

The Escort

I had been a waiter for only a couple of years, but for me, it was a familiar story: the well-heeled man of forty-plus dining with an attractive young girl. However, their encounter seemed rather different from most: the girl certainly appeared to enjoy his company, and when I was serving them, she was talking about her studies or asking him about his work, or discussing politics. But she was in no sense trying to be a sex kitten – rather the opposite, keeping the conversation firmly on practical ground, and keeping her hands and knees at a safe distance.

At first, the man appeared to enjoy her animated but neutral conversation, but he was clearly disappointed when the girl declined to have an aperitif, and she drank her wine very slowly. When I offered to replenish her glass, she told me firmly, 'Only half, please.' During their third course, the man leant over and spoke in an intimate way to her. She tried to take no notice, but he persisted with what appeared to me to be an invitation of some sort; she replied briefly and calmly, shaking her head. He was clearly put out at her refusal. When they had finished the course, he spoke again, and as I approached to clear the plates, he mentioned a considerable sum of money. My presence prevented her replying, and I took their orders for coffee; the girl declined to have any brandy or liqueur. As I left, I could detect the man's strong feeling of frustration and anger, as he sat back looking quite fiercely at the girl, pink blotches appearing on his cheeks. They as they drank their coffee, he spoke again to the girl, who spoke back, firmly shaking her head in denial. He abruptly swallowed his coffee and brandy, threw his napkin on the table, and spoke quite angrily to the girl as he got up and came across to me.

I had rarely seen anyone abandon a partner – it only happened when someone was ill or called in an emergency – but the man looked at me quite fiercely and said, 'The bill for my dinner. She can pay for her own.'

Fortunately I kept calm: I walked over to the desk and checked the booking. 'You're Mr Topman?' I suggested.

'Of course,' he replied angrily.

'I'm sorry sir, but the booking is in your name, and you are liable for the bill.'

'I'm not paying for that bitch!' he replied.

By this time, I had made up the total bill, and I quietly laid it in front of him.

'I'll pay half,' he said.

‘Then we will have to pursue you for the remainder, sir.’

He glared at me, so I explained the obvious, ‘We cannot allow any customer to avoid paying his bill, sir.’

He wanted to hit me, but fought down his fury. Eventually he conceded grumpily, ‘Alright then,’ and counted out a number of notes.

I was very careful to give him the exact change, which checked with great suspicion. By this time, I had retrieved his overcoat, and I helped him put it on. He simply grunted and left. I looked across at the girl, who was clearly tense and upset. I gave her a cheerful smile and shrugged my shoulders.

I had to serve another table, but then I returned to the girl and asked ‘Are you alright?’

She was clearly unhappy, ‘Yes,’ she sighed. Then she said defensively, ‘I never made any promises; I’m just paid to be a dinner escort.’

‘Look,’ I said, ‘I can’t talk now, but everyone’s finishing up. Can you wait twenty minutes? Would you like another coffee?’

She blurted out, almost in tears, ‘I can’t pay for my meal.’

‘Oh! He paid. I saw to that. And the extra coffee’s on the house.’

A few tears did come as she relaxed, ‘Oh dear!’ Then she smiled, ‘Yes, I’d love another coffee. I *can* pay for that!’

It took over half an hour for me to finish all my duties and see my tables ready for the next day. She waited patiently, watching me doing my work. Then I nodded to the girl and retrieved her coat, and went to collect my own. I explained, ‘I can take you home if you like; I keep my car at the hotel down the road.’

‘If it’s any trouble, I can walk.’

‘Where do you live, then?’

‘With my parents, a mile or two away.’

‘It’s eleven at night. Let me take you.’

She just said, ‘I’d be grateful.’

As we walked to the hotel, I said, ‘We’d better introduce ourselves. I’m Ben Taggart.’

‘And I’m Sylvia Runcorn, usually called Sylvie.’

I glanced at her, ‘That’s a pretty name.’

I led the way up the steps to the main hotel entrance, and when we got into the main hall I signalled to the concierge, who nodded back. Then I asked Sylvie, 'I usually get a coffee here after work. Do you mind if we sit in the lounge while I ease off?'

'No, of course not.'

When we had sat down, I asked her, 'I'm afraid I heard you say you were a student. What are you studying?'

