A WORD TO THE WISE

Drew Pope put down his pencil, pushed back in his chair, stretched his arms overhead, and swung in a half-circle so he could look out the window. It was a warm Indian-summer day. The maple trees that lined the Allenby Public Library parking lot reached toward the sun like a hedge of orange fire. The smell of their dry, aromatic leaves spiced the gentle breeze. "What a day to be inside!," he said, meditatively addressing the emptiness of the room. With considerable reluctance, he spun his chair around and was about to return to his papers when Preston Huish put his head into the room.

"Have a minute, Drew?" the selectman asked, perkily.

"Sure," smiled the library director, "Glad to see you. Won't you sit down, Preston?" He didn't know the selectman well, but they were on a first-name basis.

Pope studied him with questioning eyes, his hand reaching for the coolish remainder of his coffee.

Huish spoke: "My daughter, Lisa, applied for a page's job at the beginning of September, and yesterday she stopped by to see the circulation head to find out when she would be starting. Ms. Wren told her that she was number 18 on the waiting list and that it would be quite some time before she would be called." The dim thought at the back of the director's mind: "You're about to ask a favor of me. I can tell." But he kept his own counsel.

The selectman continued: "Would you personally look into this and see if she can't be moved up on the list? She's in her final year of high school, and she's saving to go away to college next year. She's bright and a really reliable kid. I'd appreciate it if you'd move her to the top of the list." He fully expected the director to acquiesce, for his eyebrows mounted ever so slightly.

A choking emotion, partly made up of incredulity and in part a burning resentment filled Drew Pope. This-this isn't right, it isn't fair. You can't ask me to do this. Something within him brought him to his feet. He was shocked, hurt, but his calm tone disclosed nothing of that. He explained to the selectman that pages were hired on a "first come, first-take" basis, and that while there was considerable turnover he doubted 18 would be needed in the year, perhaps three or four at best. He added that hiring pages was the delegated responsibility of the head of circulation, and that he left it entirely up to her, seldom becoming involved, except when there was a problem, which there rarely was.
The selectman received this explanation in silence, but he fastened on the librarian a glance full of sinister meaning. It said: "Look, pal, I can do things for you. Don't forget I'm chairman of the budget committee. Your budget will probably be one of the first to be cut in these budget-slashing times. If you want to fare reasonably well, you better play ball with me."

The logic of the thing was spread out plainly and irrefutably before Pope. And yet the thought of what he was being asked to do to salvage the jeopardized budget outraged his every fiber. How he had always anathematized those who took unscrupulous advantage of their positions, and those who succumbed to their insolent methods.

All this filled his brain and throat, and clamored for expression; but not a protesting word escaped his lips. He merely said, striving to conceal his anger: "I'll see what I can do."

Preston Huish smiled approvingly, expressed his thanks, and walked away with suave confidence.

The director returned to his paperwork, nothing in his heart but hot shame at having permitted himself to be bullied into submission by this disagreeable public official.

After a time, he went to the circulation area.

"Hilda," he said, approaching the department head, who was computing next week's schedule at her desk behind the charge-out counter, "Mr. Huish, one of the selectman, dropped by earlier today and asked me if his daughter, Lisa, who has applied for a page's job, could start immediately. I told him I'd look into it. He says she's eighteenth on the list."

Hilda Wren looked up, acknowledged that was so, and added, "We won't get to her by the time she graduates. She came by to see me yesterday and I told her not to hold out any hope."

The director reached up and scratched the side of his head. "Are we hiring anyone soon?" he inquired.

"Yes, we need someone to start next Monday," was Wren's answer, curiosity and challenge in her voice.
"Well," he responded quietly, turning his face away, "I think it would be advisable to offer the job to Lisa."

"What!" she exclaimed, on a hard and inimical note. It was as if she had been given a dizzying blow.

The director saw at once that he must tread warily."

I needn't tell you," he suggested tentatively, with brow creased, "that Preston Huish is a very influential person in town. We need all the help we can get to save our budget. We can't risk alienating him. He's chairman of the budget committee and he wields a lot of power. I've been working very hard to establish good relations with the powers-that-be, and I don't want to see my labors wiped out by denying one of them a request. If I expect them to grant me requests, then I must be prepared to grant theirs. With these assorted tax-cutting propositions being voted in right and left, we'll be the first to have out budget cut for sure. Common sense dictates that we play ball with him. Don't make this more difficult than it is. A word to the wise should be sufficient."

"I've already contacted the first person on the list," she said, with a low but intensely clear and precise articulation. "He's coming in Monday." Her lips closed resolutely into a firm line.

Pope wasted not a second in responding. "You'll have to call him and tell him there's been a mix-up and that he'll be called as soon as there's another opening."

Her eyes swept the room and then enveloped him in an icy glare. "I don't think it's right," she said with that maddening clearness of articulation. "The kid I've called has been waiting patiently for a year and a half for the job. He was thrilled to be called. He's a neighbor of mine. I know him and I like him. He's a good kid. He's conscientious and takes his work seriously. He's been our paperboy for years, and he's never been late one morning. I never moved him up on the list, although I could have many times and no one would have known. I've never done this for anybody."

The director ran his hand along his cheek. He often did this, almost unconsciously, to avert an immediate sign of reaction to an irksome confrontation. "Let's go to my office," he enjoined, noticing that the circulation clerks were beginning to take an interest in the dialogue.
Therein, Pope closed the door. "Look, Hilda," he began in a rather pleasant style, as he sat down and as she sat down. "Let's be reasonable about this. I think we have to make an exception here."

