

## MRS MEDHURST'S LODGER

Bill Appleton was enjoying his pint in the Six Bells. It was early afternoon and quiet now that the lunchtime crowd had gone. He had no need to hurry; he was enjoying his retirement. Suddenly he was aware of a new face in the bar. He supposed the newcomer had just come in, though he had not noticed anyone enter. Maybe he had nodded off for a few moments – it was a warm afternoon.

He did not recognize the newcomer as anyone from the village. But the village had grown so much over the past 20 years or so. Yet the stranger seemed somehow familiar, to belong to a time when it really was a village. “Well I’ll be blowed,” Bill thought, “if that ain’t Mrs Medhurst’s lodger, that was. I often wondered what had become of him.” He remembered, the stranger was always referred to as “Mrs Medhurst’s lodger”, or simply “*The Lodger*” – never as *Mr* Medhurst’s lodger. There was, of course, a Mr Medhurst, but everyone in the village knew who wore the trousers in that household!

Curiosity got the better of Bill, and he went over to join the newcomer. “Afternoon,” he said, “I hope you don’t mind me asking you, but ain’t you Mrs Medhurst’s lodger, that was?”

“Yes, indeed,” the other replied. “and I remember you, Bill Appleton. I suppose you must be retired now. I hope Mrs Appleton is well. Here, let me get you another pint.”

“Why, thank you,” said Bill, “Yes, Mrs Appleton’s well, and I’ve been retired these past three years. But it’s been a long time since you left here.”

“Two more pints of the best,” the Lodger called to the bartender. Then turning again to Bill, he said, “Twenty years, it’s been. I’ve noticed some changes since then. I see the grocery store in the High Street has gone, as well as one or two of the other shops.”

“Ah”, sighed Bill, “they built one of them Mall things in that yard that used to be behind Higgins’s; they got a supermarket there now and all sorts of other fancy shops. The village ain’t what it used to be. All sorts of folks have moved in; I hardly recognize any of ‘em now-a-days. It’s more a town than it is a village.”

“Even worse,” said the Lodger, “they don’t serve Hensham Fine Ales in the Six Bells any more!”

“No, they don’t,” said Bill with feeling. “They don’t serve Hensham Fine Ales *anywhere* any more! Soon after you left, the old brewery in Hensham was bought out by one of them big brewers – Whitbread’s, I believe it was. Within a year, they had closed it down; it wasn’t “commercially viable” they said. Commercially piffle! The Hensham brewery made darned fine ales, not like the chemical muck we had afterwards.”

“Yes,” said the Lodger, “so much has changed. I almost wish I hadn’t come back. But I wanted to see the old place one more time.”

“There’s nothing of the old place to see now,” said Bill. “After you moved

out, Mrs Medhurst's mind started to go. It was slow at first, and just showed up in odd little ways that we put down to the upset over her husband. But as time went on, it became more and more obvious."

"I'm sorry to hear that," interrupted the Lodger. "She always had such a sharp mind. I don't know what Mr Medhurst would have done without her to manage things. I suppose the scandal of his crimes was too much and unhinged her. Did she blame herself for what he'd done?"

"I don't rightly know," said Bill. "He never amounted to much, did he? Or so we thought. Just went to work each day at the brewery in Hensham, and hardly spoke to any of us villagers in all the years he lived here. Why, he was even quiet and sullen as a boy; always kept himself to himself, he did."

"Yes," said the Lodger, "in the five years I lodged there, I don't suppose he said more than two or three words to me. I hardly knew he existed; it was clear who was the boss. When he was home, he used to spend a lot of time in that potting shed of his."

"Yes, and we didn't know what he kept tidily tucked away in that shed!" said Bill.

"No," continued the Lodger. "I think she just liked him out of the way, but somewhere where she knew exactly where he was. It's a wonder she never searched the shed, though."

"I don't suppose she imagined there'd be anything hidden there. She could see what he was up to, so she thought. And under her direction he kept the garden neat and tidy."

