

John Caine

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'The Lodger'

by John Caine

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Through the cellophane window of the envelope, Susan could read the word Final and without opening it she knew it was the cut-off notice for the telephone account. The only other envelope laying on the faded carpet contained an opportunity, not to be missed insisted the bold blue typeface, for Mrs Susan Peters to win a week-end for two at England's premier health farm. Did they think it was flattering to be addressed as Mrs, thought Susan, or was it simply a computer error. After 46 years at the same address, even the most stubborn computers should have realised by now that she was not married.

There were no replies to her advertisement.

As she walked towards the kitchen, Susan glanced in the mahogany-framed mirror which hung slightly askew in the large, shabby hallway.

Looking back at her was an older version of the woman she believed herself to be. Certainly she could do with a week-end for two at England's premier health farm. She could always take her mother.

As if on cue, her mother called from the first floor bedroom where she lived as though under siege.

"Susan?"

The voice held a practised petulance.

'Yes mother.'

She fought to keep out the edge of irritation.

'Was that somebody at the door?'

'Only the postman.'

'The bell doesn't work.'

'He didn't ring the bell.'

Susan listened as her mother replayed the conversation in a grumbling reprise, lamenting the gradual deterioration of the house, paralleled by her own increasing infirmity.

In the cold, high ceiling kitchen, Susan dropped the two envelopes unopened onto the table, and took a mouthful of her black breakfast coffee.

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She noticed the nail varnish had not prevented the ladder in her tights from running down to the heel of her sensible shoe.

There was not time to change them. Mrs Gretchen would be waiting, glancing at her watch, anxious to be relieved from her post at the inexpensive handbag counter where Susan stood, jaws clamped in a smile, for twenty two hours each week.

'Susan!'

What on earth does she want now, thought Susan as she called back.

'Yes mother?'

'Are you going to work today?'

'Yes mother.'

She knows very well I am going to work today.

'What do I do if someone comes to see the room?'

'No one is going to come. I put it in the advertisement: write or telephone for an appointment.'

'What do I say when they phone?'

'Tell them to come in the evening, after six.'

'It gets dark before six.'

'I will be home by then.'

'Supposing someone comes when you're not home?'

'I told you, they have to make an appointment first.'

Mrs Gretchen was waiting.

'I think I've sold the python skin bag.'

It was not real python skin. All of the merchandise in the inexpensive bags' section was made from synthetic materials.

'A gentleman is coming back for it after lunch,' said Mrs Gretchen, 'I've made out a sales voucher.'

This was a practice forbidden by management, but Mrs Gretchen wanted her commission.

'I have left it in the carrier under the counter.'

'I will see to it.' said Susan.

'Have you had any replies yet?'

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Susan was sorry she had told Mrs Gretchen that they had decided to advertise for a paying guest.

'There is no rush.' said Susan, knowing that there was, if her fragile financial position was to be saved from final collapse.

She noticed him as he threaded his way through the perfume department. He was above average height, a little overweight but not fat, with an out of doors complexion.

He was heading towards her counter.

'Oh. There was another lady here before lunch. She put a bag on one side for me, a snake skin bag.'

She smiled her sales assistant's smile.

'Yes, Mrs Gretchen told me about it.' Susan reached under the counter.

The sales voucher was clipped to the top of the carrier bag, and Susan saw his name written on it in Mrs Gretchen's childish script.

'There you are Mr Harrison,' she said, putting the bag on top of the counter.

'That will be thirty seven pounds please.'

Thirty-seven pounds for a fake skin hand bag, with a thinly plated clasp that would soon shed its too bright gilt finish. Thirty-seven pounds.

Nearly enough money to pay her phone bill, thrown away on a plastic imitation that his wife would probably leave in her wardrobe, still in its wrapping paper.

Mr Harrison gave Susan a credit card.

'I am sure your wife will be pleased with it.'

'It isn't for my wife.'

Susan felt her cheeks redden.

'I am sorry....I did not mean..'

Mr Harrison smiled. 'It is a birthday present....for my sister. I am not married.'

'It is none of my business....I am very sorry.'

'There is nothing to be sorry about.'

As he signed the voucher, she noticed that his hands were clean and pink, with broad polished nails.

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Susan squeezed into the last empty seat, and took out her library book as the crowded bus lurched into the homeward bound traffic. It took nearly an hour from the town centre to reach the big old house where Susan was born, and where she now lived with her mother. She remembered what it had been like when her father was alive, and her brothers were at home. Then the house was filled with the noise of men and the startled laughter of the women. In those times, for all its size, the house seemed only just big enough. Then, there were parties, and the music leaked into passageways, and there were secret sounds from darkened rooms.

She jiggled her key in the lock, persuading it to open. As she entered the hallway her mother's voice met her, as though she was carrying on their earlier conversation.

'A man phoned, about the room.'

'What did he say?'

'He is coming tonight, at half past six.'

Susan looked at her watch. It was already twenty past.

'Why didn't you ask him to come later?'

'You told me after six.'

'I have had nothing to eat.'

'Neither have I.'

Their mutual recriminations were silenced by a knock at the door.

As Susan walked down the hallway, she could see the silhouette of a man in the frosted glass panel. She stopped at the mirror and patted her wayward hair into place. In the sudden wedge of yellow light as she opened the door, Susan saw a face that was somehow familiar.

'Good evening. I tried the bell but it doesn't seem to be working.....'

They both began to talk at once.

'Aren't you the lady.....'

'You're the snake skin bag....'

They laughed together, and Susan noticed the gap between his two front teeth, the sign of a passionate nature she had once been told.

For the second time that day she felt herself blushing.

'I have come about the room to let. I did telephone earlier...'

'Yes, my mother just told me. I am sorry...please come in, Mr Harrison.'

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Her mother's querulous voice drifted down the stairway.

'Who is it Susan?'

'It's all right mother, it's the lodger.'