

The First Table

Clive F Sorrell

As he entered the village hall the cloying atmosphere of Chanel, Lancôme, Dior and Poundsavers finest perfumes drowned the light fragrance of his aftershave. Table number four had been allocated to him at the door but on gazing at the curious faces that had all turned to look him over he knew that the first table he wanted most was seven.

She was a shapely brunette with a classic pre-Raphaelite face and she sat with long, delicate fingers interlaced on her lap. She presented a mirror-image of Proserpina by the artist Rossetti and it only needed one glance to know she personified that poet's ideal.

He looked for table four and saw a colourfully made-up woman spilling out of a low-cut polka-dot dress. Unlike table seven this woman was Lucien Freud's ideal model and he checked the number again before surrendering to ten minutes of banal chitchat.

'Hello dear, I'm Daphne and I work in Dorothy Perkin's underwear,' she said by way of introduction and he smiled inwardly at her amusing pun and the image that sprang to mind.

‘What’s yours, handsome?’ she asked as she watched him sit down. Her eyes were slowly widening and her ruby-tipped fingers were opening and closing like the claws of the rather plump cat that stalked his bird table last winter. He was tempted to break the ice by saying a very large brandy, please but instead mumbled, ‘Roger,’ and then found he was lost for words.

‘So you’re the famous lodger, Roger?’ She whinnied at her own joke and her large bosom quivered dangerously beneath the blue and white polka dots.

‘Not quite, Daphne, I’m a banker,’ he replied whilst unkindly thinking *they must at least be five on the Richter scale*. He guiltily looked towards the more desirable figure sitting at table seven.

‘So, if you’re not Roger the lodger then you must be the banker who’s a – ’

‘An investment banker,’ he said hurriedly. The tone of their conversation had started at an undesirably low level and he looked askance at the dream that was sitting so close and yet so far away.

With the back of her hand Proserpina was brushing a raven lock of hair from her face as she listened politely to the eager young man who sported a scruffy beard and a checkered Palestinian keffiyeh wound round his neck.

‘What’s one of those then, Roger?’ Daphne asked. Startled, he looked back and noticed for the first time the small hairs on her upper lip. ‘What’s a broker do for a crust?’ She grinned frivolously and he yearned for Proserpina’s smile that so far as he could see was wasted on the refugee from the LSE.

Roger felt an urgent need to move on and began talking fast to explain the intricate facts of high finance in the City until Daphne’s eyes assumed a glassy stare. Thankfully, the bell rang brassily to announce the end of the first session and his embarrassment. The buzz of conversation ceased abruptly and, as one, the men stood up, thanked their partners, glanced nervously at each other and then moved on to the next table.

‘Nice to meet you, Roger.’ Lucien Freud’s masterpiece gave a wink as he stood up. ‘If we meet again and you can tell me all about banking.’ She whinnied and her shoulders shook, greatly threatening the security of her décolletage.

He swallowed hard and hurried to the next table to be confronted by a studious twenty-something reading a well-thumbed copy of *Animal Farm*. Her fingernails were bitten down to the quick and horn-rimmed glasses magnified her

dark eyes to an alarming size that stared up at him with a frightening intensity. They were unlike the glimpse he had had of Proserpina's heavenly, turquoise eyes.

'Hello,' he said nervously. 'My name's Roger.'

She leant forward to peer at the cheap plastic label on his lapel. 'That's pretty obvious considering your name tag says "Roger".' She pointed at the label pinned to her paint-daubed denim gilet. 'Now try my literacy test.'

'Good evening, Dalis,' he said and leant back to await her next salvo of sarcasm.

'It's a Russian name y'know and it means Long Live Lenin and Stalin. My parents stupidly christened me Melissa because they thought the name of a mythological princess or Greek goddess suited me when I was puking and shitting eleven times a day.'

'And doesn't it?' he said while thinking only one woman in the hall could lay claim to being a Greek goddess.

'Far from it. I believe in solidarity with the working people and totally disagree with this piece of crap.' She waved the paperback under his nose 'Orwell's attack on communist principles is a fatuous fabrication of lies.' Roger started to say something but focused instead on the small piece of Elastoplast wrapped round the bridge of her glasses as he thought of how a perfect woman would have a passion for the purple prose of Shelley.

'Did you know the original title was *Animal Farm. A Fairy Story*?' He shook his head and Dalis started lecturing on how British politics should move to the left to solve every social and economic problem of the nation.

The bell called time and he weakly smiled, thanked Dalis *nee* Melissa, and moved on to table six to find a rosy-faced woman wearing a paisley cardigan over a floral shift dress. The clicking knitting needles were a blur, working like a shuttle loom on something partially hidden inside a Tesco bag standing upon her lap.

