

BORED AND LODGING

"NOW that plate," said the old lady, "'oo d'you think gave me that?" The young man shook his head and looked into the fire. Then he let his eyes travel slowly sideways and downwards till they rested on the book which was open on the arm of his chair farthest from his companion. It was a good book, an escape story.

"It was Mr. Kendall," said the old lady triumphantly. "Ooh, 'e was a nice man, Mr. Kendall. 'E gave me that plate. But 'e got sick and they took 'im away to 'ospital. I don't think people ought to go to 'ospital, do you?" She shot the question at him with a wild concern. He shook his head. The prisoners were tunnelling for the fifth night. Any moment the big break would begin.

"'E never came back," said the old lady. "I knew 'e wouldn't. 'Ospitals! And then 'is mother came for 'is things. Took 'em all. She never left me nothing. You'd of thought she'd leave me something, wouldn't you? . . . WOULDN'T YOU?" He nodded. "But she couldn't take that plate. Because Mr. Kendall gave it to me. 'E bought it for me special. Ooh, 'e was a nice man, Mr. Kendall."

She lapsed into silence. The fire hissed softly and the radio affirmed in muted tones that seven lonely nights made one lonely week. The old lady dozed and the young man travelled a further three yards down the tunnel. When she awoke it was with a violent start.

"Where did 'e go?"

"Who?"

"'Im that was 'ere!"

"You've been dreaming. There wasn't anyone here."

"Wasn't there? Well now, I could 'ave sworn. . . Ooh, I am an old juggins, aren't I?" She leaned forward and poked at the fire with misdirected fury. It fell apart and the flames flickered and died. Her eyes roamed vaguely round the room till they detached a large tin canister, decorated with koala bears, from the cluttered mantelshelf.

"Excuse me, but 'ave you ever been to Australia?" He shook his head with a desperate vehemence. "I come from Australia. I came across in 1894. Special offer, it was. Ten bob fare and bring your own food. All very well, I say, but 'ave you ever ate sandwiches four days old. I came for a holiday, six weeks. Then them shipping people put the fare up. They didn't ought to be allowed to do things like that, did they? DID THEY? Ten bob they said and bring your own food. That's what they said. Them shipping people didn't ought to be allowed to change it like that. I never did get back to Australia." Her eyes once again made their wandering circuit of the room.

"Now that plate over there, you see that plate, 'oo d'you think gave me that? It was Mr. Kendall . . ."

The telephone rang. The young man dived for it, but he was on the far side of the room and the old lady fumbled it from under his fingers.

"'oo? 'oo? No, I don't know nobody of that name. You must of got the wrong number. No, I never 'eard of 'im." The young man, gesticulating, tugged at her elbow, but she slapped him away wildly. "No I don't. Oh, 'e works at the Post Office, does 'e? Well,

A Short Story by S. Y. RAY

why didn't you say so in the first place. . . It's for you," she said, passing over the receiver and frowning balefully at him. When he had finished with the telephone, he turned and said slowly and very loud, "Look, my name's Cameron, Bert Cameron, see? If anyone asks for Cameron or Bert, it's me."

"Oh, it is, is it?"

"Yes it is. And I've written it down by the phone, here, see, so that you'll remember."

She said sulkily, "Well, I haven't got me glasses." Then her faded eyes twinkled at him. "Cameron, Campbell, McCannibal, it's all the same to me. I never did 'ave no truck with Scotchmen."

At nine o'clock she began to fidget round the room. "Ah, well, time for bunky-boo."

The young man settled more solidly in his chair.

"Early to bed and early to rise,

Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise."

"Look," he said aggressively, "you go to bed. I'm sitting up for a while."

"You'll put the fire out?"

"Yes."

"Ow do I know you won't go slipping out and leaving the door unlocked?"

"I won't, I promise."

She stumped off grumbling. He heard her moving through the house, her heavy footfalls punctuated by an occasional metallic grind and click. She was locking up for the night. Creak, that was the back door. Click, click, the kitchen windows: A whining groan, the kitchen door. Her footsteps paused at the living room door. He turned his head and saw for a moment her suspicious gnome-like face peering in at him from the semi-darkness of the hall. Then with incredible suddenness the door slammed to and the turning of a key ground the lock into place.

He jumped from his chair, hurled himself across the room, twisted the handle futilely and hammered on the door, shouting. A distant grumbling from the bedroom was the only answer and when it arose to a sharp squeal of alarm, he desisted and returned to the fireside. He opened the wood cupboard and piled all the logs that were in it on to the heap of dying embers and soon the structure was laced through with lively flames. He pulled the armchairs to face each other at an angle to the hearth, settled himself in one and put his feet up on the other, and for three hours suffered gloriously with the escapees to the borders of Switzerland.

