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Opening Extract from...

Skios

Written by Michael Frayn

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MICHAEL FRAYN

SKIOS

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1

'I just want to say a big thank-you to our distinguished guest,' said Nikki Hook, 'for making this evening such a fascinating and wonderful occasion, and one that I'm sure none of us here will ever forget . . .'

She stopped and read the sentence aloud again to herself, then deleted 'fascinating and wonderful' and inserted 'unique and special', which sounded a little bit more, well, unique and special. A little bit more Mrs Fred Toppler, in fact, which was what counted, because it was after all Mrs Fred Toppler, not Nikki, who was going to be so grateful, and find it all so extraordinary. Nikki was merely Mrs Fred Toppler's PA. She provided the thoughts for Mrs Toppler to think, but in the end it was Mrs Toppler who had to think them.

Outside the windows of Nikki's office the tumbling gardens and hillsides of the Fred Toppler Foundation were vivid in the blaze of the Mediterranean afternoon. Cascades of well-watered bougainvillaea and plumbago challenged the saturated blue of the sky. The fishermen's cottages along the waterfront and the caiques rocking at anchor on the dazzle of the sea were as blinding white and as heavenly blue as the Greek flag stirring lethargically on the flagpole.

Nikki, though, looking out at it all as she composed Mrs Toppler's thoughts for her, was as discreetly cool as the air conditioning. Her discreetly blonded hair was unruffled, her white shirt and blue skirt a discreet echo of the Greek whites

and blues outside, her expression pleasantly but discreetly open to the world. She was discreetly British, because Mrs Toppler, who was American, like the late Mr Fred, appreciated it. Europeans in general embodied for her the civilised values that the Fred Toppler Foundation existed to promote, and the British were Europeans who had the tact and good sense to speak English. Anyway, everyone liked Nikki, not just Mrs Toppler. She was so nice! She had been a really nice girl already when she was three. She had still been one when she was seventeen, at an age when niceness was a much rarer achievement, and she remained one nearly twenty years later. Discreetly tanned, discreetly blonde, discreetly effective, and discreetly nice.

As Nikki watched, people began to emerge from the fishermen's cottages and drift towards the tables scattered in the shade of the great plane tree on the central square. They were not fishermen; they were not even Greek. They were not tourists or holidaymakers. They were the English-speaking guests of the foundation's annual Great European House Party. They had spent the day in seminars studying Minoan cooking and Early Christian meditation techniques, in classes watching demonstrations of traditional Macedonian dancing and Late Mediaeval flower-arrangement. They had interspersed their labours with swims and siestas, with civilised conversation over breakfast and mid-morning coffee, over pre-lunch drinks, lunch, and post-lunch coffee, over afternoon tea and snacks. Now they were moving towards further intellectual refreshment over dinner and various pre- and post-dinner drinks.

Tomorrow evening all this civilisation would reach its climax in a champagne reception and formal dinner, at the end

of which the guests would be spiritually prepared for the most important event of the House Party, the Fred Toppler Lecture. The lecture was one the highlights of the Greek cultural calendar. The residents would be joined by important visitors from Athens, ferried out to the island by air and sea. There would be articles in the papers attacking the choice of subject and speaker, and lamenting the sad decline in its quality.

Please God it wasn't going to be too awful this year, prayed Nikki. All lectures, however unique and special, were of course awful, but some were more awful than others. There had to *be* a lecture. Why? Because there always had been one. There had been a Fred Toppler Lecture every year since the foundation had existed. They had had lectures on the Crisis in this and the Challenge of that. They had had an Enigma of, a Whither? and a Why?, three Prospects for and two Reconsiderations of. As the director of the foundation had become more eccentric and reclusive, so had his choices of lecturer become more idiosyncratic. The Post-syncretistic Approach to whatever it was the previous year had caused even Mrs Toppler, who was prepared to thank almost anybody for almost anything, to choke on the task, which was perhaps the unconscious reason she had left the 'not' out of this being an occasion they would not forget in a hurry. Nikki had seized the chance of the director's absence on a retreat in Nepal to choose this year's lecturer herself.

'Dr Norman Wilfred needs no introduction,' Mrs Fred Toppler would be saying tomorrow when she introduced him. Nikki looked at the unneeded introduction that followed, paraphrased from the CV that Dr Wilfred's personal assistant had sent her. His list of publications and appointments,

of fellowships and awards, was mind-numbing. Lucinda Knowles, Nikki's counterpart at the J. G. Fledge Institute, had assured her that Dr Wilfred was both a serious expert in the management of science and a genuine celebrity. Her friend Jane Gee, at the Cartagena Festival, said he was the lecturer everybody currently wanted.

So this year – *Innovation and Governance: the Promise of Scientometrics*. There was something about the word *promise* that made Nikki's heart suddenly sink. Her choice was going to be just as awful as all the others. Even now he was five miles up in the sky, on his way from London, above Switzerland or northern Italy. She had a clear and discouraging picture of him as he sat there in business class sipping his complimentary champagne. All those committees and international lectures would have taken their toll. His jowls would be heavy with importance, his waistline thick and his hair thin with it. He would have dragged *Innovation and Governance* around the world, from Toronto to Tokyo, from Oslo to Oswego, until the typescript was yellow from the Alpine sun, tear-stained from the tropical rains, and exhausted from repetition.

