

THE ENGLISH CHRONICLES

An 'autobiofictional' book by Richard Lewis

1. Appointment

It was a curious arrangement. But then most of the arrangements that have shaped my life have been curious. I can only think it was some impetuosity brought on by fading youth that made me resign from my latest job, sell the house bought only eight months earlier and head off once more into the unknown.

Or perhaps there was an element of revenge to it, even though I am not a revengeful person. That self-made woman, with her shark-blue eyes, her vast, mocking body and her Teutonic hectoring had pushed me much too far. I am a mild-mannered man, conscientious to an extreme and always inclined towards the British reserved, self-deprecating side of life, but when my toes are deliberately trodden on I have to tread back. You don't toil long hours and rotate the details of your work over and over in your mind like some huge tuneless pianola drum as you lie sleepless in bed, only to be publicly admonished for some minor omission.

So when the phone rang one day just as Moni and I stepped into the house back from a short holiday, in full suitcase wrestle, and the voice asked if I was still interested in the position and could I start quite soon, without hesitation I dropped the bags and said that one small word that can always change your life: 'Yes'.

Sometime before, I had spotted a vacancy for principal of a grandly titled school of English in the gazette proper to our particular branch of teaching. I was in a mood to apply. Somewhat surprisingly, never having been a principal before, only a director of studies as at present, I was called to an interview. Though the school was in a town on the Kent coast, the interview was to be at the London residence of the Earl of Willingham, near Eaton Square. This line of work was full of surprises, but I could never have imagined it taking me into the world of the British aristocracy. I was intrigued and, naturally, a little excited.

The residence was a modestly attractive town house in an immodestly expensive location. The door opened to reveal a tall, lithe and impeccably suited man of about my own age. He was briskly welcoming, with an ushering smile hurrying over his well-bred face. An angularly handsome man in a peculiarly British kind of way, he looked as if his ancestors might have been painted by Gainsborough. Inclining slightly, John Cleese-style, he radiated good manners as he quickly led me into a study. He was Thomas Willingham.

Another man already seated in the study, the owner and Principal of Darwin College of English and Further Studies, was a Mr Grimby, a pallid, barathean-blazered man of around sixty, stiffly bourgeois by contrast, with sleeked-down black hair. No first name was offered.

The debonair aristocrat took the initiative with a few queries about my past, present and future ambitions, done in the most light-hearted way, before handing over to the clearly self-important Mr Grimby for what he called 'technical questions' concerning teaching. In the process I learnt that Mr Grimby, who struck me, name and all, as having sprung straight from the pages of a novel by Dickens, was retiring and selling up, while Lord Willingham, having already plunged into the education business by buying a distance learning organization with offices in Slough, was now venturing into the unknown world of Teaching English as a Foreign Language to expand his interests. He was the energetic aristocrat with ambition. The other was the Dickensian school owner who, though on the way out, was basking in the late warmth generated by the sale of his establishment to an earl of the realm.

Curiously enough, I had come across the school in my peripatetic past. It was as much a mystery to me then as it was now, sitting as I was gazing at the two unlikely men involved in the business of teaching foreign students English, or 'En-glish', as the fastidious Mr Grimby oddly pronounced the word, making the 'En' rhyme with 'ten' rather than 'tin'. After six years of being a director of studies

at a language centre in Spain, I had returned to England to a job with the preposterous title of 'Marketing Executive' at a large publishing company. The stark reality of the job was driven home to me by the owner of a small hotel in Bournemouth where I was staying on one of my first marketing trips. 'We've got someone flogging books,' was the description of me that I overheard him make to his wife somewhere in the hotel depths. Deflating though this was, I was sustained in the knowledge that the company for which I was 'flogging books' was also publishing my book, a practical text book for advanced learners of English.

One of my many sorties had been to a far-flung corner of the Kent coast where there was a veritable outcrop of language schools, all potential customers. One was Darwin College of English and Further Studies in Bradgate. I checked the map and motored on to the address at 27 Darwin Avenue. The area was quietly residential, which seemed odd, and the only thing at number 27 was an unremarkable, though admittedly quite large, semi-detached house. There was no name on the building, no sign, no indication at all of the grand college the name suggested. Puzzled, I rang the doorbell. A middle-aged man opened the door gingerly. Was this the right place? 'Oh yes, um, you'd better come in,' he said tentatively. I showed him my wares, he politely acknowledged them, gave me his name and title as Mr Meek, Director of Studies, unconvincingly told me that he would discuss the books with the school owner, and showed me back to the door. As I came out I just caught sight of an elderly and slightly distressed Ford minibus in the drive. Where were the students? 'We keep them out of sight of the neighbours', was Mr Meek's furtive reply. 'I bring them for classes and then take them home in the minibus.' Such was the strange Darwin College of English and Further Studies.