

Hector Comment?

Irwin Commotionné. Shell-shocked.

There is a perceptible moment.

Hector C'est possible. Commotionné. Oui, c'est le mot juste.

Headmaster Permettez-moi d'introduire M. Irwin, notre nouveau professeur.

Hector Enchanté.

Headmaster Ce que je veux . . .

Hector Veuillez . . . veu . . . ille . . .

Headmaster Vei-uille. Enough of this . . . silliness. Not silliness, no . . . but . . . Mr Hector, you are aware that these pupils are Oxbridge candidates.

Hector Are they? Are you sure? Nobody has told me.

Headmaster Mr Irwin will be coaching them, but it's a question of time. I have found him three lessons a week and I was wondering . . .

Hector No, Headmaster. (*He covers his ears.*)

Headmaster Purely on a temporary basis. It will be the last time, I promise.

Hector Last time was the last time also.

Headmaster I am thinking of the boys.

Hector I, too. Non. Non. Absolument non. Non. Non. Non. C'est hors de question. Et puis, si vous voulez m'excuser, je dois continuer la leçon. ~À tout à l'heure.

Headmaster looks at Irwin.

Headmaster Fuck.

They go as the bell goes.

Rudge It's true, though, sir. We don't have much time.

Hector Now, who goes home?

There are no offers.

Surely I can give someone a lift?

Who's on pillion duty?

Dakin?

Dakin Not me, sir. Going into town.

Hector Crowther?

Crowther Off for a run, sir.

Hector Akthar?

Akthar Computer club, sir.

Posner I'll come, sir.

Hector No. No. Never mind.

Scripps (*resignedly*) I'll come, sir.

Hector Ah, Scripps.

Hector goes.

Scripps The things I do for Jesus. (*As he goes he gives Dakin the finger.*)

Posner I'd go.

I'm never asked.

Dakin You don't fit the bill.

Timms Me neither.

Dakin I tell you, be grateful.

Irwin (*distributing exercise books*) Dull.

Dull.

Abysmally dull.

A triumph . . . the dullest of the lot.

Dakin I got all the points.

Irwin I didn't say it was wrong. I said it was dull.

Its sheer competence was staggering.

Interest nil.

Oddity nil.

Singularity nowhere.

Dakin Actually, sir, I know tradition requires it of the eccentric schoolmaster, but do you mind not throwing the books? They tend to fall apart.

Crowther It's the way we've been taught, sir.

Lockwood Mrs Lintott discourages the dramatic, sir.
'This is history not histrionics.'

Timms You've got crap handwriting, sir.

I read Irwin as 'I ruin'. Significant or what?

Irwin It's your eyesight that's bad and we know what that's caused by.

Timms Sir! Is that a coded reference to the mythical dangers of self-abuse?

Irwin Possibly. It might even be a joke.

Timms A joke, sir. Oh. Are jokes going to be a feature, sir? We need to know as it affects our mind-set.

Akthar You don't object to our using the expression, 'mind-set', do you, sir? Mr Hector doesn't care for it. He says if he catches any of us using it he'll kick our arses from bollocks to sundown, sir.

Irwin regards them for a moment or two in silence.

Irwin At the time of the Reformation there were fourteen foreskins of Christ preserved, but it was thought that the church of St John Lateran in Rome had the authentic prepuce.

Dakin Don't think we're shocked by your mention of the word 'foreskin', sir.

Crowther No, sir. Some of us even have them.

Lockwood Not Posner, though, sir. Posner's like, you know, Jewish.

It's one of several things Posner doesn't have.

Posner mouths 'Fuck off.'

Lockwood That's not racist, though, sir.

Crowther Isn't it?

Lockwood It's race-related, but it's not racist.

Akthar Actually, I've not got one either. Moslems don't.

Another pause while Irwin regards the class.

Irwin Has anybody been to Rome?

No? Well, you will be competing against boys and girls who have. And they will have been to Rome and Venice, Florence and Perugia, and they will doubtless have done courses on what they have seen there. So they will know when they come to do an essay like this on the Church on the eve of the Reformation that some silly nonsense on the foreskins of Christ will come in handy so that their essays, unlike yours, will not be dull.

Think bored examiners.

Think sixty, think a hundred and sixty papers even more competent than the last so that the fourteen foreskins of Christ will come as a real ray of sunshine.