She printed up the unnecessary introduction and the big thank-you, the solid bookends that bracketed whatever was to come. Too late now to alter what that was going to be. It was coming towards them all at 500 mph.

She looked at her watch. She had just the right amount of time in hand to deliver the texts to Mrs Toppler and then double-check a few things on her list before she left for the airport. She stepped out of the door of her office into the great brick wall of late-afternoon heat.

2

Why does one do it? thought Dr Norman Wilfred as he sipped his complimentary business-class champagne and gazed absently down upon the world five miles below. Why *does* one do it?

Round and round the same treadmill one went. Another view like all the others over some unidentifiable part of the earth's surface five miles beyond one's grasp. Then another airport and another waiting car. Another eager assurance that everyone was so excited at the prospect of one's visit. Another guest room with two towels and a bar of soap laid out on the bed. The Fred Toppler Foundation, it was true, had a reputation in academic circles for treating its visiting lecturers well. He foresaw drinkable wine and comfortable chairs set out in soft sunshine or warm shade. All the same, when he thought of the performance he would have to go through to earn these small compensations, he felt a familiar weariness in the marrow of his bones.

'Dr Norman Wilfred?' people would say when introductions were made, and he could already see the way the expressions on their faces would change. He could feel the way he would smile and incline his head slightly in return. Once again he would bring out the topics he kept ready for the obligatory mingling with his fellow-guests. Once again he would lay out his little stock of unusual knowledge, original thoughts, and interesting opinions. He would offer the scraps of gossip he had brought. He would tell the tried and tested stories.

And then the lecture itself. The faces raised expectantly towards him. The fulsome introduction with the record of his career paraphrased from the CV that Vicki had sent them and edited down to manageable length by omitting, always, the most important publications and appointments. His head modestly lowered as he listened to it all once again, revealing the way the years were beginning to extend his high forehead up over the top of his head.

The applause as he goes to the lectern and opens the text of his lecture . . .

His lecture! Had he got it? He felt in his flight bag once again, just to be sure. Yes, there it reassuringly was. He always kept the text of his lecture with him on his travels. He and his luggage had become separated too often over the years for him to take any risks. Toothbrushes and pyjamas could be replaced; the lecture was part of himself, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. He took it out of the bag, just to be doubly sure. The same scuffed old brown binder that had travelled so many thousands of weary air miles with him, personalised by the red wine-stain it had acquired in Melbourne, the smeared remains of some small tropical insect in Singapore. He would add a few introductory remarks, as he usually did, to make clear the special relevance of the lecture to this particular time and place, but the body of the text was the material that had slowly taken its present form, like his scalp, over many years. A whole lifetime of thought and study was concentrated in these pages, its expression gradually refined and adapted, like all human knowledge, to current circumstances. The carefully crafted phrases were as familiar and reassuring as the wine-stain and the dead insect. 'Perhaps foremost among the challenges facing us

today . . . The hopes and fears of mankind . . . Within an overall framework of social responsibility . . .'

He saw the words as they would look up at him from the warm pool of light on the lectern, like well-behaved children at their fond father. 'These problems must be squarely faced . . . And here a note of caution must be sounded . . .' He heard the accomplished but still apparently spontaneous delivery. The little extempore variants and asides. The laughter. The reasonably prolonged applause at the end. The words of appreciation from his host – 'thought-provoking, insightful, fascinating' – not all of them perhaps entirely insincere . . .

Why did one go on doing it, though? When one could be sitting in one's office at the institute and doing real scholarly work. Struggling to understand the latest research by younger rivals who had invented some incomprehensible new vocabulary of their own, or to master the institute's draft accounts before the next meeting of the committee of management, or to sort out the muddle into which the manuscript of one's new book seemed to have descended.

And instead, here one was again, five miles up, glass of champagne in hand. Why, why, why?

It was true that there was also some satisfaction to be derived from being Dr Norman Wilfred. Purely as a consequence of his being who he was, seriously worded documents drafted by the labour of others were placed in front of him to be signed. His advice and his skills as a chairman did not go unappreciated. As soon as people heard the name they knew exactly what they were going to get. They were never disappointed. Dr Norman Wilfred was what they expected, and Dr Norman Wilfred was what they got.

And if there were benefits in being Dr Norman Wilfred, he thought, as the cabin attendant refilled his glass, then God knows he had earned them. He had arrived at being who he was only slowly and with sustained application, thought by thought, opinion by opinion, appointment by appointment. There had been many let-downs along the way; many failures, rebuffs, and slights; many mornings when he had looked in the shaving mirror and seen someone he didn't much like the look of gazing back at him. He had his problems even now. His blood pressure had to be kept under control. He had developed a serious allergy to onions. He suffered perhaps from a slight tendency to take himself too seriously.

Also from this apparently incurable propensity to find himself on planes with a glass of champagne in his hand, and the prospect of yet more debilitating comfort and flattery in front of him.