

MICHAEL INNES

An Inspector Appleby Mystery



THE
DAFFODIL
AFFAIR

*'yet another surprising firework display of wit
and erudition and ingenious invention'*

The Guardian

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The Daffodil Affair

First published in 1942

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About the Author



Michael Innes is the pseudonym of John Innes Mackintosh Stewart, who was born in Edinburgh in 1906. His father was Director of Education and as was fitting the young Stewart attended Edinburgh Academy before going up to Oriel, Oxford where he obtained a first class degree in English.

After a short interlude travelling with AJP Taylor in Austria, he embarked on an edition of Florio's translation of *Montaigne's Essays* and also took up a post teaching English at Leeds University.

By 1935 he was married, Professor of English at the University of Adelaide in Australia, and had completed his first detective novel, *Death at the President's Lodging*. This was an immediate success and part of a long running series centred on his character Inspector Appleby. A second novel, *Hamlet Revenge*, soon followed and overall he managed over fifty under the Innes banner during his career.

After returning to the UK in 1946 he took up a post with Queen's University, Belfast before finally settling as Tutor in English at Christ Church, Oxford. His writing continued and he published a series of novels under his own name, along with short stories and some major academic contributions, including a major section on modern writers for the *Oxford History of English Literature*.

Whilst not wanting to leave his beloved Oxford permanently, he managed to fit in to his busy schedule a visiting Professorship at the University of Washington and was also honoured by other Universities in the UK.

His wife Margaret, whom he had met and married whilst at Leeds in 1932, had practised medicine in Australia and later in Oxford, died in 1979. They had five children, one of whom (Angus) is also a writer. Stewart himself died in November 1994 in a nursing home in Surrey.

The Dry Salvages

Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,
Observe disease in signatures, evoke
Biography from the wrinkles of the palm
And tragedy from fingers...especially
When there is distress of nations and perplexity
Whether on the shores of Asia or in the
Edgware Rd.

Part One

Primrose Way

The room was void and unquickened; it was like a room in a shop window but larger and emptier; and the man who sat at the desk had never thought to impress himself upon what had entered every day. Comfort there was none, nor discomfort either; only, did the occupant deign to qualify the pure neutrality of his surroundings, it would surely be austerity that would emerge. The spring sunshine turned bleak and functional as it passed the plate glass of the tall, uncurtained windows.

The windows were large; the big desk lay islanded in a creeping parallelogram of light across this and before the eyes of the man sitting motionless passed slantwise and slowly a massive shaft of shadow. Perhaps twenty times it passed to and fro, as if outside some great joy-wheel were oscillating idly in a derelict amusement park. And then the man rose, clasped his hands behind him and walked to a window – high up in New Scotland Yard. He looked out and over wartime London lay beneath.

With science the crane or scoop or derrick had been perched amid the skeletal remains of a large building; from this point of vantage it struck and shovelled ingeniously at a neighbouring structure whose ruin had stopped halfway down. It was possible to be sad, to be indignant; and many who walked those streets were making the biologically more useful discovery of anger. But a practical-minded man could confine himself to approving or critical appraisal of the speed with which the tidy-up was accomplished – and the man at the window looked superficially as if he might be like that. His movements were economical, impersonal and abstract. His glance, if considering, was unclouded by speculative care. But on his brow was a fixed contraction; this he had carried from desk to window, and now there was neither hardening nor relaxation as he looked out.

Hudspith looked out and took it all in. He looked out and as a practical man placed it: there was this and that contingency to fear, to hope for, next time. And as a moralist Hudspith placed it: his lips framed a word. Wicked. Undoubtedly it was that. But was it evil? He thought not; he grudged to the mere fury and blindness of it that absolute word. During fifteen years Hudspith had controlled the file of police papers which dealt with the abduction and the subsequent history of feeble-minded girls. Here lay his anger, and as he looked out over London he saw, in effect, only the shadow of this. Year by year the anger had burst deeper until it was now the innermost principle of the man. He confronted sin that was double and gratuitous. For, given social conditions which were common enough, it was tolerably easy to seduce, strand, swop, sell, hire out girls whose wits were reasonably about them. And so the meanness of going for the feeble ones was – well, exasperating. Evil was exasperating. Or rather, perhaps, it was exasperating that so few people were aware of it.

Their minds stop short at wickedness – thought Hudspith, looking out over London. More than they are aware of God, of Immortality, of the Ideas of Reason, than are really aware of evil. And yet these things, as someone has said, are mere superstructure and superficiality compared with the fact of evil... Hudspith did not go to church, but this knowledge of evil made him, in fact, a violently religious man. He pursued his particular police job, sordid and depressing as it was, with very much that dangerous metaphysical intensity which Captain Ahab put into the pursuit of the White Whale. Other things passed him by, not impinging – like

his room.

And now there was this girl – the girl with the outlandish name: Lucy Rideout. Once to often she had ridden out... Hudspith smiled bleakly – unseeing and unaware – into the bleak sunshine.

A half-witted girl.

‘A horse!’

John Appleby, two storeys below, looked incredulously at the old gentleman who had recently been reinstated as Assistant-Commissioner. ‘A horse?’ repeated Appleby. Never before had he been asked to go out and look for a horse.

The old gentleman nodded, indecisively; he looked Appleby cautiously in the eye. Things had changed. There were quite a lot more sahibs in lower places, and a few more rankers in higher places, than in the old days. He attached little importance to such things. But even now and then it could come awkward – if one wasn’t minding one’s p’s and q’s. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘a horse.’ His tone was doubtful, as if some qualification must follow. He paused, as if in search of something that could be enunciated with confidence. ‘Sit down,’ he said.

