

## ROYAL NAVAL CLUB MAYFAIR

I was home from Brownsea and applying for jobs. An ad for the Royal Naval Club, Mayfair caught my eye. It should be a very swish and smart sort of place, swarming with attractive naval officers, stashed with talent.

I posted off my application thinking – *It'll be all male so they'll want a man and I won't hear anything further.* True, a month went by and I heard nothing. Then a letter came. Sure enough they had given the job to someone else but, the letter said, your qualifications and experience are so good we should like to keep your name on file.

*Oh yeah?* I thought and tore it up. A week later, a telegram. *'Please ring and reverse charges. Royal Naval Club.'* Being in the middle of a sudden attack of baking, it was an hour before I could go to the phone down the road.

"The man we appointed has quickly proved unsatisfactory," the voice said, "and I should like to see you. How soon can you get here?" It was Friday.

"Not before tomorrow," I said.

"Saturday," he said. "We close the Club at eleven. Can you be here before then?"

"Eleven in the morning?" I said, "No chance. Unless I come down tonight and stay over."

"That would be all right," he said.

"Whom do I ask for?"

"Travis." I smiled as I put the phone down. What a laugh my Brownsea boss Cornthwaite<sup>1</sup> would have at that. He had nicknamed me Servelan<sup>2</sup> and her sidekick is Travis. We watched the series avidly. But had I heard him right?

"Who?" I asked.

"Commander Travis," he replied, "as in Dave Lee." Obviously not a fan of Servelan. If I get this job Cornthwaite will split his sides laughing. He will probably laugh so much he will fall in the sea and have to be dredged out like a giant porpoise, great waves and rivulets of laughter and water spurting from his mouth.

I got the train to London, packing an overnight bag with something to wear for the evening – pretty smart, latest thing I've got, looks like a garage mechanic's overall in a very thin French navy cotton with a faint sheen to it, my black high heels with cutout toe, silver hoop earrings. Going to thrill all the naval officers, be the Darling of the Fleet!

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Cornthwaite was the Manager of Brownsea Castle

<sup>2</sup> Servelan is a character in a space drama called 'Blake's Seven'.

Got the tube to Green Park then caught a passing taxi to Hill Street. The entrance is on a corner, big, heavy plate glass doors and on the inside, a little vestibule with an old man behind a desk and a little, shrivelled old man in front of it who steps forward and clasps my hand –

“Mrs Kirkham?” He peers up at me. “I’ll take you to your room and you can freshen up. Then could you be as quick as you can and come down to dinner? The chef has a cold and wants to get off early.” I’m disappointed – I would have liked a bath.

He shows me some of the rooms in passing, saying that on the top floor are double rooms for married couples but all the rest are singles, some are known as ‘cabins’ – most intrigued when he shows me. We go through a door into what must have once been a large room and now has six cubicles, three on each side, with folding, plastic doors, containing nothing but a bed and a locker.

“For the lower ranks,” he smiles, “only eight pounds a night.” Then there are rooms without showers and at last we come to mine which is one of the best, having its own shower and toilet – but in the same room, enclosed inside a sort of cupboard arrangement – I suppose it is like they have on a ship. The room is basic – even dingy – and the cream-painted walls are covered in dirty fingermarks.

When he left and I saw the shower I didn’t much want one – dirty, cracked porcelain, filthy curtain. I changed and went down.

There were not many people around. I met Mrs Travis, a small, thin birdlike woman who showed me a couple of sitting rooms on the way to the dining room. All the carpets and upholstery were filthy with the ingrained muck of ages.

“The standard of cleaning needs to be improved,” she said and I agreed, wondering who was the housekeeper.

We went in to dinner. Apart from the Commander, who was smartly dressed in ‘civvies’ there was only one person in the dining room. Propping up the fireplace was a man who looked like an extremely ugly monkey in a blue blazer with a scruffy black beard. The waitress came to take our order. The menu was the usual boring grills and fish. But I was delighted to see Moules marinières for starters! I had to have them and they were delicious.

The main course did not appear but as the Commander was filling me in on his present manager and why he was unsatisfactory, I did not notice.

“The man has the wrong approach to the staff,” he said, “He’s sacking them at a great rate and those he doesn’t sack are leaving of their own accord because they don’t like him.”

“But is he supposed to sack staff?” I murmured.

