



Natural selection

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He sat hunched up in the far corner, by the window. His hands were clasped around a black bag that sat on his lap. He held it a little too tightly for comfort. It contained the tools of his trade and he hadn't trusted it to the overhead rack. The train rattled on toward London and the carriage danced in time to the chatter of the rails. It was two weeks now since they had called him up and told him the time and the place. He looked out of the window at the monotonous gray roofs of the houses they were passing. The slates were made shiny by the drizzling rain that scudded in dark streaks over the town and ran in rivulets across the train window.

There was a perceptible slowing and the clickety clack from the rails gradually changed from Allegretto to Largo. The steam train eased itself into the great funereal hall of King's Cross station with a metallic groaning of brakes on wheels and a final hiss of steam as the train came to a stop. He stood up, stretched and put his coat on, still holding his bag. With his free hand he gripped the brown leather strap that held the window up and released the latch. The window slid down with a thump. The silence was broken by the new noises of the station. He leaned out, looking down the platform, grasped the outside door handle and opened the door. He had never been to London before and was unprepared for the sudden bustle around him.

On the adjacent platform, there was a shrill whistle and a cadence of carriage doors slamming as the York express prepared to leave. A woman was making announcements over the loudspeakers. The words bounced off the sides of the cavernous hall and were unrecognizably distorted and hollow. He walked to the exit and found what he was seeking. On the wall was a map of the London Underground. He studied the colored lines, which ran across the map like so many intertwined snakes.

The Underground platform was long and curved gently. It was mid morning and rush hour was long past. He stepped forward and eyed the live rail speculatively. A sudden rush of air furrowed his hair and was the harbinger of squat rounded carriages that rumbled from the tunnel at the far end, driving him back from the edge. The doors slid open and he stepped in. Cloth upholstered seats faced each other from the sides of the carriage. Opposite sat a man dressed in black: black suit, black overcoat, black furled umbrella puddling on the floor, all topped with a black bowler. Next to him a middle-aged lady in a cardigan and skirt was knitting something that might have been a scarf—or a pair of socks. He

smiled again. This was the stuff of caricature. He might have been in the middle of one of Giles' cartoons in the Daily Express.

He counted off the stations and stood up in plenty of time to be able to slip through the doors when they opened at London Bridge. Within five minutes he had reached the road that ran past the front of the hospital. There were two large iron gates, flanked by gray stone pillars. High railings ran the length of the street interspersed every twenty yards by similar pillars. He walked through the gates. Behind the railings was a forecourt. At the back of the forecourt a short, broad flight of stone steps ran up to a series of archways set in the center of a building with tall windows, which were latticed and rounded at the top. Above the arches were more pillars and the whole surmounted by a broad triangular lintel.

He walked past the statue of a man whose ordinariness seemed to contrast with his august surroundings. He was identified only as Mr. Thomas Guy and appeared indifferent to the activity around him. The pigeons had left no aspect of him undecorated, and a few of the birds clucked and gossiped in a corner of the court. Up the steps, on the right was an opened door and behind a wooden counter sat a man in a drab uniform, white shirt and tie.

"My name is Simon Felsper. I am looking for the Dean's office. I have an appointment at noon."

"Ah, well then. You want to be in the far corner of the quadrangle on the left. Up the stairs. Second floor."

A tiny smile had crossed the man's face. It was barely noticeable, but it was there and it was disconcerting. There was a reason for it. The porter had identified this stranger as a candidate for medical school about to go for an interview. What the porter and everyone else in the medical school knew was that the Dean had an eccentric way of selecting candidates. The Dean had lost an eye during the war to an errant bomb. He was not on active duty. He simply was in the wrong neighborhood when one of the flying bombs floated down to land in a cluster of houses. Normally, he wore a convincing glass prosthesis in the now empty socket. Being a flamboyant person by nature, he had decided to emphasize his loss by sporting an opaque black monocle. When interviewing prospective medical students, though, he always removed the glass eye and screwed the black monocle firmly into place, covering the empty socket. The candidate sitting opposite him on the other side of his desk would be asked a seemingly innocuous

question such as “Why do you want to become a doctor?”

When the candidate embarked on the inevitable list of talents—working for the good of humanity, caring for the sick—the Dean would relax his facial muscles. The monocle would fall from its place, revealing the eye socket. If the candidate faltered in his speech or his face betrayed any trace of emotion, he was rejected. It was not a fair system, but it did ensure that the medical students at Guy’s Hospital had an individuality not always found in the other teaching hospitals. Such was the reason for the porter’s faint grin.

