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## PROLOGUE

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'WELL? WHAT DO you think?' The Dean of the Foreign Examinations Syndicate addressed his question directly to Cedric Voss, the Chairman of the History Committee.

'No, no, Dean. I think the Secretary should be the first to have his say. After all, it's the permanent staff who'll have to work with whoever we appoint.' In slightly less distinguished company, Voss would have added that he didn't give two monkeys which of them got the job. As it was, he reassumed a characteristically somnolent posture in his comfortable blue leather chair, and prayed they'd all get their fingers out. The meeting had already lasted almost three hours.

The Dean turned to the person sitting on his immediate left, a small twinkling man in his middle or late fifties, who blinked boyishly behind his rimless spectacles. 'Well, Dr Bartlett, let's hear what you've got to say.'

Bartlett, permanent Secretary of the Foreign Examinations Syndicate, glanced good-naturedly round the tables before looking down briefly at his neatly written notes. He was used to this sort of thing. 'It seems to me, Dean, that generally speaking, by and large' (the Dean and several senior members of the Syndicate visibly winced) 'and on the whole, we would all agree that the short list has been a very good one. All the applicants seemed pretty competent, and most of them sufficiently

experienced to take on the work. But—' He looked down again at his notes. 'Well, to be truthful, I would not myself wish to appoint either of the two women. The one from Cambridge was, I thought, a little, er, a little *strident*, shall we say?' He beamed expectantly round the Appointments Committee and a few heads nodded fairly vigorous assent. 'The other woman I thought just a *little* inexperienced, and I, er, didn't feel much inner surge of conviction about some of her answers.' Again there was no visible sign of dissent from the silent tables, and Bartlett stroked his ample belly with mild satisfaction. 'So. Let's come to the three men. Duckham? Just a little vague, I thought. Nice chap and all that, but I wonder if he's got quite the snap and zip that I'd welcome in the Humanities Department here. He's third, in my book. Then there's Quinn. I liked him: honest, intelligent fellow; firm views; clear brain. Not quite the ideal experience, perhaps, and then— Well, let me be quite honest about it. I think that, er, I think his, er — *handicap* may be a bit too much of a liability here. You know what I mean: phone calls, meetings, that sort of thing. It's a pity, but there it is. Anyway, I'd put him second. That leaves Fielding, and he's the man I'd go for every time: damn good schoolmaster; excellent results from his pupils; just the right age; modest; likeable; and a First in History from Balliol. References quite outstanding. I don't honestly think we could have hoped for a better applicant, and he's my first choice, Dean, without the slightest doubt.'

Not unostentatiously the Dean closed his appointments

folder and gently nodded his agreement, noting with gratification that several other heads were nodding too. Including the Dean himself, the full complement of Syndics was present. Twelve of them, each a prominent fellow of his or her college within the University of Oxford, and each called upon to attend the meetings held twice a term at the Syndicate building for the purpose of formulating official examination policy. None of them was on the permanent staff of the Syndicate, and none was paid a penny (apart from travelling expenses) for attendance at these meetings. Yet most of them took an active part on the various Subject Committees, were happy to adopt a policy of enlightened self-interest towards the profitable procedures of public examinations, and during the months of June and July, after their own undergraduates had departed for the long vac, acted as chief examiners and moderators in the GCE Ordinary- and Advanced-level examinations. Of the permanent officers of the Syndicate only Bartlett was automatically invited to participate in the counsels of this governing body (though even he was not entitled to cast a vote), and it was Bartlett who brought the number in the room up to thirteen. Thirteen ... Yet the Dean was not a superstitious man, and he looked round the committee with a degree of mild affection. Tried and trusted colleagues almost all of them, although one or two of the younger dons he'd not yet got to know particularly well: hair rather too long, and one of them had a beard. Quinn had a beard, too ... Come on! The appointment would be settled very quickly now, and with a bit of luck he could be

back in Lonsdale College before six. Tonight was a 'gaudy' and ... Get it over with! 'Well, if I'm right in assuming that the committee agrees to the appointment of Fielding, there's only the matter of his starting salary to settle. Let's see, he's thirty-four. I should think the bottom of the B Lecturers' Scale might—'

'Could I just make one point before you go on, Dean?' It was one of the younger dons. One of the long-haired ones. The one with the beard. A chemist from Christ Church.