“No, he isn’t. But he does a lot of things he isn’t supposed to do. Meat keeps disappearing from the kitchen – and I don’t mean the odd

steak – whole joints and sides of beef – not the odd packet of bacon – a whole consignment. The crunch came last weekend when I suspected for some reason he wanted me off the premises sharpish. I usually go home at weekends but for some reason he seemed particularly anxious that I shouldn't hang about. So I stayed somewhere else on Friday night and walked in here Saturday morning to find the place swarming with workmen, wood being delivered - ”

“Goodness,” I said, between mouthfuls of *moules*.

“No sign of Simpkins,”

“Simpkins?” I queried.

“Oh – the manager – that’s his name. To go on, I caught hold of a passing workman and asked him what he thought he was doing.

‘Sorry, Guv,’ he said, ‘Rush job, can’t stop to talk.’

‘You’d better stop,’ I told him, ‘And get yourself and all these others out of here.’

‘Can’t do that, Guv,’ he said, ‘Orders from Mr Simpkins to finish this job this weekend.’

‘I run this Club,’ I said, ‘Not Mr Simpkins. And I didn’t ask you to come here, so get out.’

‘But who’s going to pay?’ he said.

‘See Mr Simpkins about that,’ I said, ‘He hired you not me and I’m certainly not paying you. And they went. And I told Simpkins he’d have to go too.’”

“I should think so,” I said. “What was going on? Did you find out?”

“Oh yes, he was only going to have a breakfast bar built, in this dining room that’s been untouched since William Pitt the Younger<sup>3</sup> had the house. Do you know the slightest alteration to anything has to go through *three* committees? And he had the nerve to do that!” Verging on the apoplectic he broke off and sat in wonder at the nerve of Mr Simpkins while I surreptitiously slipped another *moule* into my mouth.

“Do you know,” he went on when sufficiently recovered to speak, “This wallpaper is the same as when Pitt had the house? Not the *same*,” he added hastily, seeing the expression on my face, “but when we had to redecorate we had paper specially made to match the original. And he thought he could build a breakfast bar over that!”

I looked up and saw, approaching the table, a short, stocky, middle-aged man – the sort who is running to flab – in an ill-fitting suit, his shirt billowing out of his trousers which were unable to cope with his spare tyre. He had a broad face, stiff black hair which had escaped control and was falling over one eye and thick, pebble-glass, black-rimmed glasses. He was smiling in an oily manner and spoke in a thick Welsh accent.

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<sup>3</sup> *William Pitt the Younger - 1759–1806*

“Sorry to trouble you, Commaander,” he said, “but Frank is having a problem with your order. He can’t understand it. Would you mind telling me what it is you want?” We do so. From the intense scrutiny he is giving me I know this must be Mr Simpkins.

“Is that . . .” I murmur as he departs.

“Yes,” says the Commander. “Don’t worry – he knows who you are and why you are here. He also knows he’s going.” We sit some more and the Commander tells me more of the history of the place. Simpkins returns.

“Frank’s still having problems,” he says, “he’s not too bright, you know,” he says, looking at me. “A good man at the stove is Frank, but not too bright up top. A pity. You can’t get the staff, you see, in London.” If you can’t get them in London, where can you, I am thinking, while being aware that all this is for my benefit. I determine not to let myself be influenced by anything Simpkins has to say. We again sit and wait, the Commander looking extremely uneasy, until Simpkins appears for the third time:

“What’s the matter now, Mr Simpkins?” he asks testily.

“Oh, nothing, Commander. Frank’s getting your order ready. But I wonder, could I trouble you for my keys which you took this morning?”

“Well, all right,” says the Commander, “but please return them. You know I want to show Mrs Kirkham the flat.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll only want them for a minute,” he says, and goes on his Welsh way.

Our main course arrives at last and we are halfway through when the waitress returns and speaks to the Commander:

“Would you mind going to speak to Mr Simpkins in the kitchen?” she asks. I wonder what is afoot now? A fit of hysterics, a plea for forgiveness? Mrs Travis and I munch on our steak and salad. It is going down a treat.

We have finished and are well into the wine when the Commander and Simpkins reappear, arguing. Simpkins saying,

“That key was on the ring when I gave you the keys this morning, Commander. Those keys are never out of my possession and now, when I give them to you, this happens.” I can’t believe my ears. Why doesn’t the Commander bite his head off? The chap is practically accusing him of removing a key from his keyring. Simpkins goes and the Commander sits down to his cold dinner. He looks upset.

“It’s the key to the cash box,” he says, “it’s missing. It’s obviously some new devilry this Simpkins is up to. You do realise,” turning to me, “that all this is for your benefit.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, “I’ve got the message.” The waitress returns and says we can’t have a sweet, they are looking for the keys to the cold room and can’t find them.