Appleby sat down. ‘There’s Ambler,’ he suggested hopefully. ‘I believe Ambler has had a lot of experience with horses. When Crusader disappeared just before the Derby in thirty–’

The Assistant-Commissioner shook his head. ‘No, no; it’s not that sort of horse. Not a valuable sort of horse – not at all valuable. And, in a way, it’s not really an official affair.’ He began to scratch his chin doubtfully; checked himself. ‘As a matter of fact, it’s my sister,’ he said ambiguously.

‘Ah.’ Appleby felt a growing dislike of this shadowy equine problem.

‘My sister lives in Harrogate. Tiresome sort of place.’ The Assistant-Commissioner was obscurely apologetic. ‘Know it, I suppose.’

‘I have an aunt living there, as a matter of fact.’

‘Indeed.’ The Assistant-Commissioner took a calculating glance at his own toes. ‘I wonder,’ he ventured, ‘if she knows–’

‘I believe she knows Lady Caroline quite well.’

‘What a coincidence!’ As he made this imbecile remark the Assistant-Commissioner scrutinized his toes more severely than before. He was not at all sure that this made the matter easier. He decided on a shift to humour. ‘You don’t happen to know,’ he asked, ‘if your aunt has a favourite cab?’

‘I don’t. But I think it very likely.’

‘Well, Caroline has – or had. She was attached to a particularly sober driver with a particularly quiet horse. At one time when Miss Maidment rang up the stables – I should explain that Maidment is her companion – I mean I should explain that Miss Maidment is her companion–’ The Assistant-Commissioner paused, perplexed. ‘What was I saying?’

‘You had got to the point, sir, at which Miss Maidment would ring up the stables.’

‘To be sure. Well, at one time she used to ask for an open landau, a respectable man and a quiet horse. But latterly she has simply asked for Bodfish and Daffodil.’ The Assistant-Commissioner paused. ‘Bodfish and Daffodil,’ he repeated. ‘The former was the driver and the latter the horse. That goes without saying, I suppose. One can imagine a Mr Daffodil, but nobody ever gave the name of Bodfish to a cab-horse.’

‘No, sir.’

The Assistant-Commissioner appeared dashed. 'Look here,' he said, 'I know it sounds tiresome. But just you listen. There's a quirk in it later on.'

Appleby, who quite liked this old gentleman, endeavoured to smile with cheerful interest. 'I suppose, sir, it is Daffodil who has disappeared?'

'Quite right. At first my sister was told the animal was dead. She was distressed, because the creature was a favourite, and not at all an old horse.' The Assistant-Commissioner hesitated. 'In fact, she felt rather like the poet.'

Appleby smiled – genuinely this time. 'Quite so, sir. Fair Daffodil, we weep to see you has away so soon.'

The Assistant-Commissioner nodded his head emphatically, much pleased with the success of his cultural reconnaissance. 'Exactly. Exactly – my dear man. At first, then, the said the horse was dead – apparently feeling that the mention of anything shady would be bad for trade. Now, my sister is inquisitive – or what a politer age used to call a person of much observation. She sent for Bodfish, intending to learn the manner of the brute's death. Bodfish came to see her – and I am sorry to say he was drunk. It had taken him that way. Caroline had once made Maidment – Miss Maidment, I should say – ring up the stables for a closed cab, a respectable driver and a quiet horse. She then drove Bodfish home, gave Mrs Bodfish a receipt for brewing cocoa in a particularly wholesome and attractive manner, and went on to make searching inquiries of Daffodil's owner. When she learnt that the animal had been stolen she – well, she sent me a somewhat urgent telegram. Scotland Yard, apparently, came a long way once to her mind. Natural, having a brother there – I suppose.'

'Very natural, sir.'

'Of course I replied that the local police were the people. So, if you please, she went to see the Chief Constable, taking her solicitor along with her. Seemingly nothing much had been done in the matter of Daffodil. And the Chief Constable, who had hard-worked officers to protect, was pretty stiff with Caroline. Not at first: I gather he tried heading her off by explaining some of the jobs he had on hand, and letting her in on a harmless wartime secret or two. But Caroline, who is even more specifically pertinacious than generally curious, held to her theme. It was *aut asphodelos aut nullus* with her. I believe her motive was quite selfish and practical: Daffodil was the only horse in Harrogate in which she really had confidence, and she was consequently determined that Daffodil should be traced. Too determined, I gather, for in the end the Chief Constable had pretty well to turn her out. So she went home, thought it over, dictated a stately letter of apology through Miss Maidment – and was thus in a position to present herself without absolute indecency on the poor chap's doorstep once more on the following afternoon. He was a bit baffled.'

'As one would imagine, sir.'

'Quite so. And I think he tried a spot of irony – suggested Scotland Yard. Caroline explained that she was already in communication with me. I fear he rather crumpled up, and really did – er – pass the buck. In short – well, it is difficult, you know.'

'Yes, sir.'

'My sister lives in the most modest way. As peers go we're nobody in particular, as you know.' The old gentleman smiled charmingly. 'But then she is the widow—'

'Quite so, sir.'

'Which means that among her brothers-in-law—'

'Clearly, sir. You would like me to go down?'

The Assistant-Commissioner sighed unhappily. 'It *is* difficult, isn't it? And, you know, you look a bit tired.' This was outrageous, but true. 'And you can't always be after those whopping big affairs. A man who manages in a twelve-month to fight a battle on a Scottish moor, and get wrecked on a desert island, and—'

'Of course I'll go if you wish it, sir.'

'Just for a weekend it's a nice quiet place enough.' The Assistant-Commissioner, here touching perhaps maximum discomfort, thrust his toes despairingly out of sight beneath his desk and looked at Appleby in frank dismay. 'You might even *find* the horse, I suppose.' He shook his head perplexedly. 'Caroline would be pleased – but then would it be tactful to the local men?' He smiled wanly. 'I leave the finding of Daffodil entirely to your discretion. The creature is said to be worth fifteen pounds. And that reminds me.'