'Recreation management, at the local College.'

'Does that involve doing a lot of sport?'

'Yes, but I like sport. I'm enjoying the course.'

'Good for you. And what do you want to do when you are finished here.'

Sylvie took a deep breath and explained, 'My Dad runs a gymnasium. Originally it was for men only, with a boxing ring, punchbags and so on. Then he found that he was asked to run fitness courses for men, but as soon as he got going, wives and other women started asking to join in.'

'Well, he started running a couple of women's courses each week, but felt a little unhappy as he wasn't trained for that. I was fourteen at the time, and I joined in at weekends; before long, as I knew all the exercises, he had me stand in front as a kind of leader. More recently, I've taken some of the classes when Dad couldn't do them.' She added quietly, 'I don't think that's quite legal.'

Just then, the concierge brought me my coffee. I had a sip and then suggested, 'So you gradually got drawn into the business?'

'In a small way, yes. But I always felt I should be properly trained.'

I drank some more coffee and munched a biscuit, 'Do you aim to work with your Dad?'

Sylvie hesitated, 'We're probably mad, but we would like to expand the premises and become more of a sports centre, catering for sports like badminton and table-tennis, and even rock-climbing. Already we have problems over changing rooms. That's why I'm getting properly trained, although it's been hard financially. My Mum works, which makes it possible.'

'Is the building suitable?' I asked.

'It could be a basis, but there would have to be enormous changes. There's space to expand the premises.' She lay back in her chair and said thoughtfully, 'It wouldn't be easy.'

I drank more coffee. Sylvie looked enquiringly at me, 'What about you? We've only been talking about *my* work and aims.'

'Confession time, is it? Well, I was OK at O-levels, but I wanted to get out into the world. I left school at sixteen, and decided to work my way up the catering and hotel business. I got a job bottle-washing in a hotel kitchen, but asked questions and learnt as much as I could about cuisine. I got a few qualifications and began to be assistant to the chef. After four or five years, I decided to move and learn the upstairs side of the business. After a couple of years, here I am.' He smiled at Sylvie, 'Not yet a Maitre d'Hotel!'

'Is that what you want to be?'

'In a top hotel, that wouldn't be bad.' Then I thought, *I know her pipe-dream, so she might as well have mine.* 'But what I'd really like is what many hotel workers want – to have my own business – a comfortable rather exclusive restaurant would do.'

'And you feel you have the experience to do it?' she asked.

'I think so. But as you say about your sports centre, it wouldn't be easy. I'd have to find a building in the right part of some city, maybe here. Then I'd have to plan and finance the renovations and fittings, and find suitable staff. I've saved a little money, but I'd have to convince some bank that it was a good proposition.'

Sylvie asked, 'What do you mean by wanting a rather exclusive restaurant? Do you mean expensive?'

'No,' I said, and I laughed, 'It's silly, but I'd want to be able to exclude awful people like your gent this evening. And I don't like very fat ladies who eat two rich sugary puddings after a serving of dumplings.'

Sylvie laughed with me. Then a thought suddenly struck her, and she turned quite serious, 'What you want are people who attend our sports centre.'

I looked at her quite keenly, 'Yes, you're right.' It really was a good thought. I continued, 'So I ought to find premises near to your new outfit.'

She pushed the idea, 'Could you tailor the cuisine to fitness, without spoiling the food?'

I thought this over, 'To some extent; but it's the often the combination of foods that can do the damage. I could arrange various menus to suit people who wanted to look after their health.'

Her eyes sparkled, 'We've both been talking dreams. What if the centre became a Fitness Centre, including an excellent restaurant for fit people. And there'd have to be a café bar as well for healthy snacks.'

I had to shake my puzzled head, 'A wonderful dream, but what about your Dad? He might not like the idea; or he may not like me!'

'It's all a million miles away – well, I hope not that far – but can I talk with Dad about the possibility?'

I agreed, 'Yes, why not? We can all think about it.' Then I looked at my watch, 'I'd better get you home now, young lady.'

Silvie made a humorous pout of resistance. But she gathered up her things and then said 'Ben,' and paused. I looked at her. She spoke very sincerely, 'Thank you so much for rescuing me from that nasty man.'

I replied thoughtfully, 'Who knows, your nasty man might have done us both a big favour.'