

Tommy My Waiter

Tommy met me at the entrance to the dining-room. "Ma'am." he bowed and smiled. "Welcome back. I have your table ready."

"Same one?" I asked stepping to the left of his dark suited frame with his white starched shirt and shiny black satin bowtie.

He paused. "You did request the same one as you had last year?"

I nodded.

He looked relieved. "Good. This way." he guided me to the corner table and pulled the chair for me.

I stared at the stiffly starched white napkin immaculately folded into the shape of a boot on my side plate.

"You remembered!"

"Oh yes ma'am." he's dark eyes twinkled.

"What a memory! Thank you Tommy. I love it."

He inclined his head. "Can I get the wine steward ma'am?"

I nodded.

He looked across the room, lifted his arm and gave one snap of his fingers. The wine steward's head spun instantly in our direction and Tommy signaled to him that I required his services and he hastily made his way to my table.

While I gave the wine steward my order of a small bottle of Nederburg Riesling, Tommy seated someone else nearby but reappeared the moment the wine steward left my table.

He handed me the menu. "No soup for you ma'am. It is too hot for soup in December."

"You remembered that too Tommy!"

"Yes ma'am." he slipped the soup spoon from the setting in front of me and handed me another white napkin to put on my lap as he could see my hesitancy to undo the boot. "The fish has a delicious sauce today ma'am. It is made with goats milk. It is smooth and aromatic."

"That sounds delightful. Thank you Tommy."

When Tommy moved off to fulfill my order, the maître d', in his dark suit and distinguishing red lapels, approached my table. "Welcome back!" he said with a big smile. "Did you have a good journey down?"

"I did it in six hours." I said.

"Clear roads then?"

"Pretty much."

Suddenly there was a clatter of cutlery on the floor. The maître d' frowned. Everyone's head turned in the direction of the noise.

"Excuse me please ma'am." he said and hurried across to the perpetrator.

He spoke rapidly and coupled with his deep Indian accent, I couldn't understand what he was saying but I had no doubt of his displeasure and I, as longtime guest, with a bit of insider knowledge, knew the waiter may well be fined. The owner of the hotel had stiff dining-room rules in place and dropping things and making an unnecessary noise by the staff resulted in harsh rebuke.

The dining-room began to fill with guests. The waiters hurried with gliding grace

to escort their guests to their white clad tables. The table they were seated at would be theirs for the duration of their stay. Another house rule. The increased chatter began to drown the persistent hum of the overhead fans.

I eagerly awaited the arrival of Daniel Milne and kept glancing in anticipation across to the entrance to the dining-room. Three months ago Daniel had written a short note to advise me of his mother, Mrs. Edith Milne's sudden death and my heart had rejoiced. Mrs. Milne's demise would surely herald another level to the relationship between Daniel and me. Maybe now he would pluck up the courage to ask me to marry him. His dedicated care of his mother had been his excuse for not proposing for four long years.

"I can't put her in a home at this point," he'd say. "and it would be totally unfair to expect another woman to share the burden of a grumpy, ornery old woman whose jealous and possessive disposition would make life very arduous for a wife to bear."

Living a thousand miles from each other with only letters and a few phone calls to keep us warm during the year, the three week vacation we'd shared each year for four years had been the highlight of my life. I hoped with all my heart that he had come prepared with an engagement ring.

Tommy placed the fish dish on the left side of me.

"Thank you Tommy. Do you know if Mr. Milne has booked in yet?"

"I believe so ma'am." he paused then rushed on. "Oh ma'am I would like you to meet somebody. He's just arrived back from England where he's been living for four years. He's the hotel owner's grandson. You would find him very interesting to talk to."

"I'm sure I'll bump into him sometime during my stay."

"Actually ma'am, I was wondering if I could put him at your table tonight."

I was about to protest when a deep voice said "Tommy, how good to see you!"

"Mr. Paul!" Tommy said. "Welcome home. Can I introduce you? This is Miss. Marion Templeton. She's a long time holiday guest at the hotel. Miss. Templeton, Mr. Paul Swayne."

I looked up into his boyish freckled face with his flaming cheeks and when I smiled and held out my hand, Mr. Swayne's scarlet cheeks ran into his neck.

"I'm pleased to meet you Miss Templeton."

I inclined my head. "And I, you, Mr. Swayne." Awkward seconds of silence followed and good manners compelled me to invite him to join me. "Would you like to join me for dinner Mr. Swayne?"

"Why, .. why that is very kind of you Miss. Templeton. I ... I would like that very much."

I caught what looked like a satisfied smile on Tommy's face and wondered why he was setting me up as he hurriedly pulled out the chair opposite me for Paul Swayne. Within seconds my unexpected table guest was ordering curry and rice from the menu and Tommy discretely removed his soup spoon and fish knife and fork.

"I understand you have just returned from England Mr. Swayne."

He moved his steel framed glasses up his nose and his very bright marble blue eyes met mine while his face infused with red again.

"Yes, I am a geologist, I work mainly in the oil exploration and mining industry and I have been working in England on a four year contract which has just expired so I'm returning to take up a post in Johannesburg."

I felt my interest peak. "And I am a gemologist. Isn't that amazing!"

"Really?"

Within seconds we became engrossed in the world of rock formations, its character, yield and make-up and somehow between mouthfuls of our different dishes we slipped naturally into first name terms.

When Tommy served my main course of roast chicken from the left and the servers stood ready on my right with steaming roast potatoes, carrots, string beans and spinach in their stainless steel sectional dishes, I pointed to what I wanted without stopping my discussion with Paul Swayne.

I was animated. He had lost his rosy face and his eyes showed interest and enjoyment in their depths. He eagerly explained his scientific surveys, and did so without faltering and with aplomb.

When Tommy brought the peach flambé for dessert, and Paul discussed with the wine steward what liqueur to serve us, I finally looked beyond my table and the blood drained from my face as my eyes rested on Daniel Milne sitting one table away from me. He wasn't alone. She was so petite that I, only 135lb in a 5'9" frame, felt like an elephant in contrast. Her dark shiny hair was waist long and I was sure her face which I could not see would be sweet and delicate.

Tommy cleared his throat, breaching etiquette by standing on my right but thus hiding me from Daniel. I looked up into his concerned brown eyes. "They are on their honeymoon." he said so quietly that not even Paul Swayne, still engaged with the wine steward, could hear.

"Tommy I" tears stung my eyes.

Tommy quickly lifted the Nederburg bottle from the ice bucket and poured the remainder into my glass. "You might want to finish that ma'am before the liqueur comes." he said.

I lifted the glass with shaking fingers and gratefully drank from it.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Is that why you" I looked across at Paul Swayne who was having a joke with the wine steward as he was about to move off and I nodded my head at him.

"Yes ma'am."

"Thank you."

"It is my pleasure ma'am. Is there anything else you'd like ma'am."

"Mr. Swayne and I get along very well Tommy, if he is happy with it, I would like him to share my table for the duration of my stay." I said, looking into Paul Swayne's blue eyes.

"I would be very happy with that arrangement." Paul said.

Tommy bowed. "I will see to it ma'am." he said.

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