

Highly Confidential **by Frank Hibberd**

The chairman rapped on the table.

‘Order, ladies and gentlemen.’

Though he was plump and balding, his elegantly tailored suit and neatly trimmed moustache lent him a slightly rakish air.

‘Soup of the day, followed by lobster thermidor, please.’

‘I’m calling the *meeting* to order, Mr. Clavicle. I’ll pause for five seconds to allow members to laugh.’

The five faces remained as silent as their reflections in the polished oak boardroom table. The table, the padded-seat oak chairs, the William Morris wallpaper, the decorative cornice, the chandeliers, all spoke of the history and traditions of the Clarkeson Cakery. On a whim of old Mr. Clarkeson, the walls boasted pictures of cute animals from some of the company’s overseas export targets, flanked by pictures of the current CEO and the finance director. Staff members viewed the juxtaposition with pleasure.

The chairman quickly checked the attendance. Arthur Clavicle, the youngest member, Sid Scrivener and Dev Patel, Gloria Wellbeloved – these he thought of in first name terms, while Mr. Herring, in black jacket and pin-stripe trousers, was definitely a Mr. And ... ‘Who’s that bloody woman?’ the chairman asked himself. Aloud: ‘Who are you, madam, and how did you get in?’

The bloody woman smiled at the chairman, who looked more closely at her. She looked vaguely familiar - not a bad looker - lipstick rather overdone, but I could fancy her, he thought. Then the truth dawned.

‘Oh, Christ! It’s you, Mr. Blond. Do you *have* to come here in disguise?’

‘You tell me I’m an actor on the world stage, sir. As such, I feel I need to stay in character.’

‘Humph.’

The chairman waved a hand towards the man on his right.

‘May I introduce a new member of the committee, whom many of you will know, at least by reputation. Mr. Herring.’

‘Albert?’ enquired Arthur Clavicle, with a smirk.

Mr. Herring looked surprised. ‘No, Clarence, actually.’

‘I apologise for Mr. Clavicle, Mr. Herring. He is our resident jokester. He is irritating, but he does have other talents.’

The chairman paused to glare at Mr. Clavicle, who nonchalantly studied the view of an office block available through the mullioned windows. He had established waving relations with a girl on the third floor, and hoped to make further contact.

‘Now,’ the chairman continued, ‘I’m sure we’ll all want to give Mr. Herring a warm welcome.’

The rest of the committee cried ‘Hear hear!’ and tapped on the table. Clarence nodded his head in acknowledgement.

‘Right. Minutes of the last meeting.’ The chairman shuffled his pile of papers.

Sidney Scrivener, the minute taker, sat with pencil poised.

‘Anything more on the fake branding?’

The chairman acknowledged Gloria with a welcoming smile.

‘Good point, my dear. Those shifty dagoes need to be watched.’ He frowned darkly to emphasize the point.

‘Excuse me, sir.’ An aggrieved tone. ‘Am I a shifty dago?’

‘Good God, no, Dev. You’re one of us. Your skin may be brown, but to us you are a white man, in the best sense of the word. Now, would you mind serving the coffee round.’

Dev Patel, looking a little baffled, turned his attention to the side table with the coffee machine and cups.

‘Er -‘

‘Yes, Sid?’

‘He couldn’t be a dago. It’s a rather offensive term for some southern Europeans.’

‘Well, thank you Sid. I must remember that.’

There was a pause while Dev served the coffees, and the milk and sugar were passed around.

Clarence Herring declined both.

‘Mr. Chairman.’ He raised his hand. ‘Surely the department has a tea lady?’

‘Of course we do, Mr. Herring. But you must appreciate that matters discussed at these meetings are highly secret and confidential. If a tea lady caught sight of, let’s say, an item on the agenda, and – unwittingly, of course – passed it on in some way, well ……….’

Clarence nodded understandingly.

‘Now, the matter Gloria has raised.’ The chairman smiled at her again. ‘It’s in bulimia, isn’t it.’

‘Bulimia’s an eating disorder, sir. It’s Liubimia where the problem is.’