“Mr Simpkins says Frank must have gone home and taken them with him,” she finishes.

“Oh, bring the coffee, girl!” Travis says, losing his temper at last. Enter Simpkins, beaming.

“I know where that key is, Commander. I’ll tell you where it is!” He goes to the desk at the entrance to the dining room, rummages in a drawer, brings out a tin of drawing pins, opens it and triumphantly finds the key! Coming over to the table and sitting down with the cash box and a bundle of receipts, he beams across the table at me and says, “What a place this is! This is always happening to me. People take your keys off your key ring, have you looking all over the place, then tell you where it is!” It was plain as the nose on your face that he had taken the key himself, had hidden it himself and then pretended to find it. I couldn’t resist asking,

“But who told you where it was?” He sat silent, his grin fading. Then inspiration struck.

“You take the job,” he said, “and then I’ll tell you!” But the Commander was not about to let the matter rest.

“Look here, Simpkins,” he said, “if you know who took that key I want to know.”

“I couldn’t do that, Commander,” sneered Simpkins, “I couldn’t give you what might prove to be false information.”

“If you know, or even suspect, who is playing tricks like this, I want to know,” insisted the Commander, completely missing the point that it is Simpkins all the time.

“Well, if you insist,” says Simpkins reluctantly, “But you won’t believe me and when you tax him with it he’ll deny it. But it was Gordon, the Night Porter.” Collapse of Commander. This explanation is so ludicrous as to be farcical, since the Night Porter does not come on until the evening and the key has gone missing during the day.

“I’ll show you the rest of the place,” says the Commander and we get up to go.

There are two restaurants and two bars. The downstairs bar is in the process of being renovated but so anxious is Travis to show me everything that I must even inspect this, and in the dark too, for the lights don’t work. I have the wallpaper, the gilding on the ceiling, the plasterwork over the fireplace, all pointed out to me, then he makes me struggle over the rubble and lumber to the far corner and I can’t help noticing that they haven’t even taken up the carpet – no doubt based on a pattern extant in Pitt the Younger’s day – all dark red with swirls on. I get to the corner where there is a priests’ hole which he proposes to make into the Catering Manager’s office!

“Aren’t you worried,” I ask him, “That putting the Catering Manager’s office in the bar is going to make him into an alcoholic?”

“Show me a Catering Manager that isn’t,” he groans, “and dishonest.”

“Well, I’m not!” I can’t help saying, though it sounds smug. Still, leave a remark like that unanswered and you’re acquiescing.

The tour continues. There are five floors, fifty rooms, the two bars and restaurants and numerous offices. For all this lot, two roommaids and one cleaner! The cleaner is a Pole, lives in the cellar and, according to Travis, does the work of three men. Does he get the pay of three men, I want to ask but don’t. He starts at seven in the morning and is often still on his feet at two the next morning.

At some point in the tour it dawns on me that ‘the Manager’ to whom Travis keeps referring and who I have taken to be Manager of the Club (after all I am only to be the Catering Manager) is in fact me. Manager of the whole shooting match – housekeeping, catering, bars, accommodation, functions – all my job. And who can improve the standard of cleaning with two maids and one cleaner? How could one ask them to do more? It is a wonder that they do anything at all.

Down in the depths is the kitchen – he saved that till last. It is filthy, cold and dark. From the kitchen a subterranean passage leads to the other half of the Club, in an adjacent building. Food must be carried down this passage when there is a function. Opening off it are several archways leading to unlit cubbyholes piled with lumber. A creepy place, not made any better by the Commander’s next remark:

“We had a murder here three years ago. Just here.” We had reached the bottom of a flight of stone steps leading to a door. “A kitchen porter murdered a chef with a kitchen knife.” We mount the stairs and go through the door which leads to offices. We go past them and up a winding stair to the flat on the third floor.

There are two rooms. One contains a bed, the other a three piece suite, a television and a bookcase. The only windows are little slits high up in the wall. No bathroom, no kitchen. The toilet is on the next floor down, the bathroom in the basement. About all that can be said for this flat is that it is in Mayfair and that it has room for someone to come and stay.

Back to the reception area and over a couple of brandies we discuss staff policy and how the Commander wants the Club run. Everyone in the place is on the fiddle, he says, and he wants this stopping. Kitchen staff are selling off the food, the bar only makes 1% profit, there are no cash registers anywhere, only a series of cash boxes, one for each bar, one for each meal service in the restaurant. There are no optics in the bar and no measures on the beers.