'Of the quirk, sir?'

'Just that.' The Assistant-Commissioner brightened. 'It really is a bit remarkable. Like those tiny but disconcerting puzzles they used to take to Sherlock Holmes. In fact there's really a mystery in the Daffodil affair – and mysteries don't turn up here every day, do they? Ocean of crime in islets of anything like genuine mystification.' He paused, obscurely troubled by something in this image. 'The place is what is called a livery stables. Means just a business you hire from. But there's the older meaning of a place you put your own horses to board. And somebody was doing that. Captain Somebody who has to do with tanks down there but likes to get on a horse from time to time. In a loose box next to Daffodil he had an animal that was worth hundreds of pounds. And this brute was stolen *first*.'

Appleby looked up sharply. 'You don't mean that—?'

'Yes. This whopping valuable brute was stolen in the night. In the morning there was a great rumpus, and nobody much bothered about Daffodil or the stable any more. Anything of the sort would have been like locking—'

'Quite so, sir.'

'And then in the course of the day up drove one of those motor things for horses, returned Captain Somebody's brute, and carried off Daffodil instead – this without anybody being more than vaguely aware of what was happening. Apparently a mistake had been made the first time. Daffodil was the wanted horse.'

'And Daffodil is really worth almost nothing?'

'Apparently not – except to my sister's sense of security round and about the streets of Harrogate. Not very old, apparently – but broken-kneed or winded or something.'

Appleby shook his head. 'I doubt whether Lady Caroline ought to have confidence in a horse that has been down.'

'My dear man, she no doubt likes its face. Anyway, Daffodil was not a valuable horse.'

'There could be no question of pedigree, stud purposes – that sort of thing?'

'Good Heavens, man! Bodfish – I mean Daffodil – wasn't – um – that sort of horse.'

'I suppose not.' Appleby got up. 'It does seem a little queer. I'll catch the first train on Friday.' He paused by the Assistant-Commissioner's door. 'There's nothing else you can tell me about Daffodil?'

'As a matter of fact there is. It's an odd thing to say about a horse. But it appears – though despite Caroline's good opinion of the creature – well, that it was rather a half-witted sort of horse. What would you say was implied by that? Don't know much about the animals myself.'

Daffodil, the half-witted horse. Appleby wandered down the corridors of the Yard and

seemed to see – for indeed he was tired – a host of these dubious creatures in his inward eye, tossing their heads in sprightly dance, curvetting and bowing to an equal number of Captain Somebody's whopping valuable brutes. A policeman could not but be gay in such jocund company...

A half-witted horse.

In vain the soft warm air washed over Superintendent Hudspith; he marched unmollified from one investigation to the next. It was June, and for another man Piccadilly Circus might have been filled with the ghosts of flowers: violets in little bunches wafting on bus tops to distant suburbs; roses to be carried off by sheaves in limousines; carnations that slip singly down James's, glow duskily from tail-coats in the bow window of White's, adorn tweeds in the rust of Boodle's, vie with the more appropriate orchid in the Travellers' – haunt of those hardy souls who have journeyed out of the British Islands to a distance of at least 500 m from London in direct line. But these wraiths were nothing to Hudspith's purpose. Fleetinglly he allowed himself a glance of suspicion down Jermyn Street, as fleetingly a nod of sanction at the Athenaeum and stumped down the steps and across to the park. The park was like green stuff spilt on a counter, shot with the sheen of a long fragment of blue–grey silk. The waterfowl were there as usual; statesmen paused in perambulations to observe their habits with attention; shadowing detectives, distantly known to Hudspith, exercised their corresponding vigilance behind him. Hudspith marched on. His visual field was all inward and shadowy – no more than a floating wreath of cheated girls. Sometimes they had been drugged, hypnotized; and sometimes they had been robbed of nearly all their clothes... Hudspith marched – as if behind Queen Anne Mansions, beyond the Underground's clock, somewhere near Victoria station maybe, bleating and wallowed that elusive Whale.

Rideout: it was not, Hudspith thought, what you would call a tony name. On the other hand the address – a block of service flats here on the fringes of Westminster – suggested a substance; and if the Rideouts were substantial the more substantial would be Hudspith's severity. He had received no particulars; it was his habit to disregard the first, and often the confused, report that came in; he had learnt, however, that there was a mother, a Mrs Rideout – and by this he was obscurely pleased. Mothers, when there were mothers, were commonly greatly to blame. Although Mrs Rideout could scarcely be herself the Whale, she might yet be abundantly deserving of one or two preliminary harpoons. Hudspith was accustomed to limber up in this way. He quickened his pace, turned a corner, and his objective was before him.

The Rideouts were in the humblest station: there lay something of disappointment in this. Mrs Rideout was employed as a cleaner and her daughter as a waitress, and normally they lived 'out'. But recently their home had disappeared in the night; this had moved Mrs Rideout to announce her intention of withdrawing to her sister's in the country; whereupon the management of the flats where she was employed, being much in need of such services as the Rideouts supply, had provided restricted but sufficient living quarters on the premises. Through the basement, past the ironing-room and the two small storerooms, the temporary abode of the Rideouts would be found.

Hudspith, having learnt so much from a melancholy porter whose own living quarters appeared to be in a lift, descended menacingly into the cold, the half-light and the gloom. This was familiar territory. Like the poet, but perhaps from a more pressing professional necessity, he was much aware of the damp souls of housemaids; he knew how easily perdition attended their despondent sprouting at area gates. And he knew – he told himself – all about Luc

Rideout, the half-witted waitress. Unsettlement, cramped quarters with an uncongenial parent, inadequate privacy, the constant sight of expensive or at least prosperous living upstairs, the drift of male guests – themselves often unsettled, uprooted: in all this – and in the picture of the glamorized advertisements, the pulsing sexy music – the story lay. Had he not probed it a hundred times? And Hudspith marched on, confident in his abundant experience, his often-tested technique. Hudspith marched against the demons – all unaware of the curiously literal way in which, far in the distance, demons awaited him.

