

FINDING MR GOLDMAN

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A parable



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To Rosie

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Part 1

Paradise lost



Had he known the hour of his death, Harry Goldman might have arranged his day rather differently. He might have made one or two phone calls to say goodbye to friends. And several more to make peace with his enemies.

If it had been in his nature, he might have said a grateful farewell to Johnson, his long-suffering butler, and perhaps given a small leaving gift to each of the staff at the big house.

On such a beautiful morning, he might have taken a stroll through the gardens with their neat gravel paths that were raked each day. He might even have admired the roses, which happened to be particularly fine that year.

But he did none of those things. Instead he went to church, which was most unusual considering it was a Thursday and Goldman detested religion. It was ironic, people said later, in view of the events about to unfold.

The day began with breakfast on the terrace: black coffee served in an elegant silver pot and slices of toast. The *Financial Times* had been placed carefully on a side table within easy reach, together with a printout of the night's Far East trading figures.

Goldman sipped his coffee and glanced thoughtfully at the financial reports. The Hang Seng Index was higher. Commodities were doing better than expected. It was all very satisfactory.

'Is he still there?' he said without looking up.

'I'm afraid so,' said Johnson with a quiet dignity, as though commenting on a matter of private grief.

'Well, sort the bastard out,' snapped Goldman. 'And do it properly this time. It's his last chance. Make sure he knows that.'

Johnson bowed and withdrew silently.

Paradise lost

Goldman brushed a crumb from his dark grey Savile Row suit and adjusted his blue silk tie, his plump fingers hesitating for a moment on the soft fabric. For some reason he never felt entirely comfortable in his expensive clothes. It was as though they belonged to someone else.

The butler walked slowly and deliberately down the long gravel drive. The morning sun was warm on his grey hair. It was going to be another hot day – hot enough for a storm. ‘You’re going to get it today, sonny boy,’ he muttered to himself. ‘You’re really going to get it.’

In the distance, across the lawns, he saw a security guard with a Dobermann on a leash patrolling the perimeter wall. The guard glanced towards the butler but gave no sign of greeting or recognition. The dog and its handler made Johnson uneasy.

As he neared the wrought-iron gates he took a small control pad from his pocket and pressed a button. The gates swung silently open. Stepping into the lane, Johnson confronted a tramp sitting with his back against one of the large stone gateposts. Beside him was a stick cut from a tree branch.

The tramp looked up, shading his eyes against the bright sunlight. ‘Good morning,’ he said cheerily. ‘How are you today?’

The butler ignored the question. ‘Are you going to push off?’ he demanded. ‘This is your last chance.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said the tramp with an amiable smile.

‘Then you’re going to get a good hiding,’ said Johnson irritably. He grabbed the stick and began to beat him about the head and shoulders. The tramp rolled over in the grass trying to dodge the blows.

Eventually the butler threw the stick down and stood back, wheezing from the exertion. ‘The boss says he wants you gone,’ he said. ‘And so do I. Why can’t you stop this nonsense? You make the place look untidy, coming here every day like this.’

‘I’ll go,’ said the tramp, rubbing his head where the last blows had landed, ‘but not until I’ve seen him. I’ve told you, there’s something important he needs to know. The way things are going, your boss is heading for trouble.’

‘You know nothing about his affairs,’ the butler said, ‘and what he does is absolutely no concern of yours. He’ll see you in hell before

he lets you across his doorstep, so get that into your thick head and go away. Then we can all have some peace.' He paused. 'Who are you, anyway?'

'Sheppard,' said the tramp. 'And according to people like your boss, I'm just a nobody.'

'Well, listen, Sheppard, here's a fiver – just take it and get lost. For my sake,' he added, a note of desperation in his voice.

'Sorry, Johnson, but it's not as straightforward as that. And your fiver's not the money I'm interested in. Though I do appreciate the gesture.' The tramp got to his feet and picked up the stick. 'You can tell him I'm going.'