The woman seemed to be trying to hide a growing personal anger toward him, and it kept her cool and reserved. He waited for a comment, an acknowledgement—something. None came. He continued: "There are two ways you can react to this: you can accept it gracefully or you can accept it unpleasantly. Whichever, we're going to hire Lisa Huish, and that's all there is to it."

Wren found speech. "This is an order then," she said defiantly, "even though I'm supposedly in charge of pages."

"Yes, if that's the way you want to take it." Neither of them relaxed the grip on each other's eyes.

"Very well, then, I'll do it," she responded sternly. "But I think it's wrong. It isn't fair to those who don't have 'pull' that those who do get preferential treatment. I don't care who's involved. I think they should wait their turn like everyone else. I'll call the young fellow and tell him there's been a mix-up, as you suggest—I hope his parents don't raise a stink—then, I'll call Lisa Huish." And then, after what had almost become an unbearable pause, "Yes, I'll do it, but I want you to know that it really sticks in my craw. It violates all my principles."

A feeling of unshielded relief filled Pope's whole being. "Don't think I like it any better than you do," he said, as it were appealing for approval. "But you can see, can't you, that we have to do it?"

That was not the thing to say. Wren threw him another malevolent look. "No, I don't see. I'm doing it because you're the boss and I'm following orders. I want you to know that. I think you're usurping my authority."

The library director decided to let well enough alone; after all, she had agreed. They parted with Pope saying, by way of offering some consolatory remark, "Her father says she's reliable."

Lisa Huish was hired and started at the appointed time. She was to work every weekday afternoon from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.; no Saturdays, at her request. (Wren felt she had compromised enough that she
didn't even blink when Lisa announced that she would like to have her Saturdays free. Pages usually work every other Saturday. The library is closed Sundays.)

Four weeks later, on a Friday, Hilda Wren came by the director's office to say that she didn't think Lisa—her tone was distinctly facetious—was as reliable as her father thought. She was frequently late for work, and she spent so much time talking with other pages and other people in the library that she was not getting her work done. And she'd been absent five days in the month. When she called in sick the third time, a week ago, the circulation head decided to have a talk with her. "As I approached her in the stacks the following day," Wren related, "I heard her saying 'We spent yesterday afternoon at the movies; we went from one theater right into the other, and got home at 6:30.' I didn't confront her with that, because we can't afford to alienate Mr. Huish, can we?" Pope observed that her manner was mocking and not the slightest bit sympathetic; a conspicuous coolness had existed between them since they had exchanged views on the hiring of Lisa Huish. Wren went on: "I spoke to her about missing work and being tardy, and she promised me she'd watch it. She's been absent twice this week and late twice, so obviously my words haven't had much effect."

Pope flushed hotly at this disclosure. Wren translated the look on his face. It was a look of horror. He looked up the selectman's telephone number at his dairy and dialed him.

"Hello, Preston," he began brusquely, "Drew Pope at the library. Look... Fine, thanks... Look Lisa isn't working out as a page. She's been consistently late, she usually behind in her work, and she's been absent 5 days out of 20. One of those days she was at the movies when she was supposed to be home sick."

Hilda Wren ahemmed when she heard that, as if to indicate what a silly thing to say. "Rhinoceros!" she said under her breath, shaking her head.

Pope continued speaking to Huish: "Last week sometime... Ms. Wren overheard her say it in the stacks... Well, that's what she heard..." He cupped his hand over the receiver and asked Wren what day it was. "Thursday" was her reticent response. "Thursday," he said, speaking into the mouthpiece. "Uh, huh. . . . : He began to tap his fingers nervously on the desk. "Well, anyway, she's been absent 5 days out of 20, she's frequently late, and she talks so much with her co-workers and the patrons that she doesn't get the work done... I suppose it is Mrs. Wren's word against Lisa's... Ms. Wren has spoken
to her and she's been absent twice since, and late, too. . . . All right. . . . Yes, I understand. . . . Perhaps that will do some good. . . . Okay. . . . Goodbye."

"Preston's going to speak to her about it," Pope said as he clicked back the receiver. He proceeded to relate the other side of the conversation: Huish was upset, not so much that Lisa wasn't working out but that they, Pope and Wren, were bothered by it. He accused them of lying when they said she was at the movies when she had called in sick. The reason Huish asked about the specific day was that Lisa had to stay home with her mother on that day. Her mother hasn't been well lately.

"Lisa didn't say she was staying home to take care of her mother when she called in sick that time, did she?" Pope asked Wren.

"No," replied the other, "she said she was sick."

"Well, I don't know what's going on," Pope continued disgustedly. "Anyway, to make a long story short, Huish said he knows Lisa has been a little flighty at times. But he said she's a good girl and a good worker. She just needs a good talking to. He said he'd be very disappointed to learn we were thinking of letter her go. He said he'd speak to her himself. Let's see if he can whip her into shape."

Consistent with her conduct in this affair, Wren agreed to go along. "There's one thing I should add," she threw in. "Several other pages have been complaining to me about Lisa. I thought you should know this, too."

The library director strove to master his frustration. "Keep me posted on how she makes out," he said resignedly.

Two weeks later, Wren popped her head in at his door. "I thought you should know that Lisa has been out two days in the past two weeks," she announced, "one time not even calling in, and late three days."

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Taken from Problems in Library Management, Chapter 14