
CE AT 13+

ENGLISH

ISEB

Independent Schools
Examinations Board

Foundation Reading (Specimen Insert)

Date

Specimen

ISEB makes every reasonable effort to obtain clearance to reproduce all third-party content that it uses in its assessment material. In the event that it has inadvertently used material without permission, or failed to acknowledge the copyright owner correctly, ISEB will be pleased to make appropriate amendments at the earliest possible opportunity.

All copyright acknowledgements are reproduced online in the ISEB Copyright Acknowledgement Booklet. This is produced for each series of examinations and is freely available to download at www.iseb.co.uk after the live examination series.

The passage below is taken from The Ruby in the Smoke by Philip Pullman:

It is 1872. A lawyer, Jeremiah Blyth, goes to visit Mrs Holland, who offers rooms for rent ('lodgings') in her house in the East End of London.

Lodgings, in the East End, is a word that covers a multitude of horrors. At its worst, it means a room streaming with damp and poisonous with stench. At its best, it means a decent, cleanly place where they change the linen as often as they remember. Somewhere in between, there is Holland's Lodgings. There, a bed for the night would cost you threepence, a bed to yourself for fourpence, a room to yourself sixpence, and breakfast a penny.

To this house came Mr Jeremiah Blyth, a stout and shady lawyer. His previous business with the owner had been transacted elsewhere; this was his first visit to Hangman's Wharf.

His knock brought a child to the door – a child whose only feature seemed to be, on that dingy afternoon, a pair of enormous black eyes. She opened the door a fraction, and whispered, 'Yessir?'

'Mr Jeremiah Blyth,' said the visitor. 'Mrs Holland is expecting me.'

The child opened the door wide enough for him to enter, and then seemed to vanish into the gloom of the hallway.

Mr Blyth went in, and drummed his fingers on his top hat, and stared at a dusty engraving of the Death of Nelson¹, and tried not to guess at the origin of the stains on the ceiling.

Presently there shuffled in, preceded by a smell of boiled cabbage and old cat, the owner of the house. She was a wizened old woman with sunken cheeks, pinched lips and glittering eyes. She held out a claw-like hand to her visitor, and spoke – but she might have been speaking in Turkish for all the sense Mr Blyth could make of it.

'I beg your pardon, ma'am? I didn't quite catch -'

She crowed, and led the way into a tiny parlour, where the smell of old cat had been left to gain depth and maturity. Once the door was shut, she opened a little tin box

on the mantelpiece and took out a set of false teeth, fitting them into her wrinkled mouth and smacking her lips over them. They were too big for her, and looked entirely horrible.

30 'That's better,' she said. 'I always forgets me teeth indoors. Mr pore dear husband's, these were. Real ivory. Made for him out East twenty-five years ago. Look at the workmanship!'

She bared the brown fangs and grey gums in an animal snarl. Mr Blyth took a step backwards.

35 'And when he died, pore lamb,' she went on, 'they was going into the grave with him, being as he was took so quick. Cholera², it was. Gone in a weekend, pore duck. But I whipped 'em out his mouth afore they shut the lid on him. There's years o'wear in them teeth, I thought.'

Mr Blyth gulped.

'There, sit down,' she said. 'Make yerself at home. Adelaide!'

40 The child materialised. She could not, thought Mr Blyth, be older than nine, and so should, by law have been at school – for the new Board Schools³ had been set up only two years before, making education compulsory for children under thirteen. However, Mr Blyth's conscience⁴ was as wraith-like⁵ as the child herself – far too insubstantial to inquire, let alone protest. So, his conscience and the child both
45 remained silent while Mrs Holland gave directions for tea; and then they both vanished again.

¹ Nelson = a famous admiral in the British Navy, who was shot and killed at the Battle of Trafalgar.

² cholera = an infectious disease that causes a very severe stomach upset.

³ Board Schools = the first state schools, which made education available for all children

⁴ conscience = a person's sense of right and wrong

⁵ wraith-like = like a wispy ghost