

MEN AS ANIMALS BY ROGER MOREAU

SABRETACHE RESTAURANT – LONDON W.1.

“As we’re all plumping for the roast, I’d suggest the Chateau Margaux Pavillon Rouge. Prepare yourselves for the exquisite blackberry aroma - a hint of sultanas and plums. Cedar and violet top notes, intoned Reg.

“You don’t mean that utterly dishy drop with its lively, taut, complex peppery characters, fine, lingering berry fruit and powdery tannin,” Dolly chirped in, joining in the spirit of the game.

“Uhm, yes, quite,” said the waiter in a patient, ‘been-through-this-crap-before’ tone of voice. “Wise, very wise, Madame et Messieurs. Loads of puppy fat plus leather sloe and French vanilla... a soupcon of shag tobacco and cassis in the front of the mouth. A trace of anise, peut-etre? A long, velveteen, smoke and hickory finish, to be sure. Yep, a bottle of the ole rise and shine - number 23 ‘ll do you a treat. Bloody good choice if I may say so.”

“You may, old son. And since the rag’s paying - right, Dolly? - bring us a refill with the mains. Can’t ‘ave too much of a good thing, eh Dolly?”

Dolly smiled bleakly as she eyed the price.

It was Monday and only the downstairs of the restaurant was occupied. Tables of businessmen in groups of twos, threes and fives. Bags of overweight bellies bulging over belted waists. In the corner, queenly ensconced with her closest male friend, Harry de Jonquières, and Reg, a relationship counsellor.

“Harry,” said Dolly, coming straight to the reason she was lashing out on the Chateau Margaux, “I want your advice about something I’ve been brooding on these past weeks. Yours too, Reg.”

“Fire away,” said Harry.

“Might be second label, but it’s still Margaux,” said Reg wandering blissfully in a world of rarely affordable aroma and bouquet.

“Well, it’s this way - I’m thinking of adding a new level to the mag...a new direction,” she burst out, and waited for the heavens to fall in after having uttered words profane and sacrilegious.

“You what?” Harry exclaimed, wide-eyed. “But it’s you. It’s New Age Woman... Power Woman... Career Woman... Alpha Woman slugging it out on equal terms with the blokes and cantering past the winning post to scoop up the glittering prizes.”

“Yes, but you see, it’s no longer one hundred percent ME. It’s what I *was*... steel-polished... hard-nosed....”

“Jug-eared,” put in Reg, removing the glass from his lips with a puff of a sigh. “Is what you’re saying, you’re still big, it’s the mag that got small?”

“No, it’s just that I’m so sick to death of meeting a fellow, getting to know him and all that courtship ra-ra, your place or mine stuff, then finding out he’s wrong in just about every respect,” she burst out emotionally. “It’s a big – no, I’ll say huge part of me now to find a permanent bloke, someone I can be comfortable with, someone who understands me, someone I don’t have to be on my best behaviour with all the time. *I want him to be right for Dolly*. The problem is,” she said with a rising note of desperation in her voice, “that I’ve reached the stage now where there are less and less of them to choose from.”

A pause while she gulped at her wine. “Isn’t it the old, old story: all the decent guys are either gay or married. We’re talking barren moonscape here.”

Harry swallowed hard. Reg shook his head. Both men looking at her like she'd suddenly landed on the table from Outer Space and sprayed moon dust over their shirtfronts. It was the wine. Had to be. She'd drunk far too quickly. Nervousness.

“Have you been thinking about this for long, Dolly?” Harry enquired gently. It had taken him all of ten seconds to make the connection between Dolly's first and second outburst. On the face of it not the slightest linkage. Certainly not to the average male. But he knew Dolly and the way her mind worked.

“I suppose it's been at the back of my mind for some time now,” she admitted. “It's your *Truth* magazine assignment that's really brought it centre-stage.”

“Just how restricted is this pool you're referring to, Dolly?” Harry enquired. g. “More and more as you go up the corporate ladder. It's called hyper gamy, that's the anthropological name for 'marrying up' - the need to secure a slightly older bloke, taller, of course, and better educated and financially better off. Something to do with improving the gene pool. The catch-22 is that high-achievers like me find that the higher we climb, the scarcer the A1 merchandise becomes. By the time you get to the top of the tree, there's only Ted Turner and Bill Gates left. And the clincher is that in the eighteen to twenty-five age group, young males outnumber females, but after 30 the trend's reversed. So, here we are in our ball-gowns and less and less chance of someone marking our dance-card. Mostly we have to settle for something less than ideal, or quit the game altogether, leaving our girlish hopes and dreams to shrivel and die.”