Come the fourteen foreskins of Christ and they'll think they've won the pools.

Irwin pauses as before.

You should hate them.

Crowther Who, sir?

Irwin Hate them because these boys and girls against whom you are to compete have been groomed like thoroughbreds for this one particular race. Put head to head with them and, on the evidence of these essays, you have none of you got a hope.

Crowther So why are we bothering?

Irwin I don't know.

I don't know at all.

You want it, I imagine. Or your parents want it. The Headmaster certainly wants it.

But I wouldn't waste the money. Judging by these, there is no point.

Go to Newcastle and be happy.

Long pause.

Of course, there is another way.

Crowther How?

Timms Cheat?

Irwin Possibly.

The bell rings and he is going out.

And Dakin.

Dakin Yes, sir?

Irwin Don't take the piss.

There isn't time. (*He goes.*)

Timms What a wanker.

Dakin They all have to do it, don't they?

Crowther Do what?

Dakin Show you they're still in the game. Foreskins and stuff. 'Ooh, sir! You devil!'

Scripps Have a heart. He's only five minutes older than we are.

Dakin What happened with Hector? On the bike?

Scripps As per. Except I managed to get my bag down.

I think he thought he'd got me going. In fact it was my *Tudor Economic Documents, Volume Two.*

They stop talking as Posner comes up.

Posner Because I was late growing up I am not included in this kind of conversation. I am not supposed to understand. Actually, they would be surprised how much I know about them and their bodies and everything else.

Scripps Dakin's navel, I remember, was small and hard like an unripe blackberry. Posner's navel was softer and more like that of the eponymous orange. Posner envied Dakin his navel and all the rest of him. That this envy might amount to love does not yet occur to Posner, as to date it has only caused him misery and dissatisfaction.

Posner goes and they resume the conversation.

Dakin I wish sometimes he'd just go for it.

Scripps Posner?

Dakin Hector.

Scripps He does go for it. That's the trouble.

Dakin In controlled conditions. Not on the fucking bike. I'm terrified.

Scripps Of the sex?

Dakin No. Of the next roundabout.

Rudge is having sex, apparently.

Rudge Only on Fridays. I need the weekend free for
rugger. And golf.

Nobody thinks I have a hope in this exam.
Fuck 'em.

Dakin Currently I am seeing Fiona, the Headmaster's
secretary, not that he knows. We haven't done it yet, but
when we do I'm hoping one of the times might be on his
study floor.

Scripps Shift!

Dakin It's like the Headmaster says: one should have
targets.

Staff room.

Mrs Lintott The new man seems clever.

Hector He does. Depressingly so.

Mrs Lintott Men are, at history, of course.

Hector Why history particularly?

Mrs Lintott Story-telling so much of it, which is what
men do naturally.

My ex, for instance. He told stories.

Hector Was he an historian?

Mrs Lintott Lintott? No. A chartered accountant.
Legged it to Dumfries.

Hector Dakin's a good-looking boy, though somehow
sad.

Mrs Lintott You always think they're sad, Hector, every,
every time. Actually I wouldn't have said he was sad.
I would have said he was cunt-struck.

Hector Dorothy.

Mrs Lintott I'd have thought you'd have liked that. It's a
compound adjective. You like compound adjectives.

Hector He's clever, though.

Mrs Lintott They're all clever. I saw to that.

Hector You give them an education. I give them the
wherewithal to resist it. We are that entity beloved of our
Headmaster, a 'team'.

Mrs Lintott You take a longer view than most. These
days, teachers just remember the books they discovered
and loved as students and shove them on the syllabus.
Then they wonder why their pupils aren't as keen as they
are. No discovery is why. *Catcher in the Rye* is a current
example. Or have I got the whole thing wrong?

Hector Maybe Auden has it right.

Mrs Lintott That's a change.

Hector Dorothy.

'Let each child that's in your care . . .'

Mrs Lintott I know, . . . have as much neurosis as the
child can bear.'

And how many children had Auden, pray?

Classroom.

Irwin So we arrive eventually at the less-than-startling
discovery that so far as the poets are concerned, the First
World War gets the thumbs-down.

We have the mountains of dead on both sides, right . . .
'hecatombs', as you all seem to have read somewhere . . .
Anybody know what it means?

Posner 'Great public sacrifice of many victims, originally of oxen.'

