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Opening extract from

The Mysterious Benedict Society

Written by

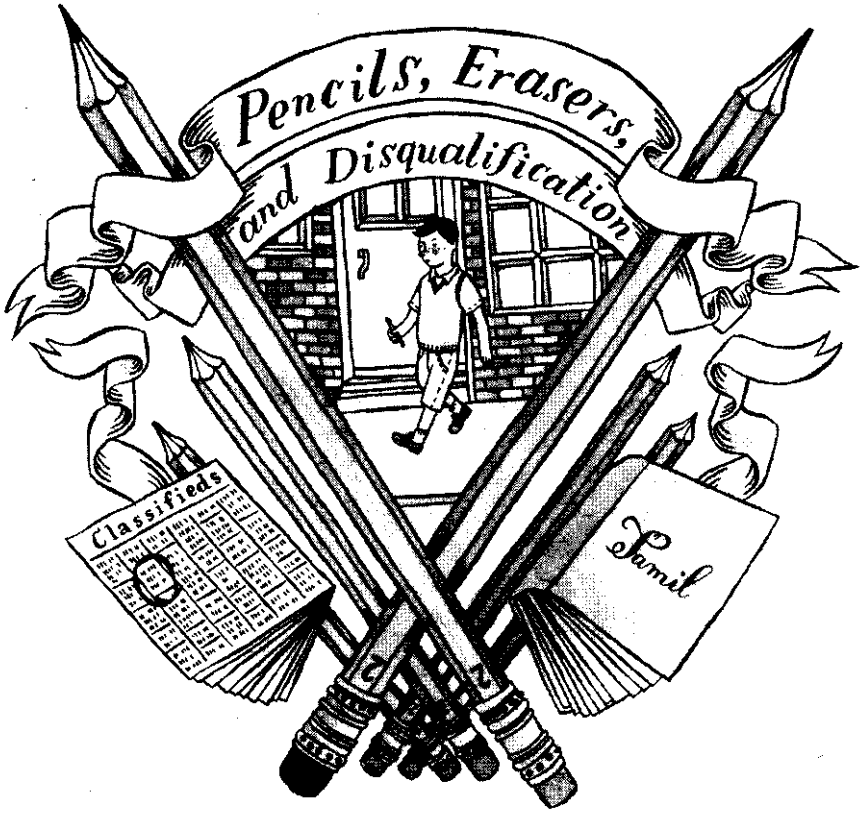
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In a city called Stonetown, near a port called Stonetown Harbour, a boy named Reynie Muldoon was preparing to take an important test. It was the second test of the day – the first had been in an office on the other side of town. After that one he was told to come here, to the Monk Building on 3rd Street, and to bring nothing but a single pencil and a single rubber, and to arrive no later than one o'clock. If he happened to be late, or bring two pencils, or forget his rubber, or in any other way deviate from the instructions, he would not be allowed to take the test, and that would be

that. Reynie, who very much wanted to take it, was careful to follow the instructions. Curiously enough, these were the only ones given. He was not told how to *get* to the Monk Building, for example, and had found it necessary to ask directions to the nearest bus stop, acquire a timetable from a dishonest bus driver who tried to trick him into paying for it, and walk several streets to catch the 3rd Street bus. Not that any of this was difficult for Reynie Muldoon. Although he was only eleven years old, he was quite used to working things out for himself.

From somewhere across the city, a church bell struck the half hour. Twelve thirty. He still had a while to wait. When he'd checked the doors of the Monk Building at noon, they were locked. So Reynie had bought a sandwich at a deli and sat down on this park bench to eat. *A tall building in Stonetown's busiest district must surely have many offices inside*, he thought. Locked doors at noon seemed a little peculiar. But then, what *hadn't* been peculiar about this whole affair?