'Yes, of course, Mr Roope. I didn't mean to give the impression—'

'If I may say so, I think you're presuming that we all agree with the Secretary's views; and, of course, it may be that everyone else does. But I don't, and I thought the whole purpose of this meeting—'

'Quite so, quite so, Mr Roope. As I say, I'm sorry if I gave you the impression that, er — you know ... I certainly didn't mean to do that. It was just that I thought I sensed a feeling of general agreement. But we're in your hands. If you feel—'

'Thank you, Dean. I do feel strongly about this, and I just can't agree with the order of merit the Secretary has given. If I'm going to be frank about it, I thought that Fielding was too much of a yes-man, too much of a smoothie for me. In fact if he got the job, it wouldn't be so much a matter of taking the rough with the smooth as taking the smooth with the smooth.' A gentle murmur of amusement rippled round the tables, and the slight tension, perceptible only a minute before, was visibly relaxed. And as Roope continued, some of his

senior colleagues listened to him with slightly more interest and attention. 'I agree with the Secretary about the rest, though I can't say I completely agree with his reasons.'

'You mean you'd put Quinn first, is that it?'

'I would, indeed. He's got sound views on examinations, and he's got a good mind. But what's more important, I reckon he's got a genuine streak of integrity, and these days—'

'You didn't feel the same about Fielding?'

'No.'

The Dean ignored the Secretary's audible mumble of 'Nonsense!' and thanked Roope for his views. His eyes swept vaguely over the committee, inviting comments. But none was immediately forthcoming. 'Anyone else wish to, er—?'

'I think it quite unfair for us to make too many cosmic character-judgements on the strength of a few brief interviews, Dean.' The speaker was the Chairman of the English Committee. 'We must all make our own assessments of these people; of course we must. That's the only reason we're here. But I agree with the Secretary. My order of merit was the same as his: exactly so.'

Roope leaned back and stared at the white ceiling, a yellow pencil balanced between his teeth.

'Anyone else?'

The Vice-Dean sat shuffling uneasily in his chair, profoundly bored, and anxious to be on his way. His notes consisted of an extraordinarily intricate doodle of whorls and scrolls; and he added a further florid curve

to the flowing tracery as he made his first and final contribution to the day's deliberations: 'They're both good men, that's obvious. Doesn't seem to me to matter much which we go for. If the Secretary wants Fielding, I want Fielding. A quick vote, perhaps, Dean?'

'If that's, er, that's, er . . .'

A few members of the committee interjected their muted bleats of approval, and in a vaguely disconsolate voice the Dean called the division lobbies. 'All right. A show of hands, then. All those in favour of appointing Fielding, please?'

Seven or eight hands were being raised when Rooth suddenly spoke again, and the hands were slowly lowered.

'Just before we vote, Dean, I would like to ask the Secretary for some information. I'm quite sure he'll have it at his fingertips.'

From behind his spectacles the Secretary eyed Rooth with chill distaste, and several committee members could scarcely conceal their impatience and irritation. Why had they co-opted Rooth? He was certainly a brilliant chemist and his two years with the Anglo-Arabian Oil Co. had seemed a decided asset in view of the Syndicate's commitments. But he was too young, too cocky; too loud and splashy, like a vulgar speedboat churning through the placid waters of the Syndicate regatta. This wasn't the first time he'd clashed with the Secretary, either. And he didn't even serve on the Chemistry Committee; didn't do a scrap of examining. Always said he was too busy.

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'I'm sure the Secretary will be glad to, er— What were you thinking of, Mr Roope?'