'And you're not coming back?'

'What do you think?'

'I think you're a young fool. One day something serious is going to happen if you carry on making him angry like this.'

'What's he going to do – have me arrested?'

'The boss doesn't need the police. He's got his own way of dealing with people like you. Unpleasant ways. So, unless you can run faster than a Dobermann, you'd better go away and stay away.'

'You know, I almost think you care about me,' said the tramp with a smile. 'Maybe you're not such a bad guy after all.'

The butler glanced anxiously at the security camera on the gatepost and stepped closer to Sheppard. 'Listen,' he said in a low voice. 'The boss has cameras everywhere, so I had to make it look as though I was hitting you good and hard, or I'd be in trouble myself. That man's got a mean temper, believe me. That's why I'm telling you to go away. It's for your own good. How old are you? Thirty? Thirty-five? I've got a son your age. You've got your life in front of you. Do yourself a favour; go and get a job or something. I tell you, the boss is the wrong person to mess with.'

'And there was me thinking you didn't hit me so hard because you're an old man and past it,' said Sheppard.

'Old?' snapped the butler. 'Come back here tomorrow and you'll find out how hard I can hit. Listen, I'm being serious, the boss is bad news for people like you.'

‘Johnson, believe me, I do take it seriously – but whether I’ll be back tomorrow or not remains to be seen.’

As he spoke, a small red car crunched softly down the drive and out into the lane. In it were two young women with heavy make-up. They were dressed as though they had been to a party. A wild party.

‘Looks as though your boss was having a good time last night. He certainly likes his creature comforts,’ said Sheppard as he glimpsed a low-cut dress and bare flesh through the open car window.

‘Don’t even go there,’ muttered Johnson.

‘No, perhaps not,’ said the tramp with a grin. ‘Anyway, you take care of yourself.’ He walked off down the lane, limping slightly as he went.

The butler stood watching until he was out of sight. Suddenly his phone rang.

‘Are you going to be all day?’ said a rasping voice. ‘Get back here. I need the car.’

Johnson sighed wearily. He was not sure which car Mr Goldman wanted today. Maybe the Bentley again?

When he got back to the house Goldman was on the phone. An international call. The phone was on speaker and Goldman paced about the room, shouting instructions. ‘Just get rid of them, Atkins, and do it soon,’ he yelled. ‘Clear the bastards out.’

A distant voice responded from the phone console. ‘That’s not going to be easy, Mr Goldman. We’re talking about whole villages. Where are we going to put these people? There are hundreds of them with nowhere to go.’

‘I don’t care how many of them there are,’ shouted Goldman. ‘Just clear them out. Use the heavy gear. Get the bulldozers in. We need that land and we need it now.’

Johnson withdrew discreetly to the other side of the room and busied himself rearranging the magazines on a coffee table, trying to avoid eye contact with his boss.

Atkins, their head of operations in South America, spoke again. ‘We also have an issue with publicity, Mr Goldman. And there’s another problem. There’s a nun.’

‘What the hell do you mean, a nun?’

‘She’s stirring things up with the peasants. Going on about human rights. Talking to a TV crew that’s hanging around. It’s not going to look good in the press.’

‘I don’t care about the press, Atkins. All I care about is that land, and I’m not going to be messed around by a bunch of natives and a blasted nun. I want the land cleared. I don’t care who lives on it; I want them out. And that includes Mother bloody Teresa. Make it happen, Atkins, or it’ll be you that’s out. Got that?’

‘We’ll certainly try, sir,’ said the voice on the phone.

‘Try?’ yelled Goldman. ‘You’ll do more than try, you moron. You’ll fix it, or I’ll fix you. I made you and I can damn well break you. Remember that.’ He leaned over the large mahogany desk and stabbed a button on the phone console. The line went dead before Atkins could reply.

Goldman turned and kicked out savagely at a chair. It crashed backwards onto the carpet. For a few moments he stood breathing heavily like an enraged bull, perspiration glistening on his forehead. Gradually, his breathing steadied and he seemed calmer.