I must never leave the premises at weekends when it is closed (from 11am Saturday to 8.30pm Sunday) because Shepherd Market is only down the road. This is where the high class tarts hang out and if he is

not watched, the weekend porter will be letting them into the rooms and taking a cut. I must never let anyone know at any time if I am going out or they will be up to all sorts of tricks behind my back. I begin not to want this job. It sounds like no fun at all.

I get off to bed about 1am but he says he wants me up for breakfast at eight to continue our discussion.

Next morning, tired of hearing his moans about Simpkins, I ask him what made him give him the job in the first place. I am peeved that I wasn't even called for interview and here was this idiot getting it.

"On the strength of this," he says, handing me a scrapbook full of press cuttings. The strange thing about these cuttings is that every one of them contains a photograph of Simpkins so there is no doubt that they are all about him. They go something like this:

WONDER BOY BYRON SIMPKINS WINS HIS 200<sup>TH</sup> MEDAL AT SALON CULINAIRE

BYRON SIMPKINS OPENS BAKERY IN WALES

BYRON SIMPKINS YOUNGEST MAN IN LONDON TO OWN ROLLS ROYCE

BYRON SIMPKINS OPENS LATEST IN CHAIN OF BAKERY EMPIRE

BYRON SIMPKINS, MILLIONAIRE BAKER, OPENS NEW SHOP

BYRON SIMPKINS SELLS OUT 6.5 MILLION POUND BAKERY EMPIRE

"And have you noticed his gold watch and bracelet, gold identity chain and his gold pen which he always places on the table in front of him and plays with while he's talking to you?" Come to think of it, there was a pen which he kept rolling between his fingers but I hadn't noticed it was gold. And I hadn't clocked the jewellery either.

I understood now why he gave Simpkins the job, because the Commander's talk is all of Lord This and Admiral That and the man who looked like a monkey was going down to Poole to collect his fifty thousand pound boat. So he was impressed with fame and money. Serve him right.

At a quarter to eleven, another candidate was 'sprung'.

"I have a man coming to see me at eleven." This was the first I'd heard of it, the way he was pushing the job I thought I was the only one in the running. "Would you like to go and walk round and come back about one thirty and I'll give you a decision today."

I wanted to say, 'please can I go home and I'll ring you to hear the decision,' but no, I thought, he'll probably want to discuss money if he offers me the job but hell, I don't want it. Whatever shall I do if he offers it to me. I'll have to say I'll go home and think it over, but he was wanting me to start the following Monday so he could give Simpkins the boot.

Off I went. Who should spring out from behind a door but Byron Simpkins.

"Are you going home?" he asked.

“No.” I said, “He’s sent me to walk around while he sees someone else.”

“Oh.” He stood looking at me for a minute. “Look here,” he said, “You do understand you’re in no sort of competition with me for this job, don’t you?” I thought back to what the Commander had said, that Simpkins was begging to be allowed to stay on, if not as Manager then as Chef and if not as Chef then as kitchen porter, and I thought of his behaviour the night before and I said,

“Oh?”

“No, no, I don’t want the job! I’ve told him, I’ve flatly refused to sign any contracts with him. No, the job’s yours and good luck with it.”

“In that case,” I said, “You must have somewhere to go when you leave here?”

“Oh,” he grinned, a look of relief, or was it understanding, passing over the broad planes of his face. “You obviously don’t know who I am. I’m Byron Simpkins - ” he paused for the expected rush of indrawn breath, the exclamation of ‘not - *Byron Simpkins!*’ “And I own two houses in London,” he went on, “and a flat with a mistress in it – purely” - he added in some haste – “purely a business arrangement. I don’t sleep with her.” I am left wondering what sort of a business arrangement one can have with a mistress one doesn’t sleep with. “If you’d like to wait,” he says, “I’ll get my jacket and come with you. Unless,” – pause – “you’d rather be alone?”

I hesitate. Warned off him by the Commander, but I didn’t want the job and – what the hell – it could only be a laugh. I said yes. I walked on and waited for him in a little park round the corner and soon he joined me.

He was most entertaining and knew all about everything we passed and a lot we didn’t. Whether it was true or he made it up I didn’t know but it was jolly good! As we walked along he asked,

“Would you describe yourself as a male personality or a female personality?”

“I don’t really know what you mean by that,” I said.

