ONCE UPON A TIME

PERILS OF THE PROMISCUOUS PREFIX

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Like most gentlemen of leisure, the group of distinguished-looking men of science were busy discussing the quirks and foibles of contemporary Homo sapiens.

"Hey Alex, those engineers in Malaysia are at it again, blathering about rights to plaster titles in front of their names." It was directed at a bearded man in Victorian clothes. Another member of the group seemed offended by the development.

"Hmmmpf! They want this, they want that," grunted the one they call Thomas. "I think they should actually do something, then get titles and accolades. Back in my time, we slaved in our labs and success was never guaranteed. Perspiration and diligent labour is what they need, gentlemen."

"Cut them some slack, Thomas. It's a nice and peaceful country, and they are quite lucky; they've hardly experienced any real hardship," said Alex. Turning to the first speaker, he continued, "That said, Richard, most professions muddle along nicely without a need for titles. What do you suppose a brand-new title would bring them? Status? Riches? Will their standing in the community or in engineering be any higher?"

"You know, Alex, it reminds me of what Arline said to me once – what do you care what other people think?" replied Richard. "Society never appreciates the things they take for granted, why should they? I think that any society that puts shallow entertainment figures on pedestals hardly deserve to be taken seriously. The public isn't really very clever."

At that the ancient Egyptian gentleman in their little group started mumbling under his breath. Richard turned to him, "Sorry about bringing that up, we all know how hard it is to have jerks pass your magnificent constructions off as works of extra-terrestrial aliens…"

"If it's about status, imagine how we would look in their eyes," remarked one of two men that looked like brothers. "Alex is supposedly an inventor, but his wife Mabel might also say he's just a teacher of the deaf. Michael, our esteemed tinkerer here is merely a bookbinder. And we are just a couple of bicycle builders from Ohio."

Thomas the great experimentalist was taking a closer look at the situation down there. "I wonder if those at the fringes of orthodox engineering will have the same privilege? It appears there's been a lot of arguments about the root word of engineering. Some people are trying to tie engineering to ingenuity. It seems a bit silly. Clearly, one cannot simply dismiss all the historical baggage from other meaning associated with engineering. I contend that engineering is a bit of both, and the ingenuity meaning alone is too broad. With just the latter, too many Tom, Dick and Harrys can claim themselves to be engineers. Why, if these engineers don't appreciate their history, then they are forsaking and abandoning us! Hmmmpf! Those ungrateful louts!"

"Indeed, it would be quite a mess if every organised profession decide to follow suit and be a little promiscuous with titles," offered Alex. "Their country does seem to have an enthusiastic culture of giving assorted titles to exemplary citizens, so perhaps this is an extension to tradition."

Richard now weighed in with a few opinions of his own. "If those Malaysian engineers do get what they wanted, do you suppose that it will work in a global setting? The schemes for professional and chartered engineer certification are already quite consistent worldwide. People know what they stand for, by and large. In fact, a title that is broadly applicable to most qualified engineers in Malaysia might look a bit pretentious in some other countries."

"In a way, this looks like a propaganda exercise. A title has a certain propaganda value. Therein lies the flaw of the exercise. Neither wordplay nor playing with definitions will get them the proverbial pot of gold; you cannot force the issue when you are dealing with market forces. How much will such a title matter? I fear that it might not matter much."

"Why is it so, my dear sir?" asked Michael the bookbinder.

"Simply put, the law of supply and demand. Why is the title of a certified professional engineer prestigious? It's because they are scarce compared to the total population of engineers, and they really mean something. Now if a great many engineers have a lesser engineering title, the large supply will lower the value of the said title. Thus it might a victory for the profession, but it will be a bit hollow. Worse, society, as the market, is rather alarmingly fickle. Society's perception can be terribly unjust and cruel. Will the public react favourably or unfavourably? That remains to be seen. So you see, Malaysian engineers can win the battle but lose the war."

This bit of fictional fluff alludes to a few historical personas in science. Can you guess who they are? ■