Mrs Rideout had friends. Almost might she be said, in upstairs language, to be receiving company for two ladies were coming away as Hudspith reached the door; a third, approaching from some other angle through this subterranean world, was making a ceremonious claim for admittance; and from inside there came a murmur of voices and a chink of cups. Her presence however was nothing to confound the experienced investigator; it would be untoward were it not. Mrs Rideout found enjoying her sensational sorrow in solitude.

‘Good afternoon,’ said Hudspith to his fellow visitor. ‘A sad occasion this, marm; very sad indeed.’

‘What I asks,’ said the visitor, ‘is – where was the police?’

‘Ah,’ said Hudspith. ‘Where, indeed? But they’re here now, missis.’ With subdued drama he tapped himself on the chest. ‘Come along.’

The woman, who had been about to open the door, paused round-eyed. ‘Toomer’s name,’ she said. Her voice sank to a whisper. ‘Would it be worse than death?’

Hudspith frowned austerely. ‘That remains to be seen.’ And he opened the door and ushered Mrs Toomer – she was a dim-featured, almost obliterated woman – into the Rideout home.

It was possible – or it ought to have been possible – to see at a single glance all that was to be seen, for clearly in this one room consisted all the territory that the Rideouts, mother and daughter, enjoyed. It was long, narrow and of considerable size, lit by a filter of light from windows which hovered uncertainly near the ceiling; there was a bed at each extreme end and a table and arrangements for cooking near the middle. There was little that was remarkable in this. But Hudspith, if unaware of his own habitual surroundings, had a trained eye for domestic interiors, and that eye became positively hawk-like when scrutinizing the late environment of levanting or abducted girls. Here there looked to be plenty of evidence. The influence of Lucy Rideout was dominant in the room. Her handwriting, as it were, was not only decisive at her own end; it declared itself unmistakably far beyond any fair line of demarcation, so that one immediately discerned Mrs Rideout’s kingdom as a sort of beleaguered fortress within ever-contracting lines. Only here and there was evidence of a species of cautious sortie undertaken, no doubt, since the daughter’s departure; a pair of elastic-sided boots had found their way to the foot of Lucy’s bed; a small empty bottle of the kind in which ladies are accustomed to keep gin stood on what had served her as a dressing-table; hard by this lay a journal devoted to the celebration of the Christian Hearth and Home. All this was immediately decipherable. But there remained an element of puzzle which Hudspith at a rapid inspection was unable to resolve. And now Mrs Toomer, exalted by the fact of arriving virtually on the arm of Scotland Yard, was contriving introductions to the assembled company. ‘Mrs Rideout,’ she said, ‘this is the police.’

Mrs Rideout was not much over forty and belonged to the inefficient type that contrives to get through life by the aid of a sort of massive unfocussed vehemence. She set down

teacup and looked from Mrs Toomer to Hudspith. 'That's right,' she said, largely and vaguely. 'Yes, that's right.' She exuded that repetitive and dazed acquiescence that makes so considerable a part of the social communion of the folk. 'And I'm sure they ought to do something.'

'That's right,' said Mrs Toomer – and two stout women who flanked Mrs Rideout nodded their heads and bosoms in agreement. Human speech is at bottom no more than the individual demand for reassurance in a lonely world; the sophisticated contrive to extract comforting intimations of solidarity from disagreement, controversy and repartee; the uninstructed prefer the much simpler forms of mutual support. When the ritual is in course of celebration – at such a party as was now gathered at Mrs Rideout's – it is a solecism to break the grand affirmative flow of things. And indeed we none of us particularly care for the man who qualifies our suggestion that it is a fine day, or that it looks like rain, or that it is nice to see a little bit of sunshine.

All this the much-practised Hudspith knew. He nodded his head ponderously. 'Yes,' he said. 'Something ought to be done. And I'm here to do it.'

'That's right,' said one of the stout women. 'That's what I say.'

'That's right,' said the other stout woman.

Mrs Rideout turned in triumph to Mrs Toomer. 'That's what Mrs Thorr and Mrs Fiddock say,' she said.

Mrs Toomer, who had turned her head in quest of the teapot, nodded skilfully backwards. 'That's right,' she agreed.

'That's right,' said Mrs Fiddock and Mrs Thorr.

Hudspith cleared his throat, preparing cautiously to intrude upon the spell. 'Acting,' he said, 'on instructions received—' The ladies all laid down their teacups, instantly impressed by the wisp of official eloquence. Hudspith slowly produced a notebook. The investigation was launched.

Mrs Rideout called God to witness that she had been a good mother. Mrs Thorr, Mrs Toomer and Mrs Fiddock responded in a sort of trinitarian chorus. Hudspith said grimly that he was glad to hear it, as in most such cases it was not so; he appeared to make a jotting of Mrs Rideout's maternal goodness as if for subsequent scrutiny. Mrs Rideout affirmed that Lucy had always been a good daughter. But everybody knew what girls were nowadays; there was no controlling them; out they would go when they pleased. Hudspith could have written down all this out of his head; he was able to spare considerable attention for a further study of the lost girl's possessions.

He saw the cheap dance slippers; he saw on a nail the pathetic wisp of white rabbit that was some sort of cape. He saw the array of photographs pinned to the wall by the bed: the usual pictures, he wearily thought, cut from the usual cinema magazines. The heroes often wore bathing-trunks now; lying under beach umbrellas, they leered up at girls who sat with parted lips, entranced. Or in resplendent tails and hair grease they led their ladies through exotic restaurants while little tables crowded with ambassadors and duchesses made a modest background to the scene. Or momentarily disguised as common mortals they perched, millionaire play-boys though they were, on little stools in small-town drug-stores and scooped at sundaes nose to nose with the beloved. Hudspith ground his teeth as he looked at them. Not the celebrated William Prynne, who wrote some eight hundred thousand words on the theme that stage-plays are the very pomps of the devil, could have felt more ill disposed

to this fantasy-world than did Superintendent Hudspith.