“Oh well, if you want me to be blunt. Do you prefer girls in bed or boys in bed?”

“I don’t think I want to answer that question,” I said haughtily.

“That answers itself then, doesn’t it,” he said.

“Does it?” I replied. “That’s all right then.” He decided to expand his theme.

“When you walked in the Club last night,” he said, “in that suit, open down the front, the Hall Porter said to me, ‘There goes another one who kicks with the left leg.’” I laughed at this odd phrase.

“What did he mean by that?” I asked.



“In London,” he informed me, “when we say someone kicks with the left leg we mean a homosexual. And,” he added darkly, “you put ‘Ms’ on your application form.”

“So what?” I said, “I always do.”

“Well in London that means you’re a lesbian. And it will stop you getting jobs.”

“Come to think of it,” I said, “I haven’t had many replies when I’ve applied for jobs here.”

“There you are then,” he said, “I should stop putting it.” We looked at the shops in Oxford Street. “You don’t want to look at that rubbish,” he said, “That’s not for a girl like you. That’s for shopgirls. You want to dress in Knightsbridge.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said, “but it sounds expensive.” Which of course gave him the key he wanted for when we were sitting having coffee in Justin de Blank’s coffee house he began to tell me how no woman could survive in London without a Protector. I ignored this. He asked me if I wanted some advice about the job.

“Advise away,” I said. “I’ll listen.” So he proceeded to give me a thumbnail sketch of each member of staff, what their hangups were and where their loyalties lay, what their sexual predilections were.

“There is another lesbian on the staff,” he said, “and she’s got your number and she’ll be making you an approach very shortly. The others will be waiting to see what you do.” A shudder ran through me. One woman he described as, “getting desperate because now she’s touched thirty whereas she used to score every night now it’s only two or three times a month.” I laughed out loud at this. “You can laugh,” he said, leaning over the table, his thick, wiry hair falling across his face, “but in London that’s a serious matter. A woman needs to score to pay the rent, or she wouldn’t survive.” At this I lost my rag and told him,

“The day I need any man’s help to survive will be the day I give up.”

“You might survive in Yorkshire,” he said smugly, “but in London it is a different thing.”

“You might think so but I don’t,” I said, “If you’d survived as I have, brought up two kids on social security and never had a penny from anybody, then fought your way into a man’s job in a man’s world, then you could talk about surviving.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” he said, “But I’d be your Protector if you’d let me.” So that was what this was about! To say I was stunned was to put it mildly. I sat and looked at this little, tubby man, who in Keighley would be laughed to death, but in London – you just don’t know – it’s sinister somehow. “You want a good circle of friends,” he went on. “I’d take you to the Intercontinental and introduce you to Max, he’s my contact there, and to the Inn on the Park and get you in with Tom. I’d build you up a

nice circle of friends – you’ll need them in London. And I’ll tell you which members of staff are my men, they’ll look after you, anything you need they’ll get you. There’s a man coming next week to fit a kitchen in the flat – I’ll tell him to do it for you, as he was going to do it for me, and you’ll be down here next Monday, because you’re going to get this job, I’ve seen to that, and I’ll call for you and take you out twice next week.”

I simply sat and looked at him.

“If you accept this offer of friendship,” he said, “put out your hand.” I kept my hands just where they were. As we parted, doubt for a second assailed him. “If by any chance you don’t get this job, keep in touch, there might be something else you’d be interested in that I could put your way.” I started to move off without replying. Nothing he said could interest me. He stopped a few yards away and called back:

“Because you know what? I fancy you!”

Back at the Club, the Commander met me on the doorstep and informed me the other candidate had had to leave at twelve as he had another appointment. After spending an hour with him and seven with me, he’d offered him the job. I was never so relieved but also annoyed as I was sure this other person had only got the job on the strength of his sex. I knew the Commander thought me perfectly capable or why hadn’t he said so the night before? No, he had thought, she’s okay but if this man’s owt like I’ll give it him. And so he had.

“Of course,” he said, “He may not turn up at all and in that case I’ll be straight back to you and ask you to take it.” I sat and said nothing. “Unless you wouldn’t want to be considered second best?” I said nothing, thinking *I am already second best to Byron Simpkins and goodness knows how many others*. “Unless your pride wouldn’t allow you to accept?” He was having another try. I got up to go, shook his hand and said,

“It’s been very nice meeting you. Goodbye.” I escaped, got the train home and lived happily ever after. One month later a telegram arrived.

“Please ring me and reverse charges. Travis.” I didn’t reply.