

Fiction 3 UNIT

F.3 The Man Who Knew Too Much *by Alexander Baron*

1. **With your partner, discuss and narrate an incident about a person who likes to show off.**

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Check whether your classmates agree with you.

2. **Now, read about the "Professor" who knew too much and find out if he knew enough!**

1. I first met **Private** Quelch at the training depot. A man is liable to acquire in his first week of Army life - together with his uniform, rifle and equipment- a nickname. Anyone who saw Private Quelch, lanky, stooping, frowning through horn-rimmed spectacles, understood why he was known as the Professor. Those who had any doubts on the subject lost them after five minutes' conversation with him.
2. I remember the first lesson we had in **musketry**. We stood in an attentive circle while a Sergeant, a man as dark and sun-dried as raisins, wearing **North-West Frontier ribbons**, described the mechanism of a service rifle.
3. "The muzzle velocity or speed at which the bullet leaves the rifle", he told us, "is well over two thousand feet per second."
4. A voice interrupted. "Two thousand, four hundred and forty feet per second." It was the Professor.
5. "That's right," the Sergeant said without enthusiasm, and went on lecturing. When he had finished, he put questions to us; and, perhaps in the hope of revenge, he

Private: soldier without rank

musketry: art of using the infantry soldier's handgun.

N.W. Frontier ribbons: decorations showing service in the N.W. province in British India, today a part of modern Pakistan.



turned with his questions again and again to the Professor. The only result was to enhance the Professor's glory. Technical definitions, the parts of the rifle, its use and care, he had them all by heart.

6. The Sergeant asked, "You had any training before?"
7. The Professor answered with a phrase that was to become familiar to all of us. "No, Sergeant. It's all a matter of intelligent reading."
8. That was our introduction to him. We soon learned more about him. He saw to that. He meant to get on, he told us. He had brains. He was sure to get a **commission**, before long. As a first step, he meant to get a **stripe**.
9. In pursuit of his ambition he worked hard. We had to give him credit for that. He borrowed training manuals and stayed up late at nights reading them. He badgered the instructors with questions. He drilled with enthusiasm, and on **route marches** he was not only miraculously tireless but infuriated us all with his horrible heartiness. "What about a song, chaps?" is not greeted politely at the end of thirty miles. His salute at the pay table was a model to behold. When officers were in sight he would swing his skinny arms and march to the canteen like a Guardsman.
10. And day in and day out, he lectured to us in his droning, remorseless voice on every aspect of human knowledge. At first we had a certain respect for him, but soon we lived in terror of his approach. We tried to hit back at him with clumsy sarcasms and practical jokes. The Professor scarcely noticed; he was too busy working for his stripe.
11. Each time one of us made a mistake the Professor would publicly correct him. Whenever one of us shone, the Professor outshone him. When, after a hard morning's work cleaning out our hut, we listened in silence to the **Orderly Officer's** praise, the Professor would break out with a ringing, dutifully beaming, "Thank you, sir!" And how superior, how **condescending** he was. It was always, "Let me show you, fellow," or, "No, you'll ruin your rifle, that way, old man."
12. We used to pride ourselves on aircraft recognition. Once, out for a walk, we heard the drone of a plane flying high overhead. None of us could even see it in the glare of the sun. Without even a glance upward the Professor announced, "That, of course, is a North American Harvard Trainer. It can be unmistakably identified by the harsh engine note, due to the high tip speed of the airscrew."

What could a gang of louts like us do with a man like that?

commission: become an army officer

stripe: V-shaped band to indicate the rank of a soldier.

route marches: training marches of battalions.

Orderly Officer: officer of the day

condescending : to look down on



13. None of us will ever forget the drowsy summer afternoon which was such a turning-point in the Professor's life.

14. We were **sprawling** contentedly on the warm grass while Corporal Turnbull was taking a lesson on the hand grenade.



15. Corporal Turnbull was a young man, but he was not a man to be **trifled with**. He had come back from Dunkirk with all his equipment correct and accounted for and his kitten in his pocket. He was our hero, and we used to tell each other that he was so tough that you could hammer nails into him without his noticing it.

16. _"The outside of a grenade, as you can see," Corporal Turnbull was saying, "is divided up into a large number of fragments to assist segmentation"

17. "Forty-four"

18. "What's that?" The Corporal looked over his shoulder

19. "Forty-four segments." The Professor beamed at him.

20. The Corporal said nothing, but his brow tightened. He opened his mouth to resume.

21. "And by the way, Corporal." We were all thunder-struck.

22. The Professor was speaking again. "Shouldn't you have started off with the five characteristics of the grenade? Our instructor at the other camp always used to, you know."