As Simon turned to go, the porter said quietly, “Good luck, son.” Simon mumbled “Thank you” and turned right, through more arches.

He gripped the bag more firmly, reassured by its heft. He was annoyed by the porter’s avuncular use of “son” when addressing him.

He walked along the path toward the other end of the quadrangle. The grass by the side was brown and worn by errant feet. Even the clusters of dandelions were wilted. Only the fluting chatter from groups of nurses raised the level of the place one step above a mausoleum.

In the far corner was a small archway leading to a staircase. There was an ancient wooden smell to the corridor above. It was a mixture of old pipe tobacco, brown paper, and glue. Halfway down the corridor was an oak door with gold lettering on the center panel. It said simply “DEAN.” Simon knocked. A tall, angular man opened the door. His most prominent feature was his nose, which hooked over his thin lips. He wore the type of spectacles that was much in fashion; the lenses were surmounted by half frames in dark tortoiseshell. Simon had the impression of an angry wasp and flinched slightly.

He recovered and said, “I am Simon Felsper and I have an appointment with the Dean.”

The wasp moved back and said, “Come in, Mr. Felsper. I am Mr. Vespa, the Dean’s personal private assistant. Take a seat.”

Simon sat, his bag upon his lap. The Dean’s personal private assistant sat. The old school clock on the wall ticked, deafeningly.

After several minutes Mr. Vespa leaned back in his chair and regarded Simon. “I will offer you a small wager that I know what is in that bag you hold in your hands.” Everyone, sooner or later, remarked upon the bag and almost everyone assumed that it was his lunch. Mr. Vespa put his fingers together and rested his elbows on his desk.

“A stethoscope, an otoscope, a head mirror, and a reflex hammer. Am I right?” He smiled pleasantly.

Simon was dumbfounded. The man had listed the bag’s contents precisely.

“Something of that sort, yes.”

Mr. Vespa bowed his head and returned his attention to his papers. “You and every other candidate,” he murmured. Then, looking at Simon again, he

said, “You may go in now” and indicated a door to the right of his desk.

The Dean was a gaunt but dapper man. In build, he resembled his personal assistant. The resemblance ended there. The Dean wore a black coat that was opened to reveal a brocade waistcoat. He had a gray silk tie carefully knotted under a wing collar. His hair was gray and sparse. He arose to greet Simon, proffering a hand with long, delicate fingers. What made him truly remarkable, though, was his face. His left cheek was chiseled in the classic style, but its twin on the right was pocked and scarred. The scar tissue drew up the corner of his mouth into a sardonic grin that was a permanent rebuke to the world around him. Even more strikingly, he wore a jet black monocle. The lower edge was tucked into a fold under his eye and the left eyebrow frowned threateningly above it. A black silk cord dangled from the monocle’s frame and disappeared into a pocket of the waistcoat.

“Good morning, Mr. Felsper. Sit.”

For the second time that morning Simon did as he was bade.

“Did you have a pleasant journey?”

Nod.

“Not too tiring?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, tell me then, why do you wish to embark on a career in the Medical Profession?” It was definitely capitalized.

Simon had no intention of telling this man the truth, and yet, when he came to speak, it was in a quite unexpected direction.

“The truth is that I really want to go on the stage, but I am afraid I have little talent in that direction. I have never liked mathematics. I am not very good with languages, and the only branch of science that interests me is zoology. I think that I would be a good teacher, but I have tastes beyond the salary that I might expect there. So you see, sir, that only leaves Medicine. I must say, though, that I think I would make a good doctor. I have always liked people and I think we all have a responsibility to—”

During this last sentence he noticed that the Dean was surveying him intently. Simon felt that he was fixed in that awful gaze like some insect on a microscope stage. As he looked back at the older man, he saw an eyebrow relax and the monocle fell from the man’s face and dropped behind the desk. Simon was shocked to see what was revealed. Not two lids sewn discreetly shut to hide the obscenity that lay behind. There was no polished glass or plastic eye, mimicking nature’s art. All that confronted him was an empty pink socket in whose depths lurked unmentionable things. Simon stopped. For two seconds they looked at each other. Then Simon said, “Sir, you just dropped your monocle. You probably couldn’t see it, of course. I just thought I had better tell you.” He said it in the tone of a helpful bystander informing a man that his fly was open.