'Well, as you know, Dean, I've not been with you very long yet, but I've been looking at the Syndicate's Constitution, and as it happens I've got a copy with me here.'

'Oh God!' mumbled the Vice-Dean.

'In paragraph 23, Dean — would you like me to read it?' Since half the committee had never even seen a copy of the Constitution, let alone read it, it seemed wholly inappropriate to dissemble any phoney familiarity, and the Dean nodded reluctant assent.

'Not, er, too long, I hope, Mr Roope?'

'No, it's very brief. Here's what it says, and I quote: "The Syndicate will endeavour at all times to remember that, wholly dependent as it is for its income on public monies, it owes and must seek to discharge a corresponding responsibility both to society at large and to its own permanent employees. Specifically, it will undertake to employ in its services a small percentage of persons who are variously handicapped, should the disabilities of such persons prove not substantially to interfere with the proper discharge of the duties entrusted to them." 'Roope closed the slim document and put it aside. 'Now, my question is this: can the Secretary please tell us how many handicapped people are at present employed by the Syndicate?'

The Dean turned once more to the Secretary, whose customary *bonhomie* had now apparently returned.

'We used to have a one-eyed fellow in the packing

department—' In the ensuing laughter the Vice-Dean, whose own particular handicap was a weak bladder, shuffled out of the room, where Roope was pursuing his point with humourless pedantry.

'But presumably he's no longer employed here?'

The Secretary shook his head. 'No. Unfortunately he turned out to have an uncontrollable weakness for stealing toilet rolls, and we—' The rest of the sentence was drowned in a ribald cackle of lavatory laughter, and it was some little while before the Dean could bring the meeting to order again. He reminded the committee that paragraph 23 was not, of course, a statutory injunction — merely a marginal recommendation in the interests of normal civilized, er, living. But somehow it was the wrong thing to say. Far wiser to have allowed the Secretary a few more anecdotes about his less-than-fortunate experiences with the unfortunately afflicted few. As it was, the subtle shift had been made. The man with the handicap was coming into the betting once more, his odds shortening further as Roope pressed his point neatly and tellingly home.

'You see, Dean, all I really want to know is this: do we feel that Mr Quinn's deafness is going to be a significant liability in the job? That's all.'

'Well, as I said,' replied Bartlett, 'there's the telephone for a start, isn't there? Mr Roope perhaps isn't fully aware of the vast number of incoming and outgoing telephone calls here, and he must excuse me if I suggest that I know slightly more about this than he does. It's a very tricky problem when you're deaf—'

'Surely not. There are all sorts of gadgets these days.'

You can wear one of those behind-the-ear things, where the microphone is—'

'Does Mr Roope actually know someone who's deaf and who—?'

'As a matter of fact, I don't but—'

'Then I suggest he is in real danger of underestimating the sort of problems—'

'Gentlemen, gentlemen!' The exchanges were becoming increasingly tetchy, and the Dean intervened. 'I think we all agree that it would be *something* of a problem. The real question is – how much of one?'

'But it's not just the telephone, is it, Dean? There are meetings – dozens and dozens of 'em a year. A meeting like this one, for instance. You get stuck in a meeting with somebody on the same side of the table, sitting three or four places away...' Bartlett warmed to the point, and made his case without interruption. He was on safer ground, he knew that. He was getting just a little deaf himself.

'But it's not beyond the wit of man to arrange the seating of a meeting—'

'No, it isn't,' snapped Bartlett. 'And it's not beyond the wit of man either to rig up a convenient little system of headphones and microphones and God knows what else; and we could all learn the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, if it came to that!'

It was becoming increasingly obvious that there was a festering, strangely personal antipathy between the two men, and few of the older Syndics could understand it. Bartlett was usually a man of wonderfully equable temperament. And he hadn't finished yet: 'You all saw

the report from the hospital. You all saw the audiographs. The fact of the matter is that Quinn is very deaf. *Very* deaf.'