23. In the silence that followed a dark flush stained the tan of Corporal's face. "Here," he said at last, "you give this lecture". As if afraid to say any more, he tossed the grenade to the Professor. Quite **unabashed**, Private Quelch climbed to his feet and with the aid of a man coming into his birth-right gave us an unexceptionable lecture on the grenade.

24. The squad listened in a **cowed**, horrified kind of silence. Corporal Turnbull stood and watched, impassive except for a searching intentness of gaze. When the lecture was finished he said, "Thank you, Private Quelch. Fall in with the others now." He did not speak again until we had fallen in and were waiting to be dismissed. Then he addressed us.

sprawling: lying with arms and legs outstretched.

trifled with : to play with or fool around with, talk or act frivolously with.

unabashed: unashamed.

cowed: subdued



25. "As some of you may have heard," he began deliberately, "the platoon officer has asked me to nominate one of you for...." He paused and looked lingeringly up and down the ranks as if seeking final confirmation of decision.
26. So this was the great moment! Most of us could not help glancing at Private Quelch, who stood rigidly to attention and stared straight in front of him with an expression of self-conscious innocence.
27. _____ ".....for permanent cookhouse duties, I've decided that Private Quelch is just the man for the job."
28. Of course, it was a joke for days afterwards; a joke and joy to all of us.
29. I remember, though.....
30. My friend Trower and I were talking about it a few days later. We were returning from the canteen to our own hut.
31. Through the open door, we could see the three cooks standing against the wall as if at bay; and from within came the monotonous beat of a familiar voice.
32. "Really. I must protest against this abominably unscientific and unhygienic method of peeling potatoes. I need to only draw your attention to the sheer waste of vitamin values....."
33. We fled.

About the Author

Alexander Baron (1917-1999) has written many novels, including 'There's no Home', 'The Human Kind', 'Queen of the East', 'Seeing Life' and 'The How Life', film scripts and television plays. He started life as an Asstt. Editor of The Tribune and later edited 'New Theater.' He served during the Second World War.

3. The 'Professor' knew too much. How did he prove himself? Fill up the space with suitable examples from the story, using the given clues:

- (a) about muzzle velocity: _____

- (b) after a thirty mile walk: _____

- (c) his salute on payday: _____



- (d) the loud sound of a high flying invisible aeroplane: _____

- (e) about hand grenades: _____

- (f) during cook house duties: _____

4. Based on your reading of the story, answer the following questions by choosing the correct options.

- (a) Private Quelch was nick-named 'Professor' because of _____
- his appearance.
 - his knowledge.
 - his habit of reading.
 - his habit of sermonising.
- (b) One could *hammer nails* into Corporal Turnbull without his noticing it because _____
- he was a strong and sturdy man.
 - he was oblivious to his surroundings.
 - he was a brave corporal.
 - he was used to it.
- (c) The author and his friend Trower fled from the scene as _____
- they had to catch a train
 - they could not stand Private Quelch exhibiting his knowledge
 - they felt they would have to lend a helping hand.
 - they did not want to meet the cooks.

5. Answer the following questions briefly.

- (a) What is a 'nickname'? Can you suggest another one for Private Quelch?
- (b) Private Quelch looked like a 'Professor' when the author first met him at the training depot. Why?
- (c) What does the dark, sun-dried appearance of the Sergeant suggest about him?
- (d) How was Private Quelch's knowledge exposed even further as the Sergeant's classes went on?



- (e) What did the Professor mean by "intelligent reading"?
 - (f) What were the Professor's ambitions in the army?
 - (g) Did Private Quelch's day to day practices take him closer towards his goal? How can you make out?
 - (h) Describe Corporal Turnbull.
 - (i) How did Private Quelch manage to anger the Corporal?
 - (j) Do you think Private Quelch learnt a lesson when he was chosen for cookhouse duties? Give reasons for your answer.
6. ***At first, Private Quelch was a hero in the eyes of his fellow soldiers. Support this observation with suitable examples from the story in about 100 words.***
7. ***Private Quelch knew 'too much'. Give reasons to prove that he was unable to win the admiration of his superior officers or his colleagues in about 100 words.***
8. (a) ***Write down the positive and negative traits of Private Quelch's character instances from the story.***

Positive traits

Instances from the story

- i) _____
- ii) _____
- iii) _____
- iv) _____

Negative traits

Instances from the story

- i) _____
- ii) _____
- iii) _____
- iv) _____

- (b) ***Now, share your notes with the class. Add details if you need to.***
- (c) ***Attempt a character sketch of Private Quelch using your notes in about 100 words.***

WRITING TASK

9. ***You are the 'Professor'. Write a diary entry after your first day at the cookhouse, describing the events that led to this assignment, also express your thoughts and feelings about the events of the day in about 175 words.***

