

So Simple By Lydia Penn

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It was early in the war, soon after the fall of France, that Clara first appeared in the small West of England town. Neighbours understood that she had been evacuated from London to stay with her aunt for the duration of the war.

She soon found work as a kitchen hand in a girls boarding school in the town. As it was wartime both domestic and teaching staff were difficult to obtain and there were constant comings and goings, employers could not afford to be fastidious in taking on staff

So Clara provided help in the kitchen – and great sport for the rather unkind school girls who nicknamed her, “Clara Cluck”. For Clara was obviously a little “simple” and not of very prepossessing appearance with her lank light auburn hair, prominent teeth and big blue eyes which peered out vacantly from behind large tortoiseshell glasses. With her slight figure, at a casual glance, she looked about sixteen, but closer observation would reveal her to be much older. However, who was going to look closely at her. She was so simple!

Her kitchen duties were routine and simple too. By the time she arrived each morning to assist with the eight o'clock breakfast the kitchen was organised. Hopkins, the handyman, had the boiler lit and was well into his daily routine.

Cook would arrive soon after he did, always carrying a large brown paper bag. She was a tall angular local woman who, like Hopkins, had been employed at the school for a number of years. So Hopkins never commented on the paper bag, even when she departed at night

with the bag well filled. After all, he was well fed by Mrs Hopkins. He noticed however, that Clara arrived with nothing and took nothing away either. She is just so simple, he thought.

Once breakfast was over, Clara would spend the morning preparing vegetables for lunch, which was the main meal of the day. Her appearances in the dining room were only brief until 4 pm tea, which was the least formal meal of the day, presided over only by the duty mistress. It was, therefore, a great time for the girls to fool around and indulge in plenty of boisterous behaviour.

At this time cook would put her feet up and have "a nice cup of tea", leaving Clara to take out plates of bread and butter, and anything else the girls requested. As she came in and out saying nothing but smiling fatuously, she appeared totally unaware of the remarks and giggles among the girls. At times she would laugh with them, but they were confident she had no idea what they were saying, or why they laughed. They found it great sport for Clara was so simple.

But was she?

They would have been horrified if they knew what she really thought of them. Imbeciles, she would mutter to herself each morning as she donned her fatuous smile together with her maids uniform. Clara was not as dumb as she appeared to be, in any sense of the word!

As the Battle of Britain intensified over the skies of southeastern England, enemy planes now also flew from the west coast of occupied France. Somerset was in the direct path of the bombers heading for the cities of Bristol, Manchester and Liverpool. The school was also close to Westlands aircraft factory which in spite of being camouflaged to blend in with houses on either side of the airfield, was twice bombed, although production was hardly affected.

The school dormitories were moved downstairs into what had been classrooms, so they were close to the cellars which were then used as air raid shelters. As air raid sirens sounded, and the girls and staff trooped down in the cellars where they huddled together in the cold, they would have been amazed if they had known where Clara was.

Air raid wardens patrolling the streets to spot blackout violations, and any suspicious civilian behaviour, would occasionally come across Clara, apparently wandering aimlessly around, when they suggested escorting her home, she would just smile fatuously at them and nod as she walked on. "Humph", they would say. "It's just that kid who works at the school. She doesn't understand, she's quite simple. We took her home the other night, and she was out again," and they would shake their heads and move on.

So Clara was left alone. Clara was simple and quite harmless.

But was she?

For most civilians, taking refuge night after night in an underground shelter thought victory would be achieved by combat in the air or on the battlefields of northern France. Few had heard of Bletchley Park and to those who had, it was just a name, a location outside

London. No one on either side of the conflict had any idea of the vital role played by code breakers, spies and counterspies, especially in the success of the D-Day landings.

To think of Clara involved in any such activity was ludicrous. She was simple!

But after her nocturnal activities, Clara would return to her room where she would write a carefully worded innocuous letter to "Dear Uncle", which she would then post the next morning to an equally innocuous address in London. It was so simple!

After June 1944 there were no more raids in the area and life returned to semi-normality; the dormitories were moved back upstairs, much to the dismay of the girls who had found their close proximity to the cellars very handy for the late night snacks which could be found there!

They also suddenly realised that Clara was no longer there. But so what! There were plenty of other sources of amusement, and she was too simple to be much fun any longer.

The war ended and amid all the chaos of returning refugees, evacuees and displaced persons, no one took much notice of the slim attractive fraulein who looking remarkably like Clara less the glasses and protruding teeth, left England on a Dutch passport on route to Germany.

It had all been so simple!