To begin with, there was the advertisement. A few days before, Reynie had been reading the newspaper over breakfast at the Stonetown Orphanage, sharing sections with his tutor, Miss Perumal. (As Reynie had already completed all the textbooks on his own, even those for secondary school students, the orphanage director had assigned him a special tutor while the other children went to class. Miss Perumal didn't quite know what to do with Reynie, either, but she was intelligent and kind, and in their time together they had grown fond of sharing the morning newspaper over breakfast and tea.)

The newspaper that morning had been filled with the usual headlines, several of them devoted to what was

commonly called the Emergency. Things had got desperately out of control, the headlines reported; the school systems, the budget, the pollution, the crime, the weather . . . why, everything, in fact, was a complete mess, and citizens everywhere were clamouring for a major – no, a *dramatic* – improvement in government. 'Things must change NOW!' was the slogan plastered on billboards all over the city (it was a very old slogan), and although Reynie rarely watched television, he knew the Emergency was the main subject of the news programmes every day, as it had been for years. Naturally, when Reynie and Miss Perumal first met, they had discussed the Emergency at great length. Finding themselves quite in agreement about politics, however, they soon found such conversation boring and decided to drop the subject. In general, then, they talked about the other news stories, those which varied from day to day, and afterwards they amused themselves by reading the advertisements. Such was the case on that particular morning when Reynie's life had so suddenly taken a turn.

'Do you care for more honey with your tea?' Miss Perumal had asked – speaking in Tamil, a language she was teaching him – but before Reynie could answer that of *course* he wanted more honey, the advertisement caught Miss Perumal's eye and she exclaimed, 'Reynie! Look at this! Would you be interested?'

Miss Perumal sat across the table from him, but Reynie, who had no trouble reading upside down, quickly scanned the advertisement's bold-printed words: 'ARE YOU A GIFTED CHILD LOOKING FOR SPECIAL OPPORTUNITIES?' *How odd*, he thought. The question was addressed directly to children, not to their parents.

Reynie had never known his parents, who died when he was an infant, and it pleased him to read a notice that seemed to take this possibility into account. But still: how odd. How many children read the newspaper, after all? Reynie did, but he had always been alone in this, had always been considered an oddball. If not for Miss Perumal, he might even have given it up by now, to avoid some of the teasing.

'I suppose I might be interested,' he said to Miss Perumal, 'if you think I would qualify.'

Miss Perumal gave him a wry look. 'Don't you play games with me, Reynie Muldoon. If you aren't the most talented child I've ever known, then I've never known a child at all.'

There were to be several sessions of the test administered over the weekend; they made plans for Reynie to attend the very first session. Unfortunately, on Saturday Miss Perumal's mother fell ill and Miss Perumal couldn't take him. This was a real disappointment to Reynie, and not just because of the delay. He always looked forward to Miss Perumal's company – her laughter, her wry expressions, the stories she told (often in Tamil) of her childhood in India, even the occasional sighs she made when she didn't think he was aware. They were gentle and lilting, these sighs, and despite their melancholy Reynie loved to hear them. Miss Perumal sighed when she was feeling sad for him, he knew – sad to see him teased by the other children, sad the poor boy had lost his parents – and Reynie wished he hadn't worried her, but he did like knowing she cared. She was the only one who did (not counting Seymore, the orphanage cat, with whom Reynie spent the day in the reading room – and *he* only wanted to be petted). Quite apart from his

eagerness to take the special test, Reynie simply missed Miss Perumal.

He was hopeful, then, when Mr Rutger, the orphanage director, informed him late that evening that Miss Perumal's mother was considerably improved. Reynie was in the reading room again, the only place in the orphanage where he could be assured of solitude (no one else ever ventured into it) and freedom from persecution. At dinner an older boy named Vic Morgeroff had tormented Reynie for using the word 'enjoyable' to describe the book he was reading. Vic thought it too fancy a word to be proper, and soon had the entire table laughing and saying 'enjoyable' in mocking tones until Reynie had finally excused himself without dessert and retreated here.