It was a gentleman who had lived in the house, Mrs Rideout thought. A foreigner, she thought. And for some time she had known Lucy was carrying on. Lucy had taken to coming home later than she should. Whereupon she – Mrs Rideout – had said – and Mrs Toomer would witness that she had said...

Hudspith's pencil still traversed the paper. But his glance strayed now to the other wall. Over the fireplace hung Bubbles; that would be Mrs Rideout's fancy. Midway between this and Lucy's end of the room was one of those colour prints in which faintly draped figures are disposed pensively on marble terraces in a blaze of noon-tide light; behind them is a very blue lake, behind that very white mountains, with behind these again a sunset or sunrise thrown in for extra effect. Hudspith had failed to cultivate the plastic arts; nevertheless he recognized that this abomination and the magazine photographs belonged to one world. His glance ran on – and before another and smaller reproduction paused, perplexed. Momentarily disregarding Mrs Rideout's monologue, he walked over to it. A line of print on the mount told him that the aloof and lovely person had been painted by a certain Piero della Francesca. He shook his head, obscurely disturbed.

But Lucy had just gone on going out. In all that blackout too. And then the night before last she had gone out and not come back again. But she had left a note in the cocoa jug saying...

Saying, thought Hudspith, that she was going to be happy and not to worry. He walked over to Lucy's bed, where stood a little book-case. Three rows of books, all nearly new. He bent down. *Sesame and Lilies, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, After London, Cowper's Letters, The Advancement of Learning, Madam Bovary...* Hudspith frowned and looked at the next shelf. *Swiss Family Robinson, Little Women, Mopsie in the Fifth, Mopsie, Captain of the School, Doctor Dolittle's Voyages...* The books were equally new; Mopsie's first adventures had been published in the present year. Hudspith turned round, aware that Mrs Rideout had said something out of the ordinary. 'Cocoa jug?' he said. 'Are you sure it wasn't the teapot?'

Mrs Rideout was emphatic; so was Mrs Toomer, who had been present at the discovery. 'It's nearly always the teapot,' Hudspith paused, suspicious and alert. 'When do you drink cocoa, marm?'

In the Rideout ménage cocoa was drunk only at night. So that was it: not the breakfast teapot but the evening cocoa jug – in other words a good twenty-four hours' start. The little piece of elementary contrivance – surprising though this may seem – placed Lucy Rideout once among the intellectual élite of Hudspith's young women. And yet he had been given no understand –

The third shelf was almost on the ground; Hudspith stooped to examine it and his brow darkened. He knew *those* books, and it had not been his fault if the Home Secretary did not know them too. His eye went doubtfully back to the picture by the man Piero della Francesca and it was a moment before he was aware that Mrs Rideout had stopped talking and that now the person called Mrs Fiddock held the stage.

With an evident sense of drama Mrs Fiddock had set down her cup. 'I seen them and I 'eard them!' she said.

It was a sensation. Mrs Fiddock looked slowly round, enjoying her triumph. Then slowly she wagged a finger at the amorphously vehement Mrs Rideout.

'I seen and I 'eard what it's my duty to diwulge in the presence of this 'igh officer of the

police.'

'That's right,' said Mrs Toomer and Mrs Thorr.

And Mrs Rideout nodded her own vaster acquiescence. 'That's right,' she said.

Hudspith licked his pencil and congratulated himself on the irregularity of his own methods. It was contrary to correct procedure to slip in on Mrs Rideout's tea party in this way, but what signifies a little latitude when it is Leviathan himself that one pursues? Hudspith took a final look at the very bad books on Lucy Rideout's lowest shelf and turned expectantly to Mrs Fiddock. 'Quite right, marm,' he said. 'You must out with anything you know about this poor girl.'

Mrs Rideout began to sob – energetically and very rapidly, as if bent on repairing an oversight which had only just occurred to her. Mrs Toomer, having looked round vainly for a handkerchief, handed a tea towel. Mrs Thorr said 'There, there!' and 'There then!' and 'There now!' to everybody in turn. The tempo of Mrs Rideout's grief changed; she was really weeping; presently the discovery of this so surprised her that she fell abruptly silent. The room waited expectantly.

'This,' announced Mrs Fiddock, 'is a very painful occasion for me.'

'There now!' said Mrs Thorr.

'And I hope that none here will say I did anything I didn't ought. For I only done my duty.' Mrs Fiddock paused. 'As a citizen.' She paused again to admire this linguistic triumph. 'It was in the lounge of the Crown.'

'The lounge!' said Mrs Thorr and Mrs Toomer and Mrs Rideout.

'It was more than a week back,' pursued Mrs Fiddock with dignity, 'that I had occasion to enter the bottle and jug. Now as everyone knows – or everyone except this gentleman here – there's an 'atch in the bottle and jug that gives on the private. And the private has a door into the lounge. And sometimes you sees right through.'

There was an interruption while the ladies went into committee to verify these topographic statements. Depraved old wretches, thought Hudspith. Liquor, he thought. Come out on a case like this and always there's liquor round the corner. But he nodded with a large and false approval at Mrs Fiddock. 'Very observant, missus,' he said; 'very observant indeed.'

Mrs Fiddock gave a gratified bow. 'And there, Mrs Rideout, was your Lucy with that flash furrein-looking man that was in number nine. Bold as brass, he was, and I didn't think there was any good in it.' She hesitated, momentarily confused. 'It seemed to me I had a duty to do.'

'I don't remember,' said Mrs Rideout suspiciously, 'as how you ever said anything about afterwards.'