‘Huh,’ he mumbled as though coming out of a bad dream. ‘Useless fool.’ He glanced at his watch. For a moment he hesitated, as though a thought had struck him. Then he was himself again.

‘Has Henshaw brought the car round?’ he demanded.

‘At the door, Mr Goldman,’ said Johnson from across the room.

‘Good. I’m going to be out all day.’ He paused. ‘In fact, now I think about it, you may as well come too. We’re going to church,’ he said with an unexpected smile. ‘And after that I’ve a meeting in the City.’

His anger had subsided as quickly as it had appeared, but Johnson knew better than to assume his employer would stay in a good mood.

The butler looked puzzled. Church was not a word much used in Goldman’s house – or his business empire, come to that.

‘A small public relations exercise,’ said Goldman, seeing his confusion. ‘Our name in lights. In fact, better than lights.’

Johnson was none the wiser.

Paradise lost

‘We’re going to the cathedral. The dedication service of a new window. My window. Paid for by me. The window’s got a panel saying who’s donated this small piece of English history. My name will be up there for a thousand years.’ Goldman savoured the thought. ‘A very satisfactory arrangement. The Dean gets a donation to his cathedral funds, and I get my name on one of the prime sites in the country. The house of God.’

* * *

As with most things Mr Goldman set his mind to, the morning went exactly to plan.

While he was inside the cathedral at the brief dedication service and the reception afterwards in the medieval chapter house, Johnson stood chatting with Henshaw in the car park. The chauffeur pulled out a packet of cigarettes and offered one to the butler.

Johnson shook his head. ‘He’ll have a fit if he catches you.’

‘Evil little swine,’ said Henshaw, lighting up. He drew deeply on the cigarette, savouring the effect of the nicotine, then blew the smoke down both nostrils.

‘He’s not so little,’ replied Johnson. ‘It’s the way he walks. Stooping, as though there’s something wrong with his spine.’

‘That’s because he’s always reaching out, grasping for more money. Grabbing at everything he can get his greedy hands on. Hunchback of Tresco Towers, that’s him,’ said Henshaw. ‘I hate his sort.’

‘You could always leave,’ said Johnson.

Henshaw pulled strongly on the cigarette. ‘Yes? And where am I going to get another job at my age? Or you, come to that? No, mate, we’re stuck with the bastard.’

The conversation was interrupted by voices as Goldman emerged from the chapter house and made his farewells.

‘Blast,’ muttered Henshaw, hurriedly treading his cigarette into the ground and putting his chauffeur’s peaked cap back on. He opened the rear door of the Bentley ready for Goldman, saluting as his employer approached.

Goldman strode up and held out his hand.

'Sir?' said Henshaw, confused.

'You know what.'

Henshaw silently handed over the cigarettes and lighter.

'And the car keys,' snarled Goldman. 'You're sacked.'

'Sir?'

'And I'll have your fancy hat and jacket as well,' said Goldman, a vein throbbing in his temple. Goldman passed the keys to Johnson. 'Drive,' he said.

'But what about me, sir?' pleaded Henshaw.

'What about you, sir? You can damn well walk.'

Goldman got into the back of the car and slammed the heavy door. It gave a satisfying 'clunk' as it closed, sealing him off from the outside world. Relaxing in the soft leather upholstery of the Bentley as it cruised through the lush countryside, Goldman forgot about the incident with Henshaw. Instead he was thinking about the cathedral and its very patrician Dean.

A kindred spirit, he reflected. A man of the world. A man who appreciated money and power. A man on the inside. A man who might be useful.

It had all gone very well. Except for the realization that it was the first time he had been inside a church since his wedding. He thought back to his brief marriage to Trudi, the confident New Yorker he had met on a business trip to the States; their few months of happiness. Perhaps pleasure would have been a better word.