'Yes, she's much better, much better,' said Mr Rutger, through a mouthful of cheesecake. He was a thin man with a thin face, and his cheeks positively bulged as he chewed. 'Miss Perumal just telephoned with the news. She asked for *you*, but as you were not to be found in the dining hall, and I was in the middle of dinner, I took the message for you.'

'Thank you,' said Reynie, with a mixture of relief and disappointment. Cheesecake was his favourite dessert. 'I'm glad to hear it.'

'Indeed, nothing like health. Absolutely nothing like it. Best thing for anyone,' said Mr Rutger, but here he paused in his chewing, with an unpleasant worried expression upon his face, as if he thought perhaps there had been an insect in his food. Finally he swallowed, brushed the crumbs from his waistcoat, and said, 'But see here, Reynie, Miss Perumal mentioned a *test* of some sort. "Special opportunities," she

said. What is this all about? This isn't about attending an advanced school, is it?'

They had been through this before. Reynie had repeatedly asked permission to apply elsewhere, but Mr Rutger had insisted Reynie would fare better here, with a tutor, than at an advanced school. 'Here, you are comfortable,' Mr Rutger had told him more than once. And more than once Reynie had thought, *Here, I'm alone*. But in the end Mr Rutger had his way, and Miss Perumal was hired. It had proved a blessing – Reynie would never complain about Miss Perumal. Still, he had often wondered what life might have been like at a school where the other students didn't find him so odd.

'I don't know, sir,' Reynie said, his hopefulness slipping into dejection. He wished Miss Perumal hadn't mentioned the test, though of course she must have felt obliged to. 'We just wanted to see what it was about.'

Mr Rutger considered this. 'Well, no harm in seeing what things are about, I suppose. I should like to know what it's about myself. In fact, why don't you prepare a report for me when you return? Say, ten pages? No hurry, you can turn it in tomorrow evening.'

'Tomorrow evening?' said Reynie. 'Does that mean I'm taking the test?'

'I thought I told you,' said Mr Rutger with a frown. 'Miss Perumal will come for you first thing in the morning.' He took out an embroidered handkerchief and blew his nose with great ferocity. 'And now, Reynie, I believe I'll leave you to your reading. This dusty room is a hardship on my sinuses. Be a good man and run a feather duster over the shelves before you leave, will you?'

After hearing this news, Reynie could hardly return to his reading. He flailed about with the feather duster and went straight to bed, as if doing so would hasten the morning's arrival. Instead it lengthened his night, for he was far too eager and anxious to sleep. *Special opportunities*, he kept thinking, over and over again. He would have been thrilled to get a crack at plain old *regular* opportunities, much less special ones.

Just before dawn he rose quietly, got ready with the lights off so as not to disturb his roommates (they often snarled at him for reading in bed at night, even when he used a tiny pen light under the covers), and hurried down to the kitchen. Miss Perumal was already waiting for him – she had been too excited to sleep, as well, and had arrived early. The kettle was just beginning to whistle on the stove, and Miss Perumal, with her back to him, was setting out cups and saucers.

'Good morning, Miss Perumal,' he said froggily. He cleared his throat. 'I was glad to hear your mother's doing better.'

'Thank you, Reynie. Would you—' Miss Perumal turned then, took one look at him, and said, 'You'll not make a good impression dressed like that, I'm afraid. One mustn't wear striped trousers with a checked shirt, Reynie. In fact, I believe those must belong to a roommate – they're at least a size too big. Also, it appears that one of your socks is blue and the other purple.'

Reynie looked down at his outfit in surprise. Usually he was the least noticeable of boys: he was of average size, of an average pale complexion, his brown hair was of average length and he wore average clothes. This morning, though,

he would stand out in a crowd – unless it happened to be a crowd of clowns. He grinned at Miss Perumal and said, 'I dressed this way for luck.'

'Luckily you won't need luck,' said Miss Perumal, taking the kettle from the stove. 'Now please go and change, and this time turn on your light – never mind how your roommates grumble – so that you may have better luck choosing your clothes.'