'I had my duty to do,' reiterated Mrs Fiddock more firmly. 'I walked round to the lounge, disposed myself behind the haspidistra and ordered a glass of port.'

'There then!' said Mrs. Thorr. Her admiration might have been directed either to the shameless curiosity of Mrs Fiddock or to the financial solidity and social confidence which the proceeding revealed.

'And I 'eard what I 'eard. "Did you ever 'ear," 'e says, "of the isle of Capri? I got an island just like that." That's what I 'eard 'im say.'

Mrs Toomer raised her hands, instantly credulous. 'Lord!' she said; 'fancy having an island all your own.'

“Where is it?” says your Lucy – which was the first words I ’eard ’er say. “Where is it?” “It difficult to describe,” ’e says. “But you go to South America first.”

Hudspith’s pencil snapped at the point. Rage filled him – against these awful wome against the imbecile Lucy, against the unspeakably threadbare simplicity of this profession seducer’s patter. ‘Mrs Fiddock,’ he said benevolently, ‘this is very valuable information.’

‘And then neither of them said anythink, and I thought I’d best take a peep round th haspidistra. ’E was smiling at her confident like. And your Lucy she didn’t say nothink. She ju ’itched her skirt another hinch above the knee.’

Hudspith compressed his lips. Mrs Toomer made a shocked noise on the front of he palate. Mrs Rideout again sobbed.

‘It was just then that the young fellow brought the port. “Well, ma,” ’e says, “picked winner? And shall I bring the cigars?” “Young man,” I says, “I know my place, and ’opes tha others does the same.” So ’e went away and I listens again.’ Mrs Fiddock paused. ‘But what ’eard this time,’ she said dramatically, ‘I can scarcely bring myself to let pass these ’ere lips.’

Mrs Thorr leant forward on her chair; the half-obliterated features of Mrs Toomer sharpened themselves in expectation; the tea towel in Mrs Rideout’s grasp suspended itself air.

‘E leaned back and lit a cigarette. And then ’e said what made my very blood run cold. could do with two or three of you,” ’e said, – “and that’s what I’m going to get!” And then gave an ’orrid laugh, like ’e might give to a bit of fun that was all his own.’

A moment’s profound silence greeted this appalling revelation. ‘A slaver – that’s what he is said Mrs Toomer.

‘Or a regular Bluebeard,’ said Mrs Thorr.

Mrs Fiddock, her imagination fired by the literary success she had achieved, leant forward ‘Do you think,’ she asked hoarsely, ‘he drowns them in a barf?’

Maternal solicitude is an awful power. Mrs Rideout, who had risen to her feet in agitation took two sideways and three backward steps – and was thus able to fall upon her bed in a f Mrs Rideout roared; Mrs Thorr and Mrs Fiddock snivelled; Mrs Toomer gently beat her breast and uttered wheezy sighs. It is a dreadful thing to die – or even to conduct polic investigations – ’mid women howling. The hardy Hudspith looked about him with some idea throwing water or opening a window. What his eye immediately fell on was the dispassionate gaze of the Piero della Francesca – whence it travelled involuntarily to *Sesame and Lilies* and the historical labours of Edward Gibbon. Momentarily he felt like a man who sinks through deep waters. Then he stood up. ‘Be quiet!’ he shouted.

Mrs Rideout stopped roaring and snivelled. Whereupon Mrs Fiddock and Mrs Thorr, as indignant at this trespass, took breath and yelled. Mrs Toomer continued her asthmatic exhibition undeterred. Hudspith banged the table with an open palm. ‘Silence!’ he bellowed ‘Silence in the name of the law!’

There was instant quiet, as if the women were dispossessed of devils by the incantation. And Hudspith, learned in demonology went sternly on: ‘Anything that any of you says may be taken down and used as evidence in such proceedings as the magistrate may direct. We w now proceed to inquiries on the character and habits of the missing girl.’

The crisis was over. Even Mrs Toomer ceased knocking her breast. Instead, she took the lid from the teapot and peered hopefully inside.

Lucy Rideout was nineteen; so much could be gathered from her mother – who appeared to feel, however, that this represented her fair share of such information as the assembled party might provide. On her daughter's interests and accomplishments she was vague; of her friends she knew little; among a number of photographs in a drawer she found one which, after some consultation with her friends, she was persuaded to assert was Lucy. Often thought Hudspith, our claim upon the awareness of even close relations is surprisingly marginal and precarious. Nevertheless there was something almost pathological in the woman's attitude to her daughter; it was almost as if the child had been an intellectual problem which Mrs Rideout had long since found it simplest to give up. He scrutinized the photograph with a professional eye. Lucy Rideout was not pretty. Nor, as far as he could discern, did she possess any of the specific types of plainness which have here and there a peculiar appeal. Why, then, Lucy? Presumably because she was half-witted and so particularly easy to spirit away. Only Hudspith thought that if this indifferent photograph revealed anything at all it was the appearance of considerable intelligence. And this by no means accorded with his brief. He turned to Mrs Rideout. "I understand," he said cautiously, "that your daughter was never very bright at her books?"

'That's right,' said Mrs Rideout readily.

'In fact, the truth is that she isn't quite—'

'Her books?' interrupted Mrs Toomer. 'Why, she was always at her books, poor dear.'

'That's right,' said Mrs Rideout. 'So she was.'

Mrs Toomer nodded towards the bookshelf. 'See for yourself, mister. She must have bought all them since the Rideouts was blitzed. Always reading, is Lucy. But bad at her books, as you sez.'

Hudspith frowned. 'But if she was always reading—'

'That's why she was bad at her books,' Mrs Toomer looked curiously at Hudspith, as if doubting the perspicacity of one to whom this elementary point could be obscure. 'Always reading, she was. It fairly drove her teachers wild.'

