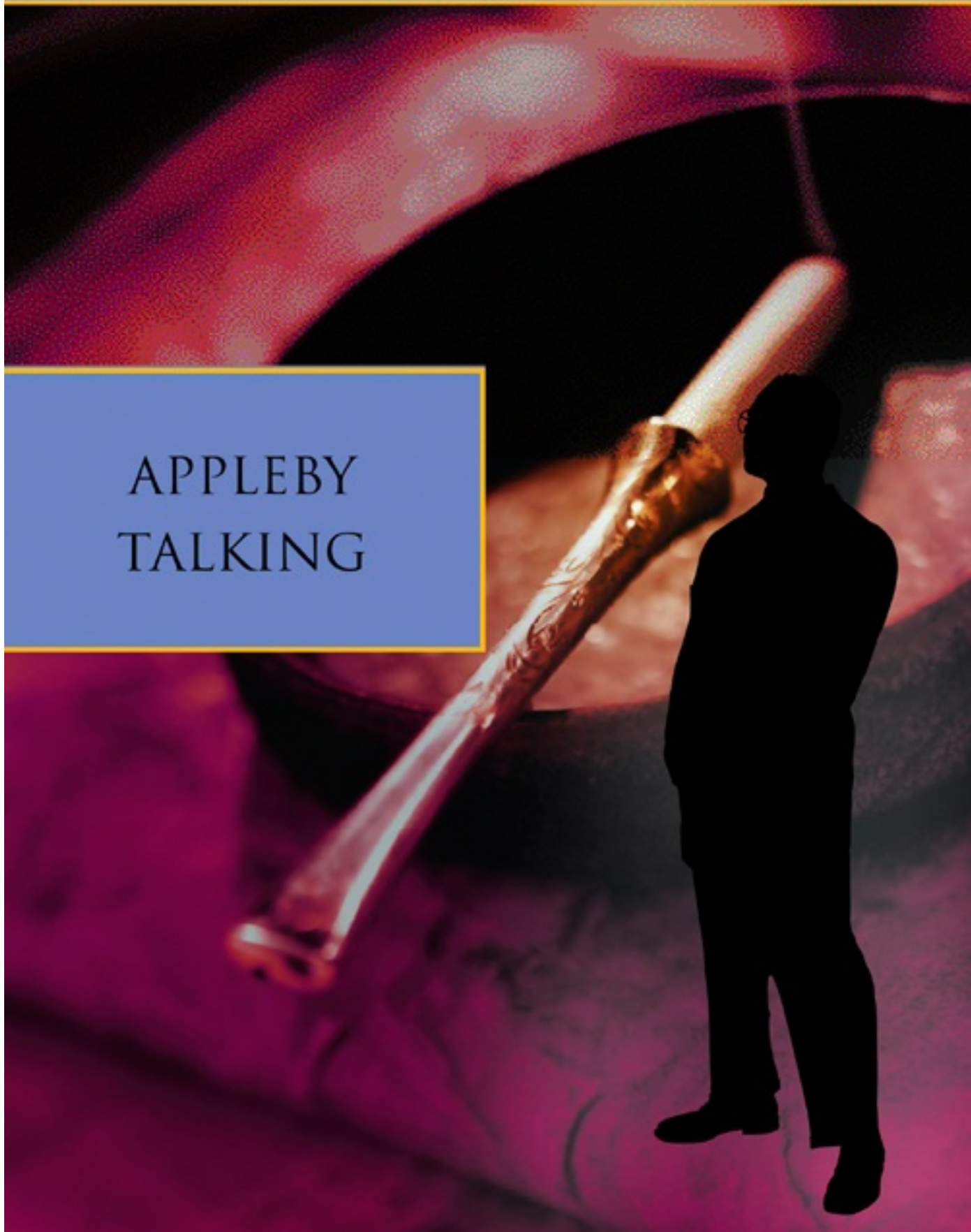


MICHAEL INNES

An Inspector Appleby Mystery

APPLEBY
TALKING



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Appleby Talking

First published in 1954

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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.

APPLEBY'S FIRST CASE

"My first case?" Appleby looked at his friends with the appearance of considerable surprise. "Do you know that nobody has ever asked me about that before? It's always the latest case that people are curious about."

The Vicar nodded. "News is more popular than history nowadays. It is only one symptom, fear, of a deplorable—"

"Precisely, my dear Vicar." The Doctor's interruption was hasty. "How right you are. But let Appleby tell us his story. For I can see that there is a story. That manner of squinting into the bowl of his pipe is an infallible sign of it."

"My first case was quite a small one." Appleby finished squinting and began to puff. "I'd say about eighteen inches by ten. And certainly not more than three inches deep."

The Vicar looked bewildered. "This case was about a case?"

"It was about this rather small case. But then, of course, I was rather small too."

"To be exact in the matter, I was just fourteen – a solemn child with somewhat precocious intellectual tastes and no notion of becoming a policeman. At thirteen I had been a geologist, littering my room with sizable chunks of any hills I could get within hammer's reach of. At fifteen I was going to be a tremendous authority on comparative religion. But at fourteen my line was the fine arts. I spent my holidays in the National Gallery or the Tate, and I particularly liked the delightful business of paying a shilling, and sixpence extra for a catalogue, in order to look at the picture-dealers' shows in the West End."