“In other words, if you don't catch him early, you are in dead strife,” that right?” “Yes, Reg. 'Fraid so. With hindsight, I should have played it differently. Made it my business to net him first and, the relationship established, set about building a career.” She made an attempt at a regretful *moue* that didn't suit her face at all. “So, I'm stuck between a rock – not going along with the ethos of the magazine that I, me, myself created, 'cos I desperately want a bloke – and a hard place, the almost impossible task of finding the right guy at my stage of life. And if by some miracle I do, not knowing if he'll still be the right guy in x number of years down the track. So, how do I get it right in the first place? Dolly hasn't a clue. It's no good saying I'll know him when I see him. That's fairyland. On par with 'He's definitely out there somewhere.' I'm not going to

fool myself the way countless other women do. I need to know now what I should be looking for ...how I'll recognize him. And know positively from the word go what the chances are for togetherness in all the years ahead. Do you see?"

"That's a big ask, Dolly," Harry murmured. This was weirdly coincidental. Hadn't he been thinking exactly along those lines this morning?

"You know full well it's your biological clock ringing the alarm bell, duckie, Making you do scatty things like dwelling on the absence of a male provider for what we in the trade call a baby," said Reg with a touch of brutality. "Bloke equals baby. Happens to millions of women every day so don't think for a moment that Dolly Dix is in anyway unique. It's the tried and proven case of biology blasting brains and, believe me, you stand zilch chance of besting it, gal. It's one of the most potent forces in the universe. Has to be, doesn't it? To make a bright girl like you, earning sqillions of quids in one of the best jobs in the land, desperate to swap it for piles of dirty nappies and three am feeds."

Dolly sat silent, bolt upright and nervous. What Reg was saying was, oh, so true.

Harry was thinking that once again, Dolly had proved her brilliance at anticipating trends. Satisfying her readership before her opposition got in. She as at an age, as were many of her readers, when the biological urge to have a baby suddenly became all-powerful. Having a baby, more often than not, meant having a Mister Dad in the background.

"How does this Mark Two Sabine Woman of yours stack up, Dolly? He asked.

"I dictated her CV on my tape recorder in the taxi on my way here. Care to listen?" She fumbled in her handbag and laying the recorder on the table made an adjustment to tone down the volume. A moment later Dolly's silver tones were competing with the clink of glassware and a ribald joke from the next table.

"Introducing the new model, 21st century, *Sabine Sister*. .

A pause, then a nervous clearing of the throat. Then: “Here we go:

- S = SMART, CAREER-MINDED, SINGLE BUT KEEN TO BE A
DOUBLE.
- A = AVAILABLE FOR RICH AND REWARDING *EQUAL* LONG-
TERM PARTNERSHIP
- B = BECKONING BUT NEEDS TO BE PRIZED AND
APPRECIATED.
- I = INDEPENDENT BUT LOOKING TO *BELONG* TO A MAN
WHO’LL SUPPORT HER AIMS AND AMBITIONS.
- N = NEEDS CARING MALE TO VALUE A PEARL OF GREAT
PRICE
- E = EMANCIPATED YET TENDER, LOVING AND KIND

“The key letter is I for India,” Dolly said with great passion and conviction in her voice. The new Sabine Woman needs to *belong* to a man who’ll want for her what she wants for herself.”

Harry said, shaking his head: “Dolly wants to belong, Reg. What do you think of the chances of any woman ‘belonging’ to a man in the year 2020?”

“Nil, mate. I don’t think so. Don’t frown at me like that, Dolly; Reg knows what he’s talking about. The two genders are moving away in ever widening circles from a centre pole we used to call ‘marriage.’ Oh, sure, they’ll be a residue of couples keen on living together in the good old-fashioned way, but they’ll be very much in the minority. The essential is that it’s vitally important in a marriage for each partner to be day in, day out, validating the other’s reality. Otherwise, you might as well be on your tod. Problem is, it’s not happening. We’re all bloody ego-centric now. Face it, men and women like and respect each other less and less as generation succeeds generation. In a word, it’s all downhill.”

“How about you, Harry?” Dolly asked. “What do you think?”

“Basically, I feel the same way as Reg. In times of struggle - which has been mankind’s lot ever since we first took our chances on the open savannah – we had a

vested interest in male and female staying together. The comparatively slow rate of growth of the human infant compared to say its chimp counterpart, made ‘couple-forming’ mandatory. We couldn’t possibly have survived without pair-bonding, for the same reasons that birds need to pair-bond, but very few other species do.”

