

Opening extract from

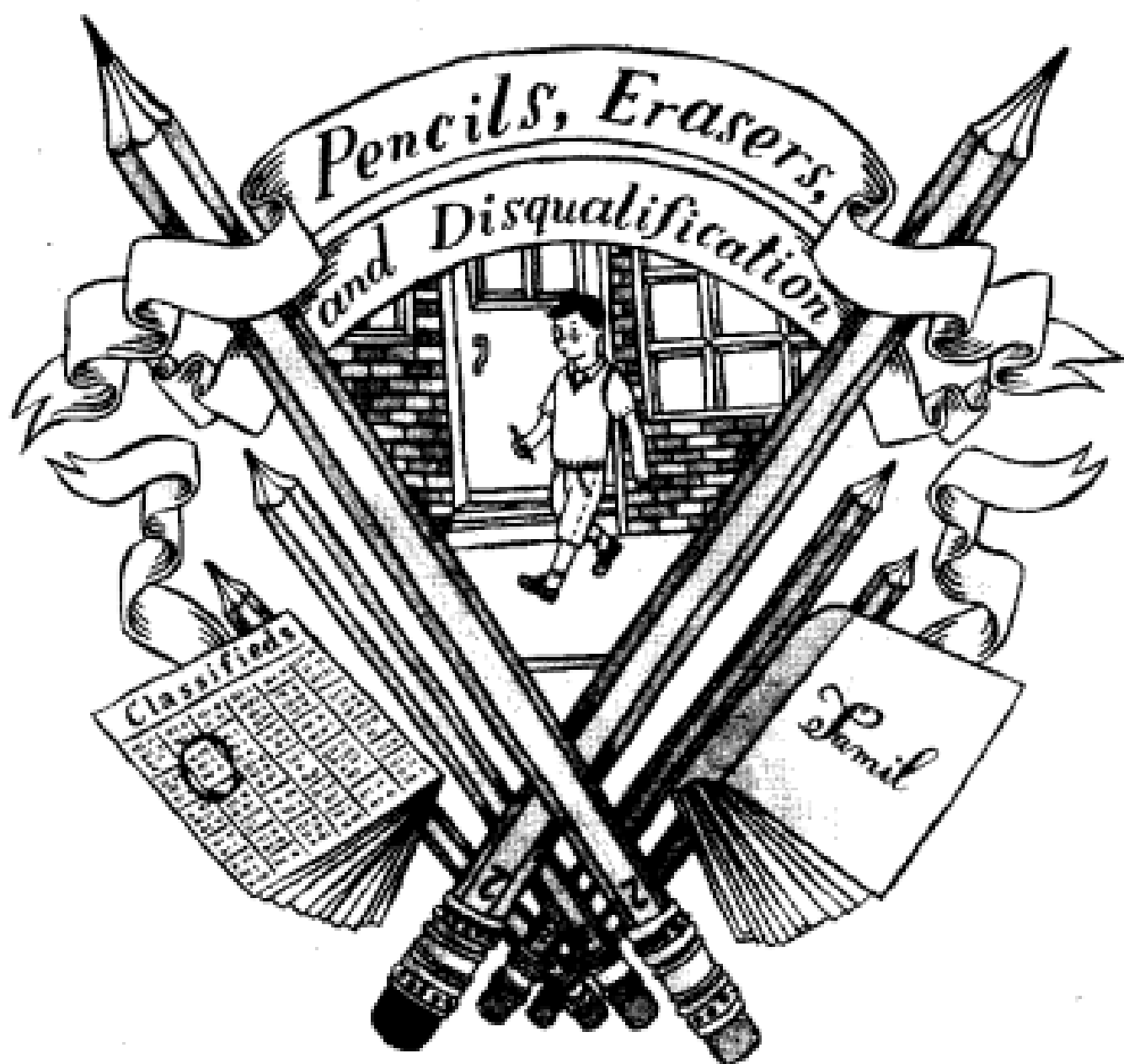
The Mysterious Benedict Society

Written by

Trenton Lee Stuart

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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.