded by tall trees that looked rather old, and there were two possible farms away on the left. Five places in all.

Mr Boggis drew a quick sketch in his book showing the position of each so that he'd be able to find them easily when he was down below, then he got back into the car and drove up through the village to the other side of the hill. From there he saw six more possibles – five farms and a big white eighteenth-century house. He studied the house carefully. It looked very grand. That was a pity. He excluded it immediately. There was no point in visiting the rich.

In this area then, there were ten possibles in all. Ten was a nice number, Mr Boggis told himself. Just the right amount for a relaxing afternoon's work. He decided to take the old house with