'That was it,' said Mrs Rideout. She nodded, vague but decided. Suddenly she became much more emphatic. 'That and her forgetfulness. No one but me can ever know how forgetful that girl is.'

'Was, more likely,' said Mrs Fiddock gloomily.

'That's right,' said Mrs Rideout. 'Sometimes she wouldn't as much as know if she'd put her dinner inside her. Something chronic, Lucy's memory.'

'It comes of reading,' suggested Mrs Thorr. 'Just common reading, let alone the sort of reading your Lucy did,' She turned to Hudspith. 'Lord Bacon and Gibbon,' she enumerated with a waned. 'And Shakespeare and the German Gouty.'

'That's right,' chimed in Mrs Toomer. 'And fairy stories, too, and animals what talk. Half a week's wages, Lucy would give, if she saw a nice big book with coloured pictures in a window.'

And the odd thing, thought Hudspith, is that the bookshelves bear out this fantastic confusion of testimonies. He addressed himself resolutely to Lucy's mother, 'My information is that your daughter is weak in the head. Not what they call mentally deficient, exactly – but getting on that way. Is that right?'

'Quite right,' said Mrs Toomer before Mrs Rideout could reply. 'Not mental—'

'Mentals,' interrupted Mrs Thorr, 'goes to school in a car. Lucy never did that, though her father tried for it when he was alive, poor man.'

'That's right,' said Mrs Rideout.

'Not mental,' resumed Mrs Toomer. 'Just a bit cracked like. What you might call terrible serious-minded.'

'That's right,' said Mrs Rideout and Mrs Fiddock and Mrs Thorr. It was their first piece of chorus work for some time.

'Fair childish,' said Mrs Fiddock, speaking as if offering the next logical step in a well-ordered theme. 'Creepy, it was at times. Shy and innocent and ignorant like.'

Hudspith tried something else. 'Your daughter went out to dances – that sort of thing?'

'That she did,' said Mrs Rideout. 'And that flighty she'd get that there was no holding her.'

The lips of Mrs Toomer, Mrs Thorr and Mrs Fiddock parted in affirmative incantation. Hudspith plunged again. 'What other interests had she?'

'Plays,' said Mrs Rideout.

'Ah – she went to the theatre?'

Mrs Rideout shook her head violently, apparently intimating that there were degrees of eccentricity of which even her Lucy must be acquitted. 'She made 'em.'

'Made them?'

'In bed at night. Since we came here it's fair driven me crazy. Whisper, whisper, whisper.'

'What sort of plays?'

Mrs Rideout considered. 'Diatribes,' she said. 'Diatribes and sometimes another as well.'

'You mean plays sometimes with two people and sometimes with three? What sort of people.'

'They got very queer names.' Mrs Rideout shifted uneasily on her chair, as if obliged to contemplate something she had long felt it more comfortable to ignore. 'Poppet is one.'

'Yes?'

'And Real Lucy and Sick Lucy is the others. Sick Lucy doesn't seem to know much. They're always telling her what happened before.'

Superintendent Hudspith was not a learned man. But he had read the appropriate textbooks in a number of odd fields. And now – almost as if dazzled by the great light that had come upon him – he gazed at Mrs Rideout and her friends with an unseeing eye. 'Well,' he said, 'I'll be damned!'

'That's right,' said Mrs Toomer.

Hudspith's inquiries were prolonged and it was dusk as he turned east along Victoria Street. Anyone glancing at him as he passed the Army and Navy Stores would have suspected first drink and then somnambulism – for he walked as in a trance. This beat the band; it was the very mark and acme of the evil with which he had to cope. He believed himself well-read in all the quaintness and curiosity of vice; his files were a veritable museum of *recherché* sins; he was the familiar of devils more grotesquely caparisoned than any that ever appeared to St Anthony. But the ingenuity of this – of this vest-pocket promiscuity or compendious polygamy – he had not met the like of before... So he walked down Victoria Street growling, ready to bark – and conceivably up the wrong tree.

Sesame and Lilies and the *Swiss Family Robinson* and the books on the bottom shelf. *Afternoon in London* (what would that be? – wondered Hudspith, staring fixedly and vacantly at Westminster Abbey) and *Cowper's Letters* and *Mopsie in the Fifth*... And suddenly the sheer technical difficulty of what the adversary had achieved revealed itself and forced from him

sort of reluctant admiration. Did you ever hear of the isle of Capri? It was clear now that the could not have been the whole story by a long way. But then perhaps it had been a matter of simple force in the end; despite the note in the cocoa jug, perhaps the girl had been kidnapped after all.

Hudspith looked up at Big Ben and took no comfort from still being able to read the time of it. London slid past him: high up, the last glitter of day; round him, newsboys and sandbag cavities and crowds; far below, the purposive hurrying of the underground and the oppressive pleasing smell that hangs round the stations as you pass. People glanced up at the sky. Hudspith stared through it, scanning some ultimate battleground of good and evil to which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.

Fetishists. Men who insist on knock-kneed women, on bowlegged women, on one-eyed women...and now this. Hudspith climbed flight upon flight of stairs rapidly, in a sudden cold sweat. He marched along a corridor – was hailed through an open door. ‘Hurrying?’ said a harassed voice. ‘After another of the vanishing ladies?’

Hudspith snapped an affirmative reply and strode on. But the harassed voice stopped him. ‘Well that’s nothing. They’ve put me on a vanishing house.’

‘A vanishing house?’ Hudspith turned reluctantly round. ‘What the deuce do you mean?’

‘I mean that somebody’s pinched a house – a whole blasted house!’ The harassed voice rose to a note of extreme exasperation. ‘And a thoroughly crazy house at that.’

The best connection was by Leeds. But Appleby, because the thing had been put to him as a holiday, went by York. The wait there was over an hour, and that would be time for a stroll up to the Minster. Also, he remembered a teashop with remarkable muffins; and although muffins are largely a matter of butter, he hoped for the best. With this judicious balance of spiritual and material satisfactions in mind he left the station.