When the fire had at last subsided into ash, he switched off the light and,



"He caught the closing door and shouted, 'I work in the Post Office'"

following a routine that had become familiar, but not stale, since he first took board with the old lady three weeks previously, he opened the empty wood cupboard and wriggled into it. With his pocket knife he forced back the outer latch and slid like a snake into the cold damp garden. He rummaged behind the abutlon for a benzine box which he had concealed there, and with its help scaled the garden trellis which separated him from his bedroom window. He felt the usual sense of exhilaration as he scrambled along the passion vine leaves and dropped on to the soft earth below. But that night an errant branch from a near-by rose tree interrupted his fall and ripped a three-cornered tear in his sports trousers.

"No, it's too much," he thought as he heaved himself across the window-sill into his own room—he had long ago taken the precaution of removing the window lock. "No, it's beyond a joke. I shall have to leave." He darned the tear unsuccessfully and slept sound in the resolution that the next day he, too, would break for freedom.

At breakfast the old lady said, "There was a man round 'ere last night. I 'eard 'im. 'E needn't think I didn't. I would of rung the police if I could of found me glasses."

"It was me," he told her. "You locked me in the sitting-room."

"Ooooh," said the old lady, "Ooooh, I never did. I wouldn't do a thing like that. 'Ow did you get out, them windows are nailed."

He returned her stare, not giving ground. "That's my secret."

That day he searched the Accommodation to Let column of the local newspaper and found two seeming possibilities. One, in a general way, offered bed and breakfast, moderate tariff, while the other, more specific, announced that a friendly home-from-home awaited a respectable young man, non-drinker.

He visited the first address in his lunch hour. It was a great pretentious house of an earlier age, its ugly dignity degraded by the addition of many lean-tos and out-houses. In the hallway, a stark black notice shouted that guests must not use radios in their bedrooms. The landlady showed him round. She had laddered stockings and an improbable coiffure. Her mouth was as red as a letter-box, hard, square and smiling. The notice in the bathroom said that guests must not occupy the room for more than fifteen minutes. The notice in the passage said that guests must not leave the lights burning. The notice in the bedroom she offered said that guests must not be late for meals, that guests must not have visitors after 9.30 p.m., that guests must not run radiators from the light sockets. It was as though a shower of notices had blown through the house and had adhered to every vacant space. The landlady spoke in the same jargon: guests must be out of their rooms by 9.0 a.m., must not bring liquor on to the premises, must not use the iron for more than one half-hour weekly, must not wash clothes in the bathroom.

At five o'clock he caught a bus to an outlying suburb and inspected the home-from-home. "We're just ordinary folk, Mr. Cameron. . . Bert—I can call you Bert, can't I?—I'm sure we'll—SANDRA, GIVE OVER HITTING DAVID—make you very comfortable. You must take us as you find us—WAYNE, PUT DOWN THE GENTLEMAN'S HAT THIS MINUTE—but we're real homey. We'll treat you just like one of the family—GLENYS, LEAVE THE DOORBELL ALONE, I'LL GIVE YOU SUCH A HIDING."

It was nearly seven when he again rang the doorbell of the old lady's house. The bell echoed into silence three times before her face popped gnome-like from the door half-opened.

"'E don't live here."

He relaxed with a sweet sense of home-coming.

"It's me. I'm sorry I'm late."

She stared wildly. "'Oo are you?"

"It's me, Bert Cameron."

"Never 'eard of 'im."

He caught the closing door with his hand and shouted, "I work in the Post Office."

"Oh, it's you, is it? Well, why didn't you say so!"

He walked happily into the house.

She had kept his dinner—sausages, potatoes and cauliflower, with stewed prunes to follow. The cauliflower was garnished with sweet vanilla custard, and white sauce was piled plentifully on the prunes.

"Ooooh, no," said the old lady, "ooh, no, I'd never do that. 'Ere, let's 'ave a taste. . . Well, I am an old juggins. That'll teach-me a darn good lesson. I won't do that again in a hurry."

He sat before the fire, tired, hungry and not altogether discontented.

"YOU see that plate," said the old lady, "'oo d'you think gave me that?"

He allowed his eyes to become dreamy and fixed. "That plate . . . that plate. . . I see a man, a nice man . . . but he is unfortunate . . . he has a selfish mother . . . and there is worse. He goes

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