

ENGLISH

CHAPTER 7: EVANS TRIES AN O-LEVEL



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~Summary~

-by Colin Dexter

Evans' Request for O-Level Exam

It is early March when the story opens. The Governor of Oxford Prison telephones the Secretary of the Examination Board with an unusual request. One of the inmates, James Roderick Evans, wishes to appear for the O-Level German Examination. The Secretary asks if the inmate is a violent sort of person. The Governor informs him that there is no record of violence against him. He is actually a pleasant and fun-loving person, and an expert at the art of imitation, which made him rather a star at the Christmas concert in the prison. He was just a kleptomaniac. He was being given night classes in O-level German in the prison. After discussing the details related to the exam, the Secretary informs him that he would send one of the parsons from St Mary Mags to act as an invigilator.

Evans the Break

Evans is known as 'Evans the Break' among the prison officials because thrice he has escaped from the prison. The Governor fears that he is again planning his escape, but thinks that there may just as well be a very slight possibility that Evans is genuinely interested in O-Level German. On 7th June at 8:30 pm, his German tutor wishes him good luck for the exam the following day. He expresses his concern that Evans has hardly any chance of getting through.

Precautions of the Prison Officials

At 8:30 am on 8th June, two prison officers, senior prison officer Jackson and a new recruit officer Stephens, visit Evans. Evans and Jackson are sworn enemies. Jackson mocks Evans by calling him Einstein. Evans hasn't shaven. He is given time to smarten himself up. Jackson tells Stephens to take away the razor after Evans has shaved. Jackson feels disgusted at the dirty bobble hat of Evans and asks him to take it off. But Evans insists that the hat is his good luck charm and he is going to need it for the exam. Evans knows that Jackson holds some compassion for him. The Governor of the prison has made sure that all precautions are taken to avoid a prison break. Evans' nail scissors and file are taken away from him. His prison cell is fitted with a listening device with its receiver being in the Governor's room.

Reverend Stuart McLeery

At 8:45 the same morning, the invigilator appointed for the examination, Reverend Stuart McLeery, started for the prison. It was drizzling outside.

He was carrying a small brown suitcase which contained all the items needed for the examination, a sealed question paper envelope, a yellow invigilation form, a special authentication card from the Examinations Board, a paper knife, a Bible and a current copy of The Church Times.

The two-hour examination was scheduled to start at 9:15 am. Evans is getting ready when Stephens comes in with two small square tables and sets them opposite each other. He also brings in two chairs. Jackson comes in and warns Evans to behave.

Evans asks him why is he being bugged in his cell. Jackson replies that no man in his senses would take any chance with Evans. He further informs him that the Governor doesn't trust him at all and would be listening to each and everything going on in his cell.

The Examination Begins at 9:25 am

Reverend McLeery, who is the invigilator, makes his entry into the prison and is taken to Evans' cell, where Evans is concentrating hard on a book of elementary German Grammar.

At 9:10 am, the Governor switches on the receiver. He knows in his heart of hearts that all these precautions were redundant, because if Evans had to make an escape, he could have easily done so from the Recreation Block. Still he feels that it is not wise to take any chances. He believes that "Evans was as safe as houses..." Suddenly, he decides to tell his officers to search McLeery.

McLeery's suitcase is 'searched'. The presence of a small semi-inflated rubber ring surprises the officers, but they are courteously informed that McLeery is suffering from piles and the rubber ring helps him in sitting in a particular position for a long time. The officers feel satisfied and the invigilator is allowed to go into the cell. McLeery gives necessary instructions to the candidate regarding writing down the paper's name 021-1, index number 313 and the centre number 271.

Stephens is in the cell until now but Evans does not like his presence. The Governor asks Jackson to call him out. Finally, the examination begins at 9:25 am. At 9:40 am, the Assistant Secretary for Modern Languages informs the Governor over the phone about the correction slip not being put in the examination package. The Governor takes all necessary precautions and Evans is told about the corrections on page three line fifteen by the invigilator.

The Governor also knew some German and was confident that McLeery understood everything. But he had some doubts about Evans. For the first quarter of an hour, Stephens had dutifully checked on Evans through the peep-hole. He saw Evans, with his pen between his lips, staring at the door. At 10:50 am. Evans requested for a blanket.

When Stephens peeped in next, he was surprised to find a blanket around Evans. He thought that perhaps the prison cells got cold in that wing. So he didn't report the slight irregularity.