When Reynie returned, Miss Perumal told him that she had a long errand to run. Her mother had been prescribed new medicine and a special diet, and Miss Perumal must go shopping for her. So it was agreed that she would take him to the test and pick him up when it was over. After a light breakfast (neither of them wanted more than toast), yet well before anyone else in the orphanage had risen, Miss Perumal drove him across the sleepy city to an office building near Stonetown Bay. A long queue of children already stood at the door, all of them accompanied by their parents, all fidgeting nervously.

When Miss Perumal moved to get out of the car, Reynie said, 'I thought you were dropping me off.'

'You don't think I would just leave you here without investigating first, do you?' replied Miss Perumal. 'The notice didn't even list a telephone number for questions. It's a bit out of the ordinary, don't you think?'

So Reynie took his place at the end of the queue while Miss Perumal went inside the building to speak with someone. It was a long queue, and Reynie wondered how many special opportunities were available. Perhaps only a very few – perhaps they would all be given out before he even reached the door. He was growing anxious at this idea when

a friendly man ahead of him turned and said, 'Don't worry, son, you haven't got long to wait. All the children are to go inside together in a few minutes. They made the announcement just before you arrived.'

Reynie thanked him gratefully, noticing as he did so that a number of parents were casting grumpy looks at the man, apparently disliking the notion of being friendly to competitors. The man, embarrassed, turned away from Reynie and said nothing else.

'Very well,' said Miss Perumal when she returned, 'everything is set. You may call me on their telephone when you've finished the test. Here is the number. If I'm not back by then, simply call a taxi and Mr Rutger will pay the fare. You can tell me all about it this afternoon.'

'Thanks so much for everything, Miss Perumal,' said Reynie, earnestly taking her hand.

'Oh, Reynie, you silly child, don't look so grateful,' said Miss Perumal. To Reynie's surprise, there were tears on her cheeks. 'It's nothing at all. Now give your poor tutor a hug. I imagine my services won't be needed after this.'

'I haven't passed it yet, Miss Perumal!'

'Oh, stop being silly,' she said, and after squeezing him tightly, Miss Perumal dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief, walked determinedly to her car and drove away just as the children were ushered into the building.

It was a curious test. The first section was rather what Reynie would have expected – one or two questions regarding octagons and hexagons, another devoted to bushels of this and kilograms of that, and another that required calculating how much time must pass before two speeding trains

collided. (This last question Reynie answered with a thoughtful frown, noting in the margin that since the two trains were approaching each other on an empty stretch of track, it was likely the engineers would recognize the impending disaster and apply their brakes, thus avoiding the collision altogether.) Reynie raced through these questions and many like them, then came to the second section, whose first question was: 'Do you like to watch television?'

This certainly was not the sort of question Reynie had expected. It was only a question of preference. Anyway, of *course* he liked to watch television – *everybody* liked to watch television. As he started to mark down the answer, however, Reynie hesitated. Well, did he really? The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he didn't, in fact, like to watch television at all. *I really* am *an oddball*, he thought, with a feeling of disappointment. Nonetheless, he answered the question truthfully: 'NO'.

The next question read: 'Do you like to listen to the radio?' And again, Reynie realized that he did not, although he was sure everyone else did. With a growing sense of isolation, he answered the question: 'NO'.

The third question, thankfully, was less emotional. It read: 'What is wrong with this statement?' *How funny*, Reynie thought, and marking down his answer he felt somewhat cheered. 'It isn't a statement at all,' he wrote. 'It's a question.'

The next page showed a picture of a chessboard, upon which all the pieces and pawns rested in their starting positions, except for a black pawn, which had advanced two spaces. The question read: 'According to the rules of chess, is this position possible?' Reynie studied the board a

moment, scratched his head and wrote down his answer: 'YES'.

