

PAUL S A REDMOND

THE NEWINGTON QUARTET

BOOK THREE

CASTLES IN VAIN



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How can we go but where our good intentions lead us?

CHAPTER ONE

“Where did you do your National Service?” The question was fired at Richard, like a bullet, by the military-looking man on his right who had previously not uttered a sound other than the merest grunt of introduction when the interview had commenced. “I always think,” continued the questioner, addressing the remainder of his companions who, by their stifled yawns, indicated that they had heard it before, “that military service makes men of them! Eh?” He paused and snorted. “Turns boys into men, what?”

Richard's heart dropped. Up to this point, with the scales tipped heavily in his favour when his education and qualifications were reviewed, he was sure that he had dealt with the questions well. Now it looked as if he would go down on this one.

“Not that I was in favour of a reduction in the period for conscription,” added the Military man briskly. The Chairman's eyebrows rose as he looked to Richard for his answer.

“I'm afraid I didn't do National Service,” he began hesitantly in a low voice. “I was allowed deferment to complete my education and the call-up was ended during that period. It is in my application.”

“That's quite satisfactory,” said the Chairman reassuringly. He turned to his side. “As conscription has ended, Colonel, we will be somewhat handicapped in our future recruitment if we press for National Service as a prequalification.”

The Colonel coloured rapidly and snorted his disapproval of the entire situation and the sad and sorry state to which things had come. For seven or more years he had relied on this, his sole question at such panels, and now his foundation was being eroded. He glared fiercely at Richard as if this undermining was entirely his fault.

“Would you tell us why you wish to become a teacher,” said the Chairman in a neutral voice, glancing sideways in the opposite direction to the Colonel, and receiving the approbation of both the Clergyman and the plump, middle aged, woman who sat beyond. Richard's heart dropped further. Here was the sort of question that he dreaded most. The answer would not be a question of fact, an affirmative, or a negative. Instead he had to try and assess the motive, disposition, and personal belief of the interviewer and then attempt to couch his answer in the most appropriate manner.

“That is a very difficult question to answer,” he began, “because the answer, if one is to do justice to the matter, is long and quite complex.” A feeling of panic ran through his mind as he wondered if his words appeared rude and his tone, smug. And, oh Lord, what was the question?

“Mmmmmmm.....” nodded the Chairman, seeming to accept Richard's premise.

He took a deep breath. “Firstly, I think one must have a basic and unalienable love of one's subject matter and an overwhelming desire to pass on one's knowledge. Secondly, there is a vocational reward in teaching; in taking the raw material of young, innocent, enthusiastic children and moulding them into - the future generation!” He finished on a note of triumph, having begun to warm to his chosen subject, but his spirits were almost immediately dampened by the realisation that he had failed to answer the specific question. The omission was either overlooked or considered insignificant for the next question came from the woman.

“Can you tell us, then, Mr Brown, a little more about your family, your parents, interests, and so on? Application forms are all very fine but they really tell us so little and, as Mr Larkins said, we must get to know you if we are to do justice to your application and arrive at the correct decision.”

Although he could not recall the Chairman saying anything of that kind, Richard's confidence began to return, and he silently thanked the questioner. "Let me see," he said, casually crossing his legs, "where to begin, and what to leave out. Well, my mother is a Scot by birth; she's secretary of the Eastgate Operatic Society. I could say that, with the exception of my father, music dominates the household. My sister, Sandra, is very musical and is quite an accomplished pianist."

"And what instrument do you play, Mr Brown? We have a fine school orchestra."

Richard suppressed a groan and watched the papers in his file being turned over and scrutinised. He had walked straight into that one. Why could he not be more careful in what he said? Now, how to answer?

"I'm afraid I was forced to discontinue my music lessons and devote my time to other studies," he said.

"The ability to play the pianoforte is an asset," said the Headmaster.

"I can still sight-read," Richard added, wondering if he could, and praying that they would not suddenly decide to test him. After all, he hadn't applied for the position of a Music Teacher, had he?

That is an asset," murmured the Clergyman, nodding.

"And your father?" prompted the woman in an almost kind voice. "He has his own business?" Though it was presented as a question to help him, Richard knew that all this information was there on the table, before them.

"Yes," he answered. "He owns a small building business."

"You didn't consider joining him, then?" said the Headmaster sharply. "You are the only son, are you not?"

That is a shrewd question, Richard thought. Goodness, that struck right to the heart of the matter, almost as if his father had suggested that the question be asked! "No," he answered. "The company hasn't really taken on the proportions of a family business as yet. My father started it in 1946 after he was demobbed."