Evans Escapes from the Prison

Three minutes before the examination was to get over, Jackson calls Stephens, telling him that the Governor wants to speak to him. The Governor instructs Stephens to accompany McLeery personally to the main gate.

As both of them head towards the main gate, Stephens has an illusion that the invigilator had suddenly grown thinner. His Scottish accent also seemed more noticeable than before.

He suddenly thinks that he must have one last look at Evans. He is in for a surprise. Stephens sees a man sprawled back in Evans' chair with the blanket slipping from his shoulders. His closely cropped hair was splattered with blood. Stephens and Jackson think that it is McLeery who had been hit by Evans. Evans has, thus, escaped. (Actually it is not so).

The wounded man in Evans' cell, whom everybody thought to be McLeery, tells the prison authorities not to worry about him. He desperately and restlessly tells the Governor about the photocopied sheet that had been superimposed over the last (originally blank) page of the question paper, where a few words were written in German.

It instructed Evans to adhere to the plan strictly and not to hit McLeery too hard. It said that the three minutes before the examination were very important. He was also instructed not to overdo the Scottish accent. Detective Superintendent Carter swings into action. McLeery is, however, very agitated and tells them that Evans has gone towards Elsfeld Way. The Governor asks Carter to take McLeery with him because he is the only one who knows what has really happened.

The Governor Gets Furious and with his Officers

The Governor now scolds his officers for behaving foolishly and calls them 'two morons' because he had not made any call at 11:22 am i.e. three minutes before the examination was to get over. At that time, the Governor was trying to get in touch with the Examinations Board.

Jackson is taken to task because of his negligence. He had not searched the cell thoroughly the previous evening. This resulted in Evans concealing the clerical paraphernalia. Thereafter, the Governor looks at the photocopied slip and thinks of Newbury.

He orders the driver to take Jackson and Stephens to St Aldates Police Station to meet Chief Inspector Bell. The Governor thinks about Evans and appreciates his ingenuity. He considers leaving the question paper behind a mistake, because it is this that is going to lead him to 'Mr clever-clever Evans.

Meanwhile Carter informs him that McLeery had seen Evans driving off along Elsfield Way. He was given a chase but they somehow missed him. The Governor tells him that he believes that Evans is heading towards Newbury and gives reasons for his belief. When the Governor asks Carter about McLeery, Carter tells him that the parson was left at Radcliffe Hospital. When the Governor rings up the hospital, he finds that McLeery was not there. When the ambulance reached Elsfield to pick him up, McLeery was not there. At this point in the story, the Governor is sure that something is terribly wrong. A quarter of an hour later they find the real McLeery bound and gagged in his own study. He has been there since 8:15 am. Eventually, everybody comes to know that Evans impersonating McLeery had not walked out, but had actually stayed in the prison itself.

The Final Escape

The scene shifts to 'The Golden Lion' in the centre of Chipping Norton. Evans is still wearing the parson's clothes. He is happy with his successful escape. But he regrets cutting his long hair. However, he had been fortunate as he was not asked to take off his hat. He is walking to his room. He opens the door and his heart skips a beat. The Governor is sitting on the narrow bed in the room.

The Governor tells him how he reached the hotel room. The correction slip provided the clue about the hotel's name. The index number 313 and centre number 271 referred to the area where Evans could be. It was the Golden Lion of Chipping Norton. Evans, similarly, tells him about the skill in getting the blood to splatter on the head.

Actually, the rubber ring contained pig's blood! The Governor enquires how Evans could plan out everything when he had no visitors. A delighted Evans tells him that he has a lot of friends. The German teacher was one of them and he was of immense help to him.

Finally, Evans is brought out of his hotel room. He is handcuffed by a prison officer called by the Governor and the two of them clamber awkwardly into the back seat of the prison van. The Governor tells Evans that he will see him soon, but it appears that Evans has some other plans in store.

He asks the Governor if his knowledge of other modern languages was as good as German. When the Governor asks him the reason behind the question, Evans smilingly says that next September, some O-level Italian classes were being planned. The Governor says that Evans might not be with them next September. The latter agrees, and so it is.

The moment the Governor is out of sight, the prison officer (actually a friend of Evans) unlocks the handcuffs and asks the driver to drive fast. Evans tells him to turn to Newbury. Thus, the Governor and his officers are completely outwitted by the clever Evans who manages to engineer an escape even after being caught!