'He seemed to be able to hear us all perfectly well, didn't he?' Roope spoke the words quietly, and if Quinn himself had been there he would almost certainly have missed them. But the committee didn't, and it became perfectly clear that Roope had a point. A strong point.

The Dean turned again to the Secretary. 'Mm. You know it's amazing that he *did* seem to hear us so well, isn't it?'

A desultory discussion broke out, gradually drifting further and further away from the immediate decision that still remained to be taken. Mrs Seth, the Chairman of the Science Committee, thought about her father ... He had gone deaf very quickly when he was in his late forties and when she was only a schoolgirl; and he had been dismissed from his job. Redundancy money, and a meagre disability pension from his firm – oh yes, they'd tried to be sympathetic and fair. But he'd had such a clear brain, and he'd never worked again. Confidence irreparably shattered. He could still have done a whole host of jobs infinitely more efficiently than half the layabouts sitting idling on their backsides on office stools. It made her so very sad and so very cross to think of him ...

Suddenly she was aware that they were voting. Five hands went up almost immediately for Fielding, and she thought, as the Secretary did, that he was probably the best of the bunch. She would vote for him too. But for

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some curious reason her hand remained on the blotting paper in front of her.

'And those for Quinn, please?'

Three hands, including Roope's, were raised; and then a fourth. The Dean began counting from the left: 'One, two, three ... four ...' Another hand, and the Dean started again: 'One, two, three, four, five. It looks—' And then, slowly and dramatically, Mrs Seth raised her own hand.

'Six.'

'Well, you've made your decision, ladies and gentlemen. Quinn has been appointed. Close vote: six-five. But there it is.' He turned rather awkwardly to his left. 'Are you happy, Mr Secretary?'

'Let's just say we all have our own views, Dean, and the view of the Appointments Committee is not mine. But, as you say, the committee has made its decision and it's my job to accept that decision.'

Roope sat back once more staring vaguely at the ceiling, the yellow pencil once more between his teeth. He may have been inwardly gloating over his minor triumph, but his face remained impassive – detached almost.

Ten minutes later the Dean and the Secretary walked side by side down the flight of stairs that led to the ground floor and to Bartlett's office. 'You really think we've made a bad mistake, Tom?'

Bartlett stopped and looked up at the tall, grey-haired theologian. 'Oh, yes, Felix. Make no mistake about that. We have!'

Roope pushed his way past them on the stairs and volunteered a vague 'Cheerio'.

'Er - goodnight,' said the Dean; but Bartlett remained darkly silent, and watched Roope go before slowly walking down the few remaining stairs and entering his office.

Above his door was a twin-coloured light, similar to the sort found in hospitals, which was operated from two switches on the desk inside. The first switch turned on a red light, signifying that Bartlett was in session with someone, and did not wish to be (and would not be) disturbed; a second switch turned on a green light, indicating that one was free to knock and enter. When neither switch was depressed, no light showed, and the conclusion thence to be drawn was that the room was empty. Since his appointment to the Secretaryship, Bartlett had firmly maintained that if anyone wished to discuss a matter of importance with him, he himself should have the courtesy to ensure an uninterrupted, confidential chat; and his staff fully appreciated and almost invariably observed the arrangement. On the very few occasions that the rule had been infringed, Bartlett had displayed quite uncharacteristic anger.

Once inside the Secretary snapped down the red switch before opening a small cabinet and pouring himself a glass of gin and dry vermouth. Then he sat down behind his desk, opened a drawer and took out a packet of cigarettes. He never smoked at meetings, but he lit one now, inhaled deeply, and sipped his drink. He would send a telegram to Quinn in the morning: it was too late to send one now. He opened his appointments

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folder once more and reread the information on Quinn. Huh! They'd picked the wrong fellow – of course they had! All because of Roope, the bloody idiot!

He put the papers away neatly, cleared his desk and sat back in his chair – a curious half-smile forming on his lips.