The Dean sat motionless. His voice dropped to a quiet rasp.

"I think that will be all for today, Mr. Felsper."

Simon waited.

"You may go," said the Dean, indicating the door. "That will be all for today."

Simon felt the abyss open. "I am supposed to see all these other people," he said, pulling out a list.

"That is no longer necessary."

Simon stumbled down the corridor and found himself out in the quadrangle again. He retraced his steps and once again sat in the corner of the compartment, riding the train back north. Nothing had changed. Everything had changed. He looked out of the window at the same serried rows of tenements, the same slanting rain. If he had just stuck to his script, all would have been well. He had no idea what he was going to do now. He realized, with a sickening lurch in his stomach, that today had been the first time that he had done anything on his own. His first foray into the world that was to be his home for the next half century or so. He had failed. His one act of independence and he was rejected as inadequate.

Today was a result of a decision that he alone had taken. Up to now his life had been directed for him. In his first school, at the age of ten, he had written an essay for the "Hygiene" class. The topic was "The Ear." Most of the rest of his class had lavished their attention on the virtues of hearing, of music, speech, and the sounds of birds. Simon had learned words like stapes and malleus and utricle, and his essay was a unique version of how the ear worked. Mr. Mulcock, the teacher, had cast a quizzical eye at him when he returned Simon's work.

"You are going to be a doctor—or a plagiarist!" he had said.

And so it was decided. Simon did not know what a plagiarist was, so he accepted the alternative.

At Cambridge, he found out that they were going to make him into only half a doctor. He attended all the required classes in Pathology, Anatomy, Physiology, and Biochemistry but found that if he was going to be a complete doctor, he had to choose one of the London medical schools. He had applied to Guy's Hospital. It was completely his own decision. Now it was over, finished, failed. He had no idea what he was going to do.

He sat staring into the distance of the murky English landscape, but his eyes were unseeing. After another twenty minutes he straightened his shoulders and focused on the travel advertisements on the opposite wall of the compartment. He seemed to come to a decision. There were no other passengers in the compartment. He was quite alone. He stood up and opened the window. The blast of rain-filled air from the open window tore at his hair and soaked his cheek. It gave him the courage that he needed. He looked at the track snaking below him. The noise

from the wheels drumming over the metal tracks was deafening. He wondered if he had the courage to do what seemed to be the only sensible thing and decided that he had. He turned and picked up the bag from his seat and went back to the window. He was resolute now.

One by one he emptied the contents of the bag onto the track outside and watched them flash and bounce and skitter away into the gloom behind the train. He closed the window and went to sleep for the rest of the journey.

When he reached his lodging in Cambridge he went to bed, and that is where he stayed for the next two days. The rain did eventually let up and so did Simon's depression. He ventured out again and took a couple of meals in College.

He returned to his lodgings one afternoon to find the day's post lying on the table in the hallway. There were four or five letters and one was for him. The envelope bore the crest of Guy's hospital. Simon felt a flash of anger at the unfairness of what they had done to him, and the wound, which had been healing nicely, began to open again. He would like to have had the determination to throw the thing in the waste paper basket, but, of course, he didn't.

He drew out the letter and unfolded it. It was hand-written on thick parchment. The writing was an elegant copper plate, all loops and curlicues.

Dear Mr. Felsper,

I am pleased to inform you that you will be admitted to Guy's Hospital Medical School. You are required to fill out the accompanying forms and return them to me before the 30th of next month.

There followed an illegible signature and the imprimatur of the Dean of the Medical School.

As the astonished Simon read this, he became aware that there were actually two letters, the second one folded in with the first. This second letter was in a different handwriting, but was also addressed to him.

Dear Mr. Felsper,

I am taking the liberty of adding my comments to the Dean's letter. This is a very unusual situation and would be offensive to the Dean so I hope that you will bear this in mind. The Dean was most impressed by your interview with him and, in fact, never tires of relating the salient details to all of his colleagues and friends. Never before has anyone pointed out that his monocle had dropped and certainly nobody has ever pointed to his lack of sight in that eye as a reason why he might have ignored the occurrence. He told me to cancel the rest of your interviews because, in his words, "There goes a lad who will never lie to a patient and will never be afraid to give a patient all the information, whether good or bad." I have to add that the story seems to grow in the retelling. It is, I fear, the stuff of which legends are born!

Yours faithfully,

Grant Vespa, Personal Private Assistant to the Dean

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