Dakin Which, sir, since Wilfred Owen says men were dying like cattle, is the appropriate word.

Irwin True, but no need to look so smug about it. What else? Come on, tick them all off.

Crowther Trench warfare.

Lockwood Barrenness of the strategy.

Timms On both sides.

Akthar Stupidity of the generals.

Timms Donkeys, sir.

Dakin Haig particularly.

Posner Humiliation of Germany at Versailles. Redrawing of national borders.

Crowther Ruhr and the Rhineland.

Akthar Mass unemployment. Inflation.

Timms Collapse of the Weimar Republic. Internal disorder. And . . . The Rise of Hitler!

Irwin So. Our overall conclusion is that the origins of the Second War lie in the unsatisfactory outcome of the First.

Timms (*doubtfully*) Yes. (*with more certainty*) Yes.

Others nod.

Irwin First class. Bristol welcomes you with open arms. Manchester longs to have you. You can walk into Leeds. But I am a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, and I have just read seventy papers all saying the same thing and I am asleep . . .

Scripps But it's all true.

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Irwin What has that got to do with it? What has that got to do with anything?

Let's go back to 1914 and I'll put you a different case. Try this for size.

Germany does not want war and if there is an arms race it is Britain who is leading it. Though there's no reason why we should want war. Nothing in it for us. Better stand back and let Germany and Russia fight it out while we take the imperial pickings.

These are facts.

Why do we not care to acknowledge them? The cattle, the body count. We still don't like to admit the war was even partly our fault because so many of our people died. A photograph on every mantelpiece. And all this mourning has veiled the truth. It's not so much lest we forget, as lest we remember. Because you should realise that so far as the Cenotaph and the Last Post and all that stuff is concerned, there's no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.

And Dakin.

Dakin Sir?

Irwin You were the one who was morally superior about Haig.

Dakin Passchendaele. The Somme. He was a butcher, sir.

Irwin Yes, but at least he delivered the goods. No, no, the real enemy to Haig's subsequent reputation was the Unknown Soldier. If Haig had had any sense he'd have had him disinterred and shot all over again for giving comfort to the enemy.

Lockwood So what about the poets, then?

Irwin What about them? If you read what they actually say as distinct from what they write, most of them seem to have enjoyed the war.

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Siegfried Sassoon was a good officer. Saint Wilfred Owen couldn't wait to get back to his company. Both of them surprisingly bloodthirsty.

Poetry is good up to a point. Adds flavour.

Dakin It's the foreskins again, isn't it? Bit of garnish.

Irwin (*ignoring this*) But if you want to relate the politics to the war, forget Wilfred Owen and try Kipling:

Akthar Thanks a lot.

Irwin

'If any question why we died,
Tell them because our fathers lied.'

In other words . . .

Timms Oh no, sir. With respect, can I stop you? No, with a poem or any work of art we can never say 'in other words'. If it is a work of art there are no other words.

Lockwood Yes, sir. That's why it is a work of art in the first place.

You can't look at a Rembrandt and say 'in other words', can you, sir?

Irwin is puzzled where all this comes from but is distracted by Rudge.

Rudge So what's the verdict then, sir? What do I write down?

Irwin You can write down, Rudge, that 'I must not write down every word that teacher says.'

You can also write down that the First World War was a mistake. It was not a tragedy.

And as for the truth, Scripps, which you were worrying about: truth is no more at issue in an examination than thirst at a wine-tasting or fashion at a striptease.

Dakin Do you really believe that, sir, or are you just trying to make us think?

Scripps You can't explain away the poetry, sir.

Lockwood No, sir. Art wins in the end.

The bell goes.

Scripps What about this, sir?

'Those long uneven lines

Standing as patiently

As if they were stretched outside

The Oval or Villa Park,

The crowns of hats, the sun

On moustached archaic faces

Grinning as if it were all

An August Bank Holiday lark . . .'

The others take up the lines of Larkin's poem, maybe saying a couple of lines each through to the end, as they go – but matter of factly.

Lockwood

'Never such innocence,

Never before or since,

As changed itself to past

Without a word –

Akthar

' – the men

Leaving the gardens tidy,

Posner

'The thousands of marriages

Lasting a little while longer:

Timms

'Never such innocence again.'

Irwin How come you know all this by heart? (*Baffled, shouts.*) Not that it answers the question. (*He goes.*)

Scripps So much for our glorious dead.

