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The Landlady

by Garf Collins

I approached Henley with a sense of unease. It was my first visit for two years since I had been working there full time. Because I was early, I settled down in a riverside café with a coffee. As I watched the pleasure boats making their way along the Thames, I thought of my time at the Riverside Cottage guest house. There were two of us staying during the week. The other, Dr Savage, I rarely saw and had no idea what he did. The landlady, Pamela Wilding, was a woman perhaps in her mid-forties but still attractive in a matronly sort of way. Somehow, I had guessed that there was something in her past she didn't want to talk about, so I never enquired and it seemed right not to tell her much of my own circumstances, either, beyond telling her about the local company where I was working.

After my arrival, we were soon on first name terms - Pam and John. Whenever I returned from work, she would greet me with a pint of Brakspears ale. There was always a tasty meal to follow. It was a real home from home for a young man. We slipped into an easy familiarity.

“How are you this evening,” she would ask and I would reply with something trite like,

“All the better for seeing you.”

In contrast to the tranquillity of the pleasure craft still passing gently, I recalled the dramatic event which had ended my sybaritic existence with Pam. One evening, after I had been working on some papers in the lounge, I said to her,

“I’ve had a hard day. I think I need to get a good night’s sleep. Got a lot on tomorrow.”

“OK. I’ll bring you up a cup of herbal tea and tuck you in then.”

“Chance would be fine thing,” I replied in our usual spirit of repartee.

I was not long in bed when Pam appeared in my bedroom. She wore only a fine slip and her hair, normally in a tight bun, floated lightly about her shoulders.

“I thought we could leave the tea until later,” she said as she slipped into my bed.

I was rigid with shock as she snuggled up to me. Her hair fell about my face as she turned to kiss me and I was aware of her exotic perfume. Instantly, I realised how misguided my casual familiarity had been and I desperately thought how to extricate myself gracefully before natural urges asserted themselves. Although perhaps fifteen years older than me, here was an attractive woman stroking my chest in an arousing way. My excuse had to be good. A harsh rejection could backfire. She might accuse me of attacking her. Woman scorned sort of thing. Then, what could I tell my new girlfriend and would she believe me?

I could think of no easy way out and was almost on the point of giving in and taking the consequences, when there was a shout,

“Fire. Fire,” from down-stairs. Pam rushed out. I dragged my trousers on and ran down. There were flames around the kettle and Dr Savage was running around shouting,

“Where’s the fire blanket.”

He had put the electric kettle on the gas stove by mistake. The alarming yellow flames around the base of the kettle were easily doused in the sink. Soon Pam, once more in landlady mode, was busily cleaning up and trying to banish the smell of burnt plastic.

I left her house the next day and heard nothing further from Pam except a bill for a month’s notice.

The boats were still gently passing the café but my mind was far from tranquil after remembering that traumatic night. With a few minutes still before my meeting, I tried to relax by reading a local paper someone had left on my table. In the announcement section a name jumped out at me and I read;

*‘Dr Brian Savage of 15a Wood Close Clapham
and Mrs Pamela Wilding of Riverside Cottage
announce their engagement...’*

Wow, I thought, there’s nothing like a cup of tea to resolve a crisis and to bring people together.