After a few more pages of questions, all of which Reynie felt confident he had answered correctly, he arrived at the test's final question: 'Are you brave?' Just reading the words quickened Reynie's heart. Was he brave? Bravery had never been required of him, so how could he tell? Miss Perumal would say he was; she would point out how cheerful he tried to be despite feeling lonely, how patiently he withstood the teasing of other children, and how he was always eager for a challenge. But these things only showed that he was good-natured, polite and very often bored. Did they really show that he was brave? He didn't think so. Finally he gave up trying to decide and simply wrote, 'I hope so.'

He laid down his pencil and looked around. Most of the other children were also finishing the test. At the front of the room, munching rather loudly on an apple, the test administrator was keeping a close eye on them to ensure they didn't cheat. She was a thin woman in a mustard-yellow suit, with a yellowish complexion, short-cropped, rusty-red hair and a stiff posture. She reminded Reynie of a giant walking pencil.

'Pencils!' the woman suddenly called out, as if she'd read his thoughts.

The children jumped in their seats.

'Please lay down your pencils now,' the pencil woman said. 'The test is over.'

'But I'm not finished!' one child cried. 'That's not fair!'

'I want more time!' cried another.

The woman's eyes narrowed. 'I'm sorry you haven't finished, children, but the test is over. Please pass your papers

to the front of the room, and remain seated while the tests are marked. Don't worry, it won't take long.'

As the papers were passed forward, Reynie heard the boy behind him snigger and say to his neighbour, 'If they couldn't finish *that* test, they shouldn't even have come. Like that chess question – who could have missed it?'

The neighbour, sounding every bit as smug, replied, 'They were trying to trick us. Pawns can only move one space at a time, so of *course* the position wasn't possible. I'll bet some stupid kids didn't know that.'

'Ha! You're just lucky you didn't miss it yourself! Pawns *can* move two spaces – on their very first move, they can. But whether it moved one space or two is beside the point. Don't you know that white always moves first? The *black* pawn couldn't have moved yet at all! It's so simple. This test was for babies.'

'Are you calling me a baby?' growled the other.

'You boys there!' snapped the pencil woman. 'Stop talking!'

Reynie was suddenly anxious. Could he possibly have answered that question wrong? And what about the other questions? Except for the odd ones about television and bravery, they had seemed easy, but perhaps he was such a strange bird that he had misunderstood everything. He shook his head and tried not to care. If he wanted to prove himself brave, after all, he had better just stop worrying. If he must return to his old routine at the orphanage, at least he had Miss Perumal. What did it matter if he was different from other children? Everyone got teased from time to time – he was no different in *that* respect.

Reynie told himself this, but his anxious feeling didn't fade.

After all the tests had been turned in, the pencil woman stepped out of the room, leaving the children to bite their nails and watch the clock. Only a few minutes passed, however, before she returned and announced, 'I shall now read the names of children admitted into the second phase of the test.'

The children began to murmur. A second phase? The advertisement hadn't mentioned a second phase.

The woman continued, 'If your name is called, you are to report to the Monk Building on 3rd Street no later than one o'clock, where you will join children from other sessions who also passed the test.' She went on to lay out the rules about pencils, rubbers and disqualification. Then she popped a handful of peanuts into her mouth and chewed ferociously, as if she were starving.

Reynie raised his hand.

'Mm-yes?' the woman said, swallowing.

'Excuse me, you say to bring only one pencil, but what if the pencil lead breaks? Will there be a pencil sharpener?'

Again the boy behind Reynie sniggered, this time muttering: 'What makes him so sure he'll be taking that test? She hasn't even called the names yet!'

It was true – he should have waited until she'd called the names. He must seem very arrogant. Cheeks burning, Reynie ducked his head.

The pencil woman answered, 'Yes, if a sharpener should become necessary, one will be provided. Children are *not* to bring their own, understood?' There was a general nodding of heads, after which the woman clapped the peanut grit from her hands, took out a sheet of paper and continued, 'Very well, if there are no other questions, I shall read the list.'

The room became very quiet.

'Reynard Muldoon!' the woman called. Reynie's heart leapt.