Dakin I know. Still, apropos Passchendaele, can I bring you up to speed on Fiona?

Scripps No.

Dakin She's my Western Front. Last night, for instance, meeting only token resistance, I reconnoitred the ground . . . Are you interested in this?

Scripps No. Go on.

Dakin As far as . . . the actual place.

Scripps Shit.

Dakin I mean, not onto it and certainly not into it. But up to it. At which point the Hun, if I may so characterise the fair Fiona, suddenly dug in, no further deployments were sanctioned, and around 23.00 hours our forces withdrew.

Like whereas I'd begun the evening thinking this might be the big push.

Scripps You do have a nice time.

Dakin And the beauty of it is, the metaphor really fits. I mean, just as moving up to the front-line troops

presumably had to pass the sites of previous battles where every inch of territory has been hotly contested, so it is with me . . . like particularly her tits, which only fell after a prolonged campaign some three weeks ago and to which I now have immediate access and which were indeed the start line for last night's abortive thrust southwards.

Scripps I can't take any more. Enough.

Dakin Still, at least I'm doing better than Felix.

Posner Felix?

Scripps Why? He doesn't . . .

Dakin Tries to. Chases her round the desk hoping to cop a feel.

Scripps I don't want to think about it.

Dakin He's only human.

Posner Actually, when you think about it the metaphor isn't exact. Because what Fiona is presumably carrying out is a planned withdrawal. You're not forcing her. She's not being overwhelmed by superior forces.

Does she like you?

Dakin Course she likes me.

Posner Then you're not disputing the territory. You're just negotiating over the pace of the occupation.

Scripps Just let us know when you get to Berlin.

Dakin I'm beginning to like him more.

Posner Who? Me?

Dakin Irwin. Though he hates me. (*Goes.*)

Posner Oh Scripps. I can't bear to listen, but I want to hear every word. What does that mean?

Posner sings a verse or two of 'Bewitched' as Scripps plays and the class filters back.

Hector Well done, Posner. Now poetry of a more traditional sort.

Timms groans.

Timms groans? What is this?

Timms Sir. I don't always understand poetry.

Hector You don't always understand it? Timms, I *never* understand it. But learn it now, know it now and you'll understand it whenever.

Timms I don't see how we can understand it. Most of the stuff poetry's about hasn't happened to us yet.

Hector But it will, Timms. It will. And then you will have the antidote ready! Grief. Happiness. Even when you're dying.

We're making your deathbeds here, boys.

Lockwood Fucking Ada.

Hector Poetry is the trailer! Forthcoming attractions!

There is a knock on the door. Hector motions them to silence.

'O villainy! Let the door be locked!
Treachery! Seek it out.'

The door is tried.

Hector (*whispers, or does he even bother to whisper?*)
Knocks at the door?

In literature.

The Trial, for instance, begins with a knock. Anybody?

Akthar The person from Porlock.

Hector Yes.

Posner *Don Giovanni*: the Commendatore.

Hector Excellent.

Scripps Behold I stand at the door and knock.
Revelation.

Timms looks.

Timms Gone, sir.

Hector Good.

Timms (*to the others*) Irwin.

Hector Very often the knock is elided – the knock, as it were, taken as knocked.

Did the knights knock at the door of Canterbury before they murdered Beckett?

And maybe the person from Porlock never actually knocked but just put his or her head in at the window? Death knocks, I suppose.

Love.

And of course, opportunity.

(*looking at his watch*) Now. Some silly time.

Where's the kitty?

Posner gets a tin and gives it to Hector.

Timms/Lockwood Oh, sir, sir.

We've got one, sir.

Hector Fifty p each.

Timms It's a good one, sir.

Lockwood You won't get this one, sir.

Hector That remains to be seen.

Timms We have to smoke, sir.

Hector Very well.

Scripps accompanies this scene on the piano.

Timms Gerry, please help me.

Lockwood Shall we just have a cigarette on it?

Timms Yes.

Lockwood lights the cigarettes and gives one to Timms.

Lockwood May I sometimes come here?

Timms Whenever you like. It's your home, too.
There are people here who love you.

Lockwood And will you be happy, Charlotte?

Timms Oh Gerry. Don't let's ask for the moon.
We have the stars.

Hector pretends puzzlement, looks in the tin to count the kitty.