In her teens she had trained at ballet school, and twenty years later still walked with the easy grace of a dancer. She had skin that glowed and a body that aroused desire among men and envy in women. Goldman had been proud to be seen in her company. They had been good together. At first.

Then, gradually, it began to fall apart. Trudi was always on about going home to Manhattan.

'Harry, I'm sick of this English weather,' she complained. 'Nothing but rain and fog. And this goddam house, stuck out here in the middle of nowhere. I'm a city girl, Harry. I like dancing. I need action. All we got round here is fields and cows. And the only person

Paradise lost

I get to talk to is the cleaner woman. Sometimes I think she's the only one who really cares about me. And you – you don't really love me, Harry. All you care about is money. It's like I'm married to a machine. I don't know what makes you this way, but it's drivin' me nuts.'

Being pregnant only made matters worse, and it certainly took the edge off sex – although that had always tended to be unsatisfying.

'I feel fat, Harry. And my back. Jeez, my back aches real bad. I wanna go home, Harry. I need my mom.'

For Goldman the thrill of being married to a beautiful, leggy blonde faded into normality; then soured into resentment. At five foot ten she was a good inch taller than him. At first they'd laughed about it but Goldman, who felt short and plump in comparison, hated looking up to anyone.

Finally, Trudi got her own way. She went home to Mom and never returned. The child, a boy, was born in New York. But by then they were drifting silently out of each other's lives.

The birth brought back bitter memories of his own childhood – memories he struggled to forget. Memories that sometimes crept up on him in the night, slipping silently into his dreams, even after all those years.

Goldman never set eyes on this small bringer of fear, and had no wish to. In any case, it was her child. She wanted it: she could damn well keep it. Once she sent him a photograph. A baby in a cot covered with a blue blanket. Blue for a boy. On the back she had written just two words: 'Your Son.'

Her handwriting was strong and stylish – just like her. He ripped the photograph up and threw it in the wastepaper basket. One piece of the picture fell on the carpet, but he did not notice.

Later that day, when Goldman had gone to dinner, the cleaner emptied the wastepaper basket and saw the torn fragment on the floor. She picked it up and studied it thoughtfully for a moment. She sighed softly to herself, then carried on with the cleaning.

That night, when the dreams were bad again, Goldman woke and went back to retrieve the torn-up photograph, but the wastepaper basket was empty.

Six months later came the letter. It was postmarked New York. In it was a plain white card with the words: 'Our baby died. Cot death. Trudi.' The handwriting was clear and confident and gave no indication of her grief.

He had not replied. She was no longer of use to him and so he had no interest in her. The parting of the ways had been sudden and complete. In the absence of any further domestic complications, Goldman turned his attention back to the world of business and finance. The place where he belonged.

Now it was as it had been before they met. Straightforward.

Goldman glanced out of the car window at the passing countryside. He had thought all that was in the past, but something in the cathedral had caught him unawares. For a moment the calm of the ancient building had felt chill, as though his sleeve had been gently tugged by an unseen hand.

Goldman shook his head to clear his mind of such thoughts. His phone rang. It was Atkins again.

Johnson stared ahead through the windscreen, pretending to be unaware of Goldman's anger as he bellowed at their man in South America.

'She what? How can she be? I only spoke to you a few hours ago. Who told the damn fools to kill her?' He paused while Atkins spoke. 'Well, that's your problem, not mine,' snapped Goldman. 'I never told you to do that. You fix it with the press. I want results and I don't care how you get them.'

Goldman tossed the phone down on the seat beside him. He gave a low growl. Atkins was dead meat. And he wasn't the only one. Goldman felt the anger rising within him. The anger made him strong; made him dangerous.

He thought about the meeting in the City. Two more hours and yet another company would be his. Their board of directors would scream and shout, but the bastards were screwed, and they knew it. The takeover battle had been brutal and bloody. Like two wrestlers fighting it out in the ring, grappling and gouging until the stronger triumphs. The weaker one submits; the struggle is over.

