

# A Question of Degree

by

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Two musicians led them in, strutting and weaving round the small tables like a pair of Pied-Pipers. Mark followed them, ungainly and gawkish, his tall thin body seeming to sag as if trying to make himself less conspicuous; Mary walked behind, her pert figure confident and head high, with large, blue-rimmed glasses emphasising her petite features and small, up-turned nose.

It was an old-fashioned restaurant, with heavy leaded windows in the bays and real flowers and linen on the tables. The walls were decorated with original oil paintings, each marked with a price and description on a printed card. They reached their table and Mary sat, quiet and confident as she lifted her hand. The waiter, a true professional, came quickly over, and with a flourish he presented an ornate menu, which Mary passed to Mark. Then, in a movement which hinted at a bow, he produced a second board which Mary eagerly seized. "Would Madame care to see my credentials?" he asked her. "You will notice some new ones since you were last here."

Mary looked. "Why, Robert," she said, "You've got your T.L.C. and N.A.F. - grade one, I see. That really is good." The waiter grinned self-effacingly, as Mary handed it on to Mark.

"It's thanks to you," he said, "you gave me so much help." He took their order and left.

"What the heck's those?" queried Mark.

"Table Laying Certificate, and Napkin Arrangement Fellow - they're absolutely essential qualifications if you're to get anywhere at all in the Catering Assistant Grades."

The musicians came past again, leading some more clients to their seats. They were playing flutes, Mark noticed; the first musician played a short phrase, a few notes long, then it was repeated exactly by the second. It gave a hollow emphasis to the music which surprised him, but Mary seemed to read his mind. "That other one's learning the job," she explained. "He has to do twenty hours supervised public playing to qualify for his Buskers Licence. The first one has an Instructor's Certificate, so naturally he leads the piece."

"But why don't they play from the music?" Mark asked.

“They can’t do that - they can’t read music, and anyway they aren’t qualified to. They’d have to be in the Musician’s Union and that needs much higher standards – a diploma at least, maybe even a degree. Really, you are dumb sometimes, Mark. I thought everyone knew that! Buskers have to learn by rote. They aren’t even allowed to improvise, or they’d count as jazz players.”

Their soup came and Mark began eating eagerly. Mary took a spoonful then called back loudly across the room. “Robert! This soup has salt in it. I cannot stand salt in my soup. Take it back now!” He did so, apologetically. Mark meanwhile stopped in embarrassment. “You can eat yours,” said Mary. “Please don’t wait for me.”

“No, I’ll wait,” he said, reddening. Mary sat imperiously, and slowly turned to watch two work men who had come in to change one of the bay windows, which was cracked. Her glasses had slipped slightly down her nose, and she peered over the top of them in a manner suggesting that the men had better not do anything of which she might disapprove. A girl of about eighteen, who had come in with the men, slipped into the kitchen and brought drinks out for the three of them while they worked. The elder man bent and kissed her brow, and she frowned but appeared to accept it as part of the job. They unclipped some catches allowing the window to swing free, then pulled the unit clear and lifted the replacement window into place. They finished as Mary’s soup was brought back, and Mark began eating his. Mary saw his slight frown and asked, “has it gone cold?”

“No, not really.”

“Well you can’t possibly eat it if it’s cold. Robert...!” She summoned him once more, and he bowed and took Mark’s soup back for re-warming. The window-people were leaving when the older one noticed Mary. He left the girl to carry the frame out and came over. “Hello, Wallace,” she said, and her voice took on a husky low drawl. “This is Mark...” They shook hands. “Wallace was with me on a course two years ago,” she explained. “I was with the Building and Industry Department then. You have progressed, Wally; you were just assistant grade then.”

“I studied hard,” he grinned at her.

“Then you must be rewarded - you know my saying: ‘study long and earn a gong’.” Once more she signaled with a raised finger, and the waiter brought over a tray bearing a small box.

Mary stood and took out a slim chain with a medallion, which she placed reverentially round Wally's neck. There was a smattering of applause from the other diners.

"And now you're a fully qualified Window Renovator," she said.

"Who's the girl?" asked Mark, trying to hide his interest.

"Hands off her, mate. She comes with the job. She's our new trainee, out on a Job Start Scheme. She's learning the business, see? But I don't reckon she'll amount to much. She's only got her Tool Carriers Certificate so far, and she's been with us two months."

"Never mind, Wally, send her along to me if you have any trouble - I'm sure I can help somehow."

"Too right," said the affable Wally, and he touched his cap in mock salute and left.

"You see, Mark," she explained, "it doesn't matter how simple or hard the job, without the right qualifications you're unemployable."

"And what qualifications do I need?"

"It depends what you want to do. Yes, I know you want to be a journalist," – she anticipated his interruption – "you are too impatient! But what sort of journalist? Women's papers? Trade News? Dog Racing? Whatever it is, you'll need papers to prove you can do it."

"That's why I'm seeing you, isn't it?" he asked. "I thought you said you can teach anyone anything."

"Oh I can," she replied nonchalantly. "And I've all my qualifications to prove it. You name it and I have a qualification to teach it." She did not sound boastful, and her young wide-eyed face looked too innocent for vanity.

They finished their lunch, with Mary only once complaining to return a trifle which she thought deficient in sherry; then she showed Mark the pictures on the wall. "All by local artists, of course," she explained.

Mark looked more closely at the hung canvases, but instead of titles to the pictures, the artists' names were followed by a long list of abbreviations.

"They've just completed their S.L.O.s - that's Still Life, (Oils)," explained Mary, "and they're acquiring their C.P.D. before they can progress to figure painting."

“Certificate in Public Display?” guessed Mark.

“Yes – most will go on to nature or animals. Not many take Human Figure Drawing now.”

“Why not?” wondered Mark, “it’s only another bit of paper.”

“It has to be awarded by the sitter,” she said, “and most artists can’t paint a flattering enough picture these days.”

They returned to their table for coffee, and the waiter brought Mark the bill. “We’ll want two receipts, Robert,” Mary instructed.

“Certainly, Madame.” He returned shortly, bearing two cards on a silver salver. The cards were a deep blue with white crenallated edges; the writing was in gold script, and beside the date and restaurant name, they were individually inscribed to Mary and Mark, and carried the abbreviations ‘A.L.C.’

“It’s a new course I started last week,” Mary said. “Associate in Lunchtime Conversation.” Mark started to object. “No, take it - you’ve earned it. You’ve done the course, and paid for it. It’s your first one, isn’t it? You’re on your way now.”

“How come you get one?” he asked.

“Mine’s slightly different,” she said. “It’s the new D.L.C. - the full Diploma. After all, I teach the course, so naturally mine is a higher qualification.”

“Are many people setting up these courses now?” asked Mark, determined to get his money’s worth from the time remaining.

“Oh, yes, dozens since the new government regulations. No one can clean toilets now without full documentary qualifications. There are more people running courses than taking them. It’s very competitive, with medals, chains of honour, certificates, badges... Mind you, there are some charlatans doing it. You have to be careful. Why, only last week the Inspectors traced six courses to just one man.

“That sounds normal, somehow.”

“Yes, but he was Purser on a cruise trip, and was selling Seamanship Tickets to the passengers. Some of them had higher qualifications than the Captain, and tried to take over the

boat. By the time they traced him, he'd skipped ship and left a woman of ninety in a wheelchair doing his job. She showed them her Certificate of Competence, and the other passengers said she was doing a marvelous job. They let her stay on till they got to Malta.”

Mark smiled to himself. He had come to expect no less.