She spoke with a soft brogue that was pleasant but far from the poetry of Proserpina's voice. 'I suppose I should tell you that my name is Mòrag Kinley and that I live at 23 Rober - '

He raised his hand to stop her. 'I don't think you should tell a perfect stranger anything personal, especially your address, Mòrag,' he advised and she nodded with a thankful thin-lipped smile.

'My name is Roger. Could you tell me what you're knitting?'

With a flourish Mòrag lifted the needles to pull a tiny infant dress from the *Every Little Helps* bag that had been disguising her third trimester.

'Only five weeks left,' she said, apologetically glancing up as she gently stroked the swelling with one hand before picking up the needle and looking down again to continue clicking. A large ball of pink wool fell from her lap to land soundlessly on the bare boards.

'Surely your husband objected to you coming here tonight?' Roger asked in astonishment as he bent to retrieve the pink ball. While under the table he noticed how her advanced condition had swollen her ankles.

'Now, I wouldn't be here if I had a husband, would I?' she teased. 'Surely he'd be here giving you a good skelping on the bahookie if I were merrit?' Her laugh was low and there was a playful twinkle in her eyes.

Roger also smiled. 'I think it's rather brave of you, Mòrag, to come to an evening such as this; you must tell me about yourself,' he said while thinking, *I've just got my own brood out of the house, I don't have the strength to start again.*

For the rest of the session he listened to Mòrag's tale of woe about leaving Aberdeen and taking a job in a well-known contraceptive factory where she fell in love with the works manager. One night she had taken work home with her and unfortunately they made active use of the notorious one-in-a-hundred product. When she grew larger than anything haggis, stovies, bridies and cloutie dumplings could account for the works manager went back to his wife and joined a sex toy company.

The ten-minute bell rang and Roger wished her good luck and moved to the next table. He sighed as he sat down for he was finally with Proserpina, the goddess of fertility, the beauty with turquoise eyes and a sensually mellow voice. He looked back briefly at Mòrag and shuddered. He had no wish for vomit on the shoulder and reeking nappies again and his children had grown beyond needing an old man in their double espresso and cantucci lifestyles.

'Good evening, I'm Kate.' Her voice seemed to envelope him like a warm comforting blanket that caressed all the right places.

Roger was drawn into the depths of the startling green eyes bounded by long curling lashes and the dimple in her right cheek seemed to add girlish charm to her smile. It was clear she was the same age as himself for her hairdresser had skilfully used the grey strands in the chignon hairstyle to stunning effect.

'It's a pleasure to meet you,' he stuttered. 'I'm Roger and I'm a reasonably successful investment banker in the City.' Once more he ran out of words and simply stared at the symmetry of her high cheekbones and the sensuous Cupid bow lips.

'I get the feeling you may be a very good investment, Roger,' she said softly as she leant forward to look enticingly into his brown eyes. He couldn't help noticing the signs of humour in the corners of her eyes and that her voice had lowered, affected by an unspoken emotion.

'When I saw you enter the hall I knew you would be a true gentleman and a rather good-looking one, too,' she said as each breath made the shot-silk blouse rise and fall in a manner that both excited and aroused him.

Roger's eyes flicked down to the delicate hands that were no longer in her lap but lying on the table. 'You're pretty perfect yourself,' he whispered and placed his hands on the table, inviting her to touch him. 'Have you ever been to one of these weird, alien evenings before?'

'It's my first time and to be honest I'm finding it quite stimulating.' Her hands came to rest on his and he could feel them trembling and the heat radiating from beneath her smooth skin.

'I've never done it before either but luckily I chose to do it on the one night you decided to come,' he whispered.

They both fell silent and as they looked into each other's dilating eyes her fingers began drawing secret messages on the back of his hands. He turned them over to interleave their fingers in an erotic language that was felt and understood only by them. A shoeless foot lightly touched his and Roger felt his pulse race as silk slid over his ankle and up his calf.

'Do we really need to talk to anyone else?' he croaked as she stirred his senses further with her fingers, her foot and the promise in her eyes.

Kate shook her head slightly and placing the ballot slip on the table scrawled *Roger* across the form. He took the pencil from her trembling fingers and wrote *Proserpina* on his own before standing.

Hand in hand they walked purposefully to the exit.

‘The ten minutes are not up yet,’ the organiser grumbled as the middle-aged couple dropped their ballots in the cardboard box and thereby threw her evening schedule into complete chaos.

The couple hurried out of the door and could just hear the brass bell ring for the next table change as, like a pair of love-struck teenagers, they skipped across the village green and into the cottage.

Yet another passionate night for Mr and Mrs Wilson had begun.

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