The city walls were still there. Naturally so – but nowadays one went about in that frame of mind. The city walls were there, and in places as fresh as if they still expected culverins and demi-cannon to be brought against them hourly. Cromwell, thought Appleby vaguely as he crossed the Ouse. Extraordinarily difficult really to imagine the siege of an English town. But then how oddly things lie in the womb of time: any amount of small change from Roman legionaries' pockets was dug up when they started making the railway station, A great massacre of Jews, thought Appleby as he passed the reticent façade of the Yorkshire Club. They had just time to kill their own wives and children and then the mob were on top of them. In England that was eight hundred years ago. He glanced down Coney Street. There was little traffic at this hour; shopkeepers, who had never read manuals on scientific salesmanship, stood at their doors, unashamedly at leisure; it was all very tranquil, very secure. Laurence Sterne, Appleby thought. And there is something in walking at random about a city, he thought, that makes one's mind turn thus idly over and over, like Leopold Bloom's.

On the left, a huddle of half-heartedly ecclesiastical buildings. On the right, the unbeautiful but beneficent York City Dispensary. And in front, the Minster. The poet Shelley had called it a monstrous and tasteless relic of barbarism. But then Shelley's was an appallingly rational and scientific mind. And perhaps they had been telling him about the Jews... Appleby climbed the steps.

When he came out he stood for a moment blinking in the sunshine. A baker's cart rattled past; it might have reminded him of the muffins; instead, it merely recalled Daffodil and the dubious investigation in prospect. Why, he asked himself, should you prefer a quiet cab-horse to Captain Somebody's whopping expensive brute? Well, you hired a cab and you went to a party and you told the man to wait. Then you stole your hostess' diamonds, deftly wrapped them in a wisp of hay and pitched them through the drawing-room window at the creature's head. The creature at once devoured the unexpected luncheon, thus unwittingly becoming your accomplice in crime. It only remained –

Appleby shook his head at this unpolicemanlike fantasy, and found that he had wandered into that narrow and winding street which has the most interesting shops. This bookshop, for instance: *A Good Warm Watch Coat* – that was Laurence Sterne again; Francis Drake's *Eboracum* of 1736 – one would have to be fairly prosperous to buy that. And that antique shop – he crossed the road. Such places were not quite what they were in the great days of those wandering scholars, the fabulous horn-rimmed Americans of the twenties. Perhaps they will be back again in the fifties, Appleby thought; and paused to glance in. Warming pans, coffin stools, china dogs. He walked on, passing a second shop of the same sort: china dogs, warming pans, coffin stools. The poms of death: dissolution had once been a comfortable and solid affair. Now it was papier mâché coffins and zip-fastening shrouds. He knew

psychiatrist who, in the early months of war, had been required to treat nervous children in a hall stacked with these conveniences... Another shop – and this time Appleby stared. The same sort of wares were exposed for sale. But suspended in the centre of them was something different. It was an ancient broom – the kind that is no more than a bundle of twigs or faggots bound to a handle.

Undoubtedly it was a witch's broom. And this sudden coming upon such an object in a shop window was like the beginning of a deftly told tale of the supernatural. Appleby, whose mind was perhaps no less rational than Shelley's, frowned disapprovingly. And as he frowned he became aware of somebody looking at him.

It was a shrunken and dusty man; he stood at the shop door so vacantly and patiently that he might have been something put out to purify in the sun. But he was looking at Appleby with a slowly gathering alertness, rather suggestive of a rusty machine beginning to turn. 'Good afternoon,' he said – and added mildly: 'Are you a tourist?'

The word has taken to itself a sinister quality: if you are a tourist you may well be suspected of carrying a fountain pen filled with tear gas or a short-wave receiver concealed under your hat. And the vast annoyance of Daffodil and Bodfish and Lady Caroline lay heavily on Appleby's mind. 'No,' he said severely; 'I'm a policeman.' He looked gloomily at the broomstick. 'How,' he asked, 'did you come by that?'

The idle question had quite unexpected results. 'Oh dear, oh dear!' cried the dusty man in despair. 'I knew there must be something wrong!' He took a shuffling step backwards. 'I suppose you had better come in and see the cauldron too.'

Appleby opened his mouth to say that neither broom nor cauldron was any interest of his. But even as he did so professional instinct asserted itself. Never let any little odd thing go by. 'Certainly I must see the cauldron,' he said sternly. 'And anything else concerned.'

The dusty man ran an agitated hand through his hair, removed what appeared to be a cobweb from his right ear, and uttered a gulping sound suggestive of mingled submission and distraction. 'You see,' he said, 'one has to be on the lookout for anything that will attract the eye – of a genuine sort, of course. And there was no doubt of the provenance of the article in this case.'

'No doubt of the what?'

'The genuineness of their history, sir, as proved by the different hands they had been through. I know the family well enough. But I should have been more careful, all the same. The whole thing was queer, I freely acknowledge. Why, even the horse was queer.'

'The *what*?'

'The horse, sir. Very queer indeed was the way that horse behaved.'

Appleby took a deep breath. 'It is about that,' he said, 'that we are going to talk.'

The first few yards of assembled antiques were reasonably well groomed; behind that everything was most woefully weighted with gathered dust. The stock-in-trade was miscellaneous, congested and arranged with a fantasy which must have been of the genuine unconscious kind. An Indian idol sat up in a four-poster bed, stretching out a multiplicity of hands as if demanding early morning tea; a row of stags' heads had Georgian coffee pots and spoon warmers depending from the antlers; through the half-open door of a grandfather clock peered the articulated skeleton of an ape or baboon. Your first surrealists, thought Appleby, are necessarily those who purvey curios in a restricted space. And you can achieve similar

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