"Almost as spotless as she kept the house," laughed the Lodger. "But she was a very good cook. She looked after me well enough."

"That's as may be", said Bill. "but as for him, she had come to despise him, you know, for being so weak. And I know from my missus that she blamed him because they had no children. 'His seed is as feeble as he is,' she'd say. And I dare say she was right. They were a rum lot, the Medhursts. They'd been here for centuries, some say, but he was the last of the line. The ones I knew when I was a young'un were all odd. It was said there'd been too much inbreeding in that family."

"Well," said the Lodger, "Mr Medhurst was certainly weird: sullen, silent, as you say, and, as we learnt, a killer too. To think it had been going on even before I had moved in."

"Yes," said Bill, "they reckon he'd been at it for some thirty years before he was caught. Just an odd murder here or there, perhaps one or two, maybe three, a year. No one knows for certain. And being the delivery driver for the brewery allowed him to move around and get to know all the villages across the county, and quite a few beyond. He picked his victims carefully – those who were not likely to be missed, leastways not missed straightaway, and people who might have left the village for all anyone knew."

"And," interrupted the Lodger, "he got to know all the best places for

disposing the bodies. He must have planned each killing extremely carefully. It seems he simply got pleasure from the detailed planning and the killing. Ugh, it makes you shiver to think about it.”

“That it does,” agreed Bill. “He must have got some satisfaction from reading about them as well. They found newspaper cuttings carefully stored and hidden away in his shed. But they showed, so I heard, only some twenty or so reports of bodies being discovered; there were some dozen or more reports of missing persons. I believe one or two of their bodies have been discovered since then. But they do reckon that there are others that never got a newspaper report.”

“And to think nobody had the slightest suspicion,” interrupted the Lodger, “least of all Mrs Medhurst.”

“Ah,” said Bill. “he was a crafty devil; you have to give ‘im that. I reckon she was annoyed that Medhurst had dared to do anything off his own bat, and ashamed that she had not discovered what he had been up to right at the start! Though I don’t think she blamed herself for the way he acted – quite the opposite, I should think – but I do reckon she took it very badly that she had not stopped him and had allowed all these other people to die.”

“No wonder her mind went,” said the Lodger.

“Yes,” said Bill. “In the end she had no memory at all of her husband or of her life as an adult. She was back again as a little girl. We were worried about her; and well we should’ve been. One day the house went up in flames. Some say she did it on purpose and wanted to kill herself. But why? She had only pleasant memories by that time. If you ask me, it was an accident – a little girl, so to speak, playing with matches. But we rescued her. She spent her last years in the Old People’s home they’ve built round at Frencham’s Corner. She was happy enough there.”

“I’m glad to she was happy in the end,” said the Lodger. “So there’s only ruins there now, then?”

“No”, answered Bill. “It’s true it was left in ruins for a time. Some people said the place was cursed, others that it was haunted. I don’t suppose anyone who knew its history would feel comfortable living there at any rate. But it got bought by one of them big companies, and now they’re going build an office block there. They started clearing the ground last week.”

“Oh,” said the Lodger, “I see. Still, now I’m here I would just like to see the site one last time and pay my respects, so to speak, to Mrs Medhurst.”

“If that’s what you want,” said Bill. “I’ll walk along with you. I can go home that way.”

They finished their drinks and walked on round to West Street where the house had once stood. It had been near the further end of West Street. As they walked up the street, they saw quite a crowd around the building site. There were police cars there; there seemed even to be a television crew. “Quite a welcome party for me, eh?” joked the Lodger.

Bill didn't reply. He wondered what was going on. He caught sight of his wife among the crowd; she always liked to know what was happening. Bill called out to her.

"Ah, there you are, Bill. So you've come to see as well?"

"See what?" asked Bill. "What's going on?"

"Why? Ain't you heard? They found a body as they were excavating. Seems like that lodger of theirs was old Medhurst's last victim."

"But..." began Bill, turning to the Lodger, who had vanished as suddenly as he had earlier arrived.

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