There was a grumble of discontent from the seat behind him, but as soon as it passed the room again grew quiet, and the children waited with bated breath for the other names to be called. The woman glanced up from the sheet.

'That is all,' she said matter-of-factly, folding the paper and tucking it away. 'The rest of you are dismissed.'

The room erupted in outcries of anger and dismay. 'Dismissed?' said the boy behind Reynie. '*Dismissed?*'

As the children filed out the door – some weeping bitterly, some stunned, some whining in complaint – Reynie approached the woman. For some reason, she was hurrying around the room checking the window locks. 'Excuse me. Miss? May I please use your telephone? My tutor said—'

'I'm sorry, Reynard,' the woman interrupted, tugging unsuccessfully on a closed window. 'I'm afraid there isn't a telephone.'

'But Miss Perumal—'

'Reynard,' the woman said with a smile, 'I'm sure you can make do without one, can't you? Now, if you'll excuse me, I must sneak out of the back door. These windows appear to have been painted shut.'

'Sneak out? But why?'

'I've learned from experience. Any moment now, some of these children's parents will come storming in to demand explanations. Unfortunately, I have none to give them. Therefore, off I go. I'll see you this afternoon. Don't be late!'

And, with that, away she went.

* * *

It had been a strange business indeed, and Reynie had a suspicion it was to grow stranger still. When the distant church bell struck the quarter-hour, Reynie finished his sandwich and rose from the park bench. If the doors to the Monk Building weren't open by now, he would try to find another way in. At this point, it would hardly surprise him to discover he must enter the building through a basement window.

As he mounted the steps to the Monk Building's broad front plaza, Reynie saw two girls well ahead of him, walking together toward the front doors. Other test-takers, he guessed. One girl, who seemed to have green hair – though perhaps this was a trick of the light; the sun shone blindingly bright today – was carelessly flinging her pencil up into the air and catching it again. *Not the best idea*, Reynie thought. And sure enough, even as he thought it, the girl missed the pencil and watched it fall through a grate at her feet.

For a moment the other girl hesitated, as if she might try to help. Then she checked her watch. In only a few minutes it would be one o'clock. 'Sorry about your pencil – it's a shame,' she said, but already her sympathetic expression was fading. Clearly it had occurred to her that with the green-haired girl unable to take the test, there would be less competition. With a spreading smile, she hurried across the plaza and through the front doors of the Monk Building, which had finally been unlocked.

The metal grate covered a storm drain that ran beneath the plaza, and the unfortunate girl was staring through it, down into darkness, when Reynie reached her. Her

appearance was striking – indeed, even startling. She had coal-black skin; hair so long she could have tied it around her waist (and yes, it truly was green); and an extraordinarily puffy white dress that gave you the impression she was standing in a cloud.

'That's rotten luck,' Reynie said. 'To drop your pencil here, of all places.'

The girl looked up at him with hopeful eyes. 'You don't happen to have an extra one, do you?'

'I'm sorry. I was told to bring—'

'I know, I know,' she interrupted. 'Only one pencil. Well, that was *my* only pencil, and a fat lot of good it will do me down in that drain.' She stared wistfully through the grate a moment, then looked up at Reynie as if surprised to see him still standing there. 'What are you waiting for? The test starts any minute.'

'I'm not going to leave you here without a pencil,' Reynie said. 'I was surprised your friend did.'

'Friend? Oh, that other girl. She's not my friend – we just met at the bottom of the steps. I didn't even know her name. For that matter, I don't know yours, either.'

'Reynard Muldoon. You can call me Reynie.'

'OK, Reynie. Nice to meet you. I'm Rhonda Kazembe. So, now that we're friends and all that, how do you intend to get my pencil back? We'd better hurry, you know. One minute late and we're disqualified.'

Reynie took out his own pencil, a new yellow HB that he'd sharpened to a fine point that morning. 'Actually,' he said, 'we'll just share this one.' He snapped the pencil in two and handed her the sharpened end. 'I'll sharpen my half and we'll both be set. Do you have your rubber?'