‘Thank you, Sid. Why can’t these places have nice simple names like England or France? Now, you’re the Africa expert, Mr. Clavicle. If you’ve completed your study of the Portman building, can you please fill us in?’

Arthur took a leisurely sip of his coffee and gazed levelly at the chairman.

‘No, sir.’

‘What? Why the hell not? Perhaps I should ask the bloody orang-utan.’ He pointed at one of the pictures.

‘Ahem. There are no orang-utans in Africa, sir. And anyway, Liubimia is in South America.’

‘Well, thank you once again, Sid. What would we do without you?’

‘You’d probably manage somehow, sir.’

‘You may be bloody clever, Sid, but you can’t recognise a rhetorical question. OK, then. Mr. Blond?’

Mr. Blond sat forward in his chair and brushed a lock of his wig to one side.

‘Yes. I have established a liaison with a top man in the company concerned.’

‘What kind of a liaison?’

‘I think he rather fancies me, sir.’

‘Is he a shirt-lifter? Any chance of blackmail?’

Mr. Blond smiled and winked.

‘No, no. He fancies me for my good looks and womanly charm.’

‘Good God! So what have you charmed out of him?’

‘Chocolate digestives and rich tea are OK. I think shortbreads are endangered.’

‘You will find a list of code names on the desk in front of you, Mr. Herring. You have five minutes to memorise them, and the document will then be destroyed.’

‘Very well, sir.’

‘Right, Mr. Blond. Do you have any samples?’

‘They’re not on the market yet, sir. But I managed to sneak one out from their HQ. Here it is.’

He took a package out of his briefcase. The group stared at it apprehensively.

Mr. Blond pulled off the wrapping. The container inside displayed ‘Clarkeson’s Jaffa cakes’.

‘Not a bad copy,’ said Clarence Herring.

The chairman nodded. ‘Not perfect - look at the lettering – but pretty good. Let’s try one each.’

They all sampled the cakes thoughtfully.

‘Very tasty!’ said Clarence Herring.

‘Yes indeed!’ said Mr. Clavicle. ‘And I detect the faintest hint of rosewater.’

The chairman looked sadly at Gloria.

‘Our jaffas are the only ones that have ever contained rosewater. And only two people are privy to the recipe. Gloria and myself. Gloria, you are a mole.’

Gloria slumped in her chair.

‘I am utterly ashamed, sir. But what could I do? They threatened to harm my little boy.’

‘You should have told us. We would have dealt with it. I have no choice but to sentence you to the doughnuts.’

‘No! No! For God’s sake, not the doughnuts. How could you do this, after all we have meant to each other - all the nights of passion we have shared?’

The other members of the group exchanged knowing looks.

‘The doughnuts?’ exclaimed Clarence. ‘That’s code for cream crackers, isn’t it?’

The chairman shook his head.

‘We’re not talking code now, Mr. Herring. These are real doughnuts.’

‘It’s very confusing,’ said Clarence. ‘For example, Mr. Blond referred to these jaffas as shortbreads. According to my list, the code for jaffa cakes is macaroon.’

‘No, currant bun,’ said Mr. Clavicle.

‘No, custard creams,’ said Dev Patel.

‘No, garibaldi,’ said the chairman. ‘Sid, please explain.’

There was a pregnant pause, as Sidney surveyed the members of the committee.

'It's like this, sir,' he said. 'I think you know that I am fiercely loyal to the company. But I feel most strongly that that fact, and my many services, have not been properly recognised. I have therefore given you all incorrect codes. I have removed all code lists from the files. I am now the only person who knows the correct codes. I think that puts me in a position of power.'

The other members stared at Sidney in astonishment. Suddenly the chairman burst out laughing.

'You devious bastard, Sid,' he said. 'That's just the kind of thinking we need in the organisation. We'll double your salary and put you on the double-0 rating.'

Sidney's eyes filled with tears. 'Oh, thank you sir' Suddenly he cried out, clutched his chest and fell back in his chair.

The chairman leapt to his feet. After a brief examination he shook his head.

'Now we're in the shit,' said Mr. Blond

'What's the code for that?' asked Arthur Clavicle.