Hector Could it be Paul Henreid and Bette Davis in *Now Voyager*?

Timms Aw, sir.

Hector It's famous, you ignorant little tarts.

Lockwood We'd never heard of it, sir.

Hector Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*.

'The untold want by life and land ne'er granted
Now Voyager, sail thou forth to seek and find.'

Fifty p. Pay up.

Lockwood Shit.

Hector When you say shit, Lockwood, I take it you're referring to the well-established association between money and excrement?

Lockwood Too right, sir.

Hector Good. Well, I will now tell you how much shit there is in the pot, namely sixteen pounds.

They go, leaving Rudge working.

Mrs Lintott Ah, Rudge,
Rudge Miss.

Mrs Lintott How are you all getting on with Mr Irwin?
Rudge It's . . . interesting, miss, if you know what I mean.
It makes me grateful for your lessons.

Mrs Lintott Really? That's nice to hear.

Rudge Firm foundations type thing. Point A. Point B.
Point C. Mr Irwin is more . . . free-range?

Mrs Lintott I hadn't thought of you as a battery chicken,
Rudge.

Rudge It's only a metaphor, miss.

Mrs Lintott I'm relieved to hear it.

Rudge You've force-fed us the facts; now we're in the
process of running around acquiring flavour.

Mrs Lintott Is that what Mr Irwin says?

Rudge Oh no, miss. The metaphor's mine.

Mrs Lintott Well, you hang on to it.

Rudge Like I'm just going home now to watch some
videos of the *Carry On* films. I don't understand why
there are none in the school library.

Mrs Lintott Why should there be?

Rudge Mr Irwin said the *Carry Ons* would be good films
to talk about.

Mrs Lintott Really? How peculiar. Does he like them, do
you think?

Rudge Probably not, miss. You never know with him.

Mrs Lintott I'm now wondering if there's something
there that I've missed.

Rudge Mr Irwin says that, 'While they have no intrinsic artistic merit - (*He is reading from his notes.*) - they achieve some of the permanence of art simply by persisting and acquire an incremental significance if only as social history.'

Mrs Lintott Jolly good.

Rudge 'If George Orwell had lived, nothing is more certain than that he would have written an essay on the *Carry On* films.'

Mrs Lintott I thought it was Mr Hector who was the Orwell fan.

Rudge He is. Mr Irwin says that if Orwell were alive today he'd be in the National Front.

Mrs Lintott Dear me. What fun you must all have.

Rudge It's cutting-edge, miss. It really is.

Timms Where do you live, sir?

Irwin Somewhere on the outskirts, why?

Timms 'Somewhere on the outskirts,' ooh. It's not a loft, is it, sir?

Akthar Do you exist on an unhealthy diet of takeaway food, sir, or do you whisk up gourmet meals for one?

Timms Or is it a lonely pizza, sir?

Irwin I manage.

No questions from you, Dakin?

Dakin What they want to know, sir, is, 'Do you have a life?'

Or are we it?

Are we your life?

Irwin Pretty dismal if you are. Because (*giving out books*) these are as dreary as ever.

If you want to learn about Stalin, study Henry VIII.

If you want to learn about Mrs Thatcher, study Henry VIII.

If you want to know about Hollywood, study Henry VIII.

The wrong end of the stick is the right one. A question has a front door and a back door. Go in the back, or better still, the side.

Flee the crowd. Follow Orwell. Be perverse.

And since I mention Orwell, take Stalin. Generally agreed to be a monster, and rightly. So dissent. Find something, anything, to say in his defence.

History nowadays is not a matter of conviction.

It's a performance. It's entertainment. And if it isn't, make it so.

Rudge I get it. It's an angle. You want us to find an angle.

Scripps When Irwin became well known as an historian it was for finding his way to the wrong end of seesaws, settling on some hitherto unquestioned historical assumption then proving the opposite. Notoriously he would one day demonstrate on television that those who had been genuinely caught napping by the attack on Pearl Harbour were the Japanese and that the real culprit was President Roosevelt.

Find a proposition, invert it, then look around for proofs. That was the technique and it was as formal in its way as the disciplines of the medieval schoolmen.

Irwin A question is about what you know, not about what you don't know. A question about Rembrandt, for instance, might prompt an answer about Francis Bacon.

Rudge What if you don't know about him either?