“So?” asked Dolly “*Quo vadis?*”

“So, now we’ve gone full circle. In Western society at last, it’s back to the abundance of food and shelter and no-obligation sex that existed way back then, millions of years ago in the Garden of Eden. On the face of it, we’ll simply revert back to our primate beginnings. Men and women are essentially very, very different and may not be intrinsically meant to live with each other except when the survival of the species dictates we become, let’s say, complimentary.” He paused before continuing. “Sorry to have to say it but, yes, my guess would be that we could well revert to essentially male and female societies, only getting together for sex, just like the great apes we once were. No, Dolly, don’t put on that pained expression. This is what I truly believe could be the situation opening up by the year 2020...*the majority of us living alone.*” He paused before adding quietly: “*Unless, that is, we somehow learn to read on another – especially those we love.*”

Silence.

The waiter arrived with the second bottle and poured a smidgen into Reg’s glass. Reg making a show of masticating a piece of dry bread to cleanse the palate, taking a small sip, rolling it around in his mouth. Finally nodding august approval.

“Seems to me,” Reg said after the waiter had departed, “Harry means that the only way a disastrous social breakdown can be prevented is for stable relationships to be the order of the day... greater compatibility due to better understanding. And quite frankly it’s easier to see England winning the Ashes, Wimbledon and the World Cup all in the same year.”

Dolly shook her head. “But how can those ‘stable relationships’ come about when we women don’t even begin to understand what the male animal is all about, and even

less how he and the relationship are going to work out in the years ahead?" Her voice climbed to a high, frustrated note. "There's no way we females can get to grips with the situation – there's just too many billions of blokes out there. We're flying blind from the start."

"I'm here when you want me, darling," came a deep, Chairman of the Board voice from the adjoining table.

"Get knotted, Neanderthal," said Dolly not even bothering to turn round.

"Good point, Dolly," said Reg, gallantly tasting her wine for her. "Delving deep, deep, deeper under that mysterious male surface of ours to get to the fascinating persona beneath could be the answer to your maidenly prayer. Allow me to pledge to you, in a supreme act of self-sacrifice, that both me and the pulsating psyche 'neath the Marks and Sparks underwear are at your entire disposal whenever you feel a desire - preferably lustful - to delve and linger intimately, purposefully and long."

"You know," said Harry thoughtfully, ignoring Reg's yelp of pain as Dolly exasperatedly kicked his ankle under the table, "we – that is the three of us – do seem to be heading towards the conclusion that understanding the male is the key to compatible relationships."

"And why, pray, as a matter of interest, shouldn't men try to understand women more?" Dolly shot back.

"I'm not about to argue the point, Dolly, except to say that women have a lot more to lose if and when the relationship turns sour and they're left holding the baby - literally. Also when it comes to who is equipped to understand whom better, it has to be your sex. More patience than men and more practice at it. Back in the bad old days, they had to divine the male mood five minutes before it even entered their lord and master's consciousness to avoid a pre-emptive strike with a swinging pike staff. It's been woman's traditional role throughout the millennia to keep the peace, to compromise - anything to give the greatest chance of survival to her offspring. And this she has done by showing enormous sensitivity to man's needs and feelings, allied to intuition and intelligence, to such a point where it has become second nature."

"I can't possibly agree, Harry," said Dolly spiritedly. "What the hell, why is it always us that's got to pander to you lot? Sure, what you're describing may well have

been the case back in the ‘bad old days.’ But it no longer applies. We got the vote, remember? Also it’s questionable whether nowadays women do have more to lose if the relationship turns sour. As for Reg’s ‘*kindness*’ fixation, how about being kind to us for a change?”

“Well, yes, but a start has to be made somewhere...”

“Yeah...okay, Harry. Take your point, I suppose.” Silence between them while the waiter cleared the table. “Seriously, Harry, if only there was a way of pigeon-holing men into specific character groups as in ...You know, something a woman could count on as more or less reliable.” Silence, then Dolly musing out loud: to get back to my problem, that’s what I personally need. And millions of my readers too. To be able to put a label on a bloke: *‘this is the type of man I need to round me off...to make me complete.’* Her voice had risen high with excitement as the idea began to expand in her imagination.

“It’s been done, sweetie,” Reg informed her condescendingly, his ankle still throbbing from her fearsome Ferragamo. “The twelve signs of the zodiac. You know, Pisces the dreamers. Aries, ‘damn the torpedoes - full steam ahead,’ that sort of thing. Broadly speaking - very broadly - they’re okay as a rough indication of character but not much more than that. Nowhere near reliable enough to risk a lifetime’s happiness on.

“I could put one of the researchers on to it, I suppose,” Dolly mused, ignoring him. “You know, to check if anything has been done to categorize men into defined personality types. Shouldn’t take long on the Internet.”

Reg looked at his watch. “Good Lord, three-thirty already. Time for me Earl Gray and Spanish Fly and cucumber sandwiches. Any chance of the mag going the extra mile, Dolly? Need all my strength for our tryst this evening.”