"This case that I'm telling you about contained a dozen exquisite pieces of jade, and it was exhibited on a table in the inner room of the Ferrarese Gallery, off Bond Street. The place may be familiar to you. It certainly hasn't changed from that day to this, and it had then, as it has now, the habit of running two exhibitions concurrently. I had gone there to look at the Impressionists in the larger rooms. The jade and other Chinese stuff in the room at the back wasn't part of my programme for the occasion. I'm sure I *had* a programme, laid out with admirable neatness, and that it indicated the study of Oriental Art as not due to begin until several weeks later."

The Doctor chuckled. "You may have been a little prig, Appleby. But you were a systematic one. And system was to lead you on to sterner things."

"No doubt. But I remembered that I had paid my shilling for *both* shows, and so I did make a quick survey of the Chinese things. The Impressionists had drawn a big crowd, but there was only a handful of people here at the back. I took a look round, and then stuck my head into the room lying farther back still. It's not much more than a large cupboard, where they sometimes exhibit a single picture or work of statuary under a rather *recherché* lighting. I don't remember what was actually on show there on this occasion, but I do remember the man with the red beard. Indeed, he is one of the three or four human beings whom I am quite certain I shall never forget."

"He was alone in the little room – an elderly man of shabby but cultivated appearance, muffled in a shapeless old ulster, and carrying under his arm a sheaf of papers and a

enormous folio volume in an ancient leather binding. I looked at the folio with great respect – had a large reverence for learning as well as the arts, and here clearly was a scholar in the grand tradition. I also looked at the red beard. There was something fascinating about it. Indeed, I must positively have stared, because I remember suddenly recollecting my own manners, and turning in some confusion to whatever artistic object was on view. When I looked at the scholar again a rather startling thing was happening. He was picking up his beard from the floor and hastily replacing it on a perfectly clean-shaven face.”

Appleby paused, and the Vicar rubbed his hands. “Capital!” he said. “Here was your observation, my dear Appleby, leading to your first triumph. Proceed.”

“I was a bit staggered, and no doubt rather scared. It was with a feeling that there was safety in numbers that I retreated to the crowd milling round the Impressionists. But my mind was moving swiftly. At least that was my own instant conviction in the matter, since I had recalled the time and again how Sexton Blake’s mind invariably worked swiftly on similar occasions. It was true that any passion for that eminent detective already lay – or seemed to lie – several years behind me. But of course, as the psychologists assure us, past obsessions rise up again in traumatic situations.

“Conceivably my swift thinking might have led in the fullness of time to the formulating of some line of positive action. As it was, events again took the initiative. I became aware that somebody was shouting, and a second later an attendant or commissionaire rushed out of the inner room. I caught the single word ‘jade’. And at that my tender intellectual faculties really *did* move with tolerable speed. I saw the whole thing in a flash – or *almost* the whole thing. I knew the villain – for are not villains invariably disguised? And I knew just what he had done for would not the showcase with those priceless little jades fit exactly into that assuredly bogus folio volume? It was a tremendous moment. And yet more tremendous was the moment immediately succeeding it. For there was the red-bearded man not six paces in front of me and making unobtrusively for the street.”

Appleby again halted in his narrative – this time to tap out his pipe. It might have been the heat of the fire that had brought a slight flush to his features as he sat back again.

“I gave a great yell. At least I thought I did – and was a good deal surprised to hear nothing. It was like the sort of dream in which you try to cry out and no sound comes. But my second attempt was more successful. Indeed, it commanded the instant attention of every soul in the place. ‘That’s him!’ I yelled – and I don’t doubt that I was horridly conscious of the bad grammar even amid the very triumph and relief of achieving articulate speech. As I yelled I pointed. And as I pointed I sprang. For there had come to me – with utter inevitability, you will admit – the one unquestionably correct course of action at such a juncture. Attendants were already closing on the red-bearded man. But I got there first, grabbed that beard with both hands, and pulled. The next instant I became aware that he was yelling too. He was yelling with pain. There were tears in his eyes. A single tuft of hair did actually come away. But his beard was as genuine as the childish down on my own lip. And the folio that ought to have been no more than a box concealing that little show-case lay open on the floor – a perfectly ordinary and authentic book.”

“But this is terrible!” The Vicar was dismayed. “It was a shocking situation for any sensitive boy. Whatever happened next?”

Appleby smiled. “I certainly experienced all the standard things – like wishing that the floor

would open and swallow me up. The establishment, clearly, would have liked to wring my little neck. Only for the first few moments they were too much occupied with apologising to my outraged victim, asking him if he wanted a doctor, offering to call him a taxi, begging to be allowed to rebind the folio, and a great deal more besides. That allowed me to get a second wind.”

“A second wind!” The Doctor was startled. “You didn’t sail in again?”

“Certainly. It was the only thing to do. I had come quite clear-headed at last, and I knew that this fellow must absolutely be held on to like grim death. I fought so hard, and did such a lot of damage, that the police when they arrived felt they must send for an Inspector. He sorted the thing out, and a check-up on the man with the real beard eventually led to the tracking down of the man with the bogus one. That was what, in the end, I *had* seen: that there were two men like that, they must be in a plot together. They had worked out a clever technique of distraction, particularly suitable for playing off against a boy. As soon as