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NCERT SOLUTIONS

Questions (Page No. 92)

(Reading with Insight)

Question 1. Reflecting on the story, what did you feel about Evans' having the last laugh?

Answer: Evans smartly devised and executed the plan of his escape. He managed to fool everyone till the end of the story. It was Evan who had the last laugh. He gave false clues to misguide the officials following him. The story describes how criminals are one step ahead of prison officials. As earlier said, Evan smartly executed the plan of release after all, providing strict care for the smooth handling of the Examination. Evan made all the arrangements to escape by just sitting in jail. His friends joined and Mc Leery helped him in escaping by deceiving the governor. They arranged the car where Evan could change his makeup and clothes. With his victorious escape, Evans definitely had a well-earned last laugh.

Question 2. When Stephens comes back to the cell he jumps to a conclusion and the whole machinery blindly goes by his assumption without even checking the identity of the injured 'McLeery'. Does this show how hasty conjectures can prevent one from seeing the obvious? How is the criminal able to predict such negligence?

Answer: Evans was a perceptive and smart criminal. He had evaluated the vulnerabilities of the prison staff successfully. Stephen was a new recruit to the prison setup. When he noticed the wounded McCleery in the cell he was so overcome that he did not verify who he was and neither did anyone else. It did not happen to anyone to ask how there could be two persons, one of them in the cell and the another who had been accompanied out by Stephens. It was for this reason that buddies of Evans, who, acting as the Governor on the telephone, addressed Stephens that he should accompany the person done with his exams. The Governor and his officers lead Evans out of the jail. The question paper was left behind to deceive the Governor. This proves that Evans the convict had sufficient time to analyze the behaviour of the jail officers and prepare their strategy well.

Question 3. What could the Governor have done to securely bring back Evans to prison when he caught him at the Golden Lion? Does that final act of foolishness really prove that "he was just another good-for-a-giggle, gullible governor, that was all"?

Answer: The Governor took all the forethought to assure that Evans should not have any risk to escape from the prison. He even traced and caught him at the Golden Lion after his magnificent release from jail. His cocksureness once again showed that he was no equal to the smart and

cunning Evans. The Governor, after getting proof from the question paper, traced Evans at the Golden Lion. When he entered the room he was stunned to see the Governor. Evans gave no action and was imprisoned. The innocent Governor rejoiced over his victory and said goodbye to him. Evans was made to sit in the police van. The Governor did not check the identity of the driver, the officer, and the van. A little more diligence could have avoided the escape of the sinner. If the Governor had taken Evans to the jail cell with the arrangement of police the criminal would not have disappeared. Their carelessness showed that he was “just another good-for-a-giggle gullible governor”.

Question 4. While we condemn the crime, we are sympathetic to the criminal. Is this the reason why prison staff often develop a soft corner for those in custody?

Answer: The reason why the jail officer develops a soft corner for those in imprisonment is that regular communication brings people closer. There is increased perception between them. They may not be in a position to justify the action but can explain it. Our opinions change when we see a criminal accepting his punishment. This is what happens with the jail officer. By seeing the criminal suffering in the jail, they accidentally generate a soft corner for him in their hearts. They gaze at him as a human being and not as an illegal character. They start seeing and appreciating their mental skills rather than just retrieving their sin. In this story, it is said that buried somewhere in Jackson, the senior police officer, beneath all the bluster, was a tiny core of kindness and Evans knew it. Evans knew of the sensitive side of Jackson and so hit it straight through his talk about “lucky charm”, and managed to fool the strict and efficient staff. Even the Governor could not help seeing his brain power when he found him in the hotel. Thus, he was not bitter or stern with Evans, and regrettably, carried off with him leniently.

Question 5. Do you agree that between crime and punishment it is mainly a battle of wits?

Answer: In every fight, the more powerful side wins, and this power could be mental or physical. However, after seeing the story we can terminate that punishment and crime, it is chiefly a battle of wits. The side which defeats the other successes. It is not always that a culprit gets punished. Here in the story, the police officers, though well-trained, were easily deceived by the smart Evans who tried to escape from right under their nose. The Governor and Evans, both tried to outwit each other. The Governor took all the forethought like bugging the cell during the exam. He sent Stephen to accompany Mc Leery and got the hotel exactly. Evans was also taken aback when he got to know that the receptionist in the hotel was an informer. These are examples of the battle of wits between crime and punishment.