“In your wet dreams, Wily Wally,” said Dolly, squaring her shoulders - once again her old powerful Sabine Woman self. In control. Never dismayed, or taken by surprise. And never doubting for a moment man’s infinite capacity to do a gal wrong.

“Gee, you turn me on when you do that, Dolly, breathed Reg, his fingertips stroking her rounded knee and beginning to inch north.

“You and your slow burn, Reg, “said Dolly deciding to laugh it off. “And put both hands on the table where I can see them.” But as she turned away there was the trace of a smile playing around her mouth. She wasn’t beautiful - never had been. Or even pretty in the conventional sense. But she knew she had whatever it was that made men pant. Reg wasn’t the first man she’d left with his tongue hanging out. A sliver of antidotal New Yorkese passed through her mind: ‘Okay, if you’re so clever, why aren’t you rich? Okay, if you’re so desirable, why aren’t you married?’

“Do you know,” said Harry slowly, “for the first time I feel a sense of ... well... almost buoyancy about this assignment ‘ Gender relations in the Year 2020.”

“No different from writing out a shopping list,” said Dolly decisively. “You put down exactly what you want and how much you’re prepared to give up in exchange. No impulse buys which only make you unhappy when you unload your shopping bag back home. Sticking only to what you’ve worked out is right and good for you. No problem.”

She rose to her feet in a long, sinuous weaving motion. “Now somebody call me a cab before I break Reg’s effing, erring fingers one by one.”

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There’s the nucleus of a terrific *Sabine* article here thought Dolly on the taxi ride back to the office. She just knew it. That old familiar buzz, buzz, buzz was here in her head and playing a tune. Her eyes took on a bright, excited look as creative juices began flushing through her. She fished in her bag for her tape recorder to begin dictating. For ‘*impulse buy*’ read ‘*drifting into a relationship.*’ The thoughts were beginning to pour out; she was on fire... ablaze with the wonder of being the one and only Dolly Dix this mellow afternoon. This adored and adorable new *Sabine Woman*. On the other hand it could have been the wine...

‘If waking up every morning is an ever-prevented dying,’ she began, ‘ just as walking is an ever deferred falling down, so growing up for a woman is merely passing the time before falling in love and having babies.’

Uhm, not a bad opener. Now let's see.

'One of the problems we modern face is that we were never built for mate selection on the vast scale we have nowadays – that is, outside the traditional village, clan or tribe. So in the end, many women can't decide or simply just don't know any more. Half the time willing themselves to fall in love tomorrow morning during the coffee break but with no idea of with whom. In many cases ending up in a desperate, last minute snatch at whatever's around that's got two feet, tow hands, one head, one bum and, hopefully, zilch wife in the woodwork. And should the marriage hit the rocks, and nearly half do, they erroneously blame it on *love* – that old promise breaker.'

It was going well. She was in full flow. Surfing.

'Answer is, says Dolly, you have to clearly define your target, homme-wise. Otherwise it's like going into a candy store with no clear idea of what you want and you're faced with black liquorice, yellow marzipan, pink and white Turkish delight, brown nougat. Et cetera, et cetera. Bewildering. You buy in haste and in all likelihood live to regret your purchase.'

Another example needed. Think, girl.

'Okay, choosing a pet. Before you go to the pet shop, you've taken several essential factors into account – for instance, the size of you habitat has to govern the size of your pet. Then there's the amount of time you can spend with it. Whether you want a lively companion – let's say a dog that has to be walked twice a day – or a more arm's length animal, a cat maybe. Or, maybe, more of wallpaper pet, a budgie or goldfish. In other words, you've done your homework and decided what suits you in terms of deriving maximum enjoyment from your choice. No unpleasant surprises down the track. You are going to get exactly what's best for you- compatibility-wise.'

'And so it should be with your choice of a permanent *homme*. You have to know exactly what you want from the outset. What suits you best. ***And then go out and get him!*** She paused and clicked off the tape recorder as the taxi driver began speaking to her. He was French – the accent unmistakable.

“I’m going to your country,” said Dolly, abruptly brimming with post-prandial *bonhomie*. “My best friend’s being married in Paris next month...*le mois prochain*.”

“Ah, *la ville lumière*.... ze City of Light... ze mellow falls of Autumn, ze aroma of chestnuts roasting along the boulevards, ze air like Veuve-Clicquot, ze Faubourg St. Honoré, ze elegant Parisienne with ze poodle on ze silver chain, ze *Arc de Triomphe* lit at dusk, ze...”

A new thought blazed across Dolly’s mind. “Snuff it, Pierre, I’m dictating.”

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