"Was he an Army man?" barked the Colonel.

"He was. He was in the Royal Engineers but attached to a special unit at Canterbury. I know he saw service in both North Africa and Germany, and he received a decoration for gallantry, although he doesn't like to talk about it. He elected to come back to civilian life as soon as the War was over."

"What rank?"

"Nothing special. He was a Major at the end."

"Sounds reasonable to me," grunted the Colonel, beaming. It was clear that the *son* of someone who had seen military service would suffice in the future. He had established a new bridgehead.

Richard nearly went on to say that he thought that his mother had influenced his father's decision, but checked himself. "Anyway," he continued, "he started in a small way and built up the business to the present size where it employs about thirty employees, and he's a Town Councillor." It was an illogical addition, the information relating to his father's position on the local authority, but Richard had not included this fact in his application, and now he thought that it might impress the panel.

"There was - there is - no question of you going into your father's business? This is an important point as we must establish your commitment to the career you are seeking to pursue. There should be no alternative for you to use as an escape route. Teaching can be arduous and frustrating. It is never easy."

Richard uncrossed his legs and sat upright. How they misunderstood him, yet how difficult it would be to explain fully! He would try. "I would be less than honest if I did not admit that it is my father's wish that I should join him; that the Company should become A.J.Brown & Son, Limited. I must say that my father is skilled with his hands and that I have inherited that talent. But I am not interested in the business and, anyway, it would be just too easy for me. I want to make my own way in the World; to carve out my own life and establish my independence. My father had his opportunity. I feel that I must have mine. So I have steadfastly rejected his proposition." He thought that sounded plausible if not a little grand,

and wondered whether anyone before had said it at an interview.

“And your father?”

“My father is aware of my views and that the matter is closed.” Richard picked his words with care. His interviewers failed to grasp their full significance.

“You say you are neither married, nor engaged,” stated the woman. “Are you courting?”

“No.”

“Teachers should be married,” she asserted. Richard wondered why.

“Yes,” said Mr Larkins to Richard's dismay, picking up the theme and assuming his most headmasterly posture, “we like our young teachers to be married and settled. It gives them stability.” He paused, then added, “we also like them to be married to the right kind of wife!”

“Yes, the right kind of wife,” repeated the woman.

It had never occurred to Richard to consider what might constitute the 'right' kind of wife for a prospective Assistant Mathematics Master. His knowledge of probability assured and reassured him that somewhere, at large, was a number of eligible young ladies whose sole aspiration was to marry and stabilise the life of a prospective Assistant Mathematics Master, if only one could be found. There it rested, with probability, because other than the odd school-time fantasy and subsequent, occasional, brief flirtation, he had enjoyed little contact, and no success with the fairer sex. It was not to be described as a closed book, but opportunity or, rather, the lack of it, had prevented him from delving further than the first chapter. He was confident, however, that he knew the outline of the plot.

“The right kind of wife,” echoed the Clergyman, nodding and smiling benignly.

“But, of course, that is one thing we must leave in your hands, Mr Brown,” said the woman.

That was something of a relief. Richard bowed his head and looked at his damp palms. “I'm afraid I haven't had much time for that sort of thing - what with my studies,” he said, sheepishly and apologetically.

“Quite correct, too,” exclaimed Mr Larkins, looking for support one way then the other.

“Just so,” added the Clergyman. There was a lull as the Headmaster shuffled, sorted and consulted his papers. He scribbled a brief note and it was passed along the length of the table, receiving silent approval.

“Well, Mr Brown,” he said, leaning forward and placing his hands on the table before him, “I think we have gone as far as we need to at present. Perhaps you would withdraw while we consult, but I would like you to remain in the School for a short while, if that is not inconvenient, just in case we wish to raise any further matters with you.” He rose, taking the small silver bell from beside his file and ringing it vigorously. Richard automatically stood, his mind in a turmoil. Behind him the door opened and the middle-aged school-secretary, whom he had met on his arrival, appeared. His thoughts were still confused as he blurted out the words “thank you” to the members of the panel who remained seated as they watched the Headmaster and the secretary usher him through the doorway into the outer office.

“Rather than bring you all this distance to no avail,” continued Mr Larkins once the door had sealed the interview room, “I've asked Mrs Hiller to find Mr Crompton, my Deputy, so that he can show you over the School while we are deliberating. Twenty minutes should suffice and there is always the improbability, no matter how remote, that you might decide that you did not want to come and join us here. I assume that you are in no hurry to get away?”

“Oh, no,” murmured Richard. “That will be fine.”

“Sit down there, then. I wouldn't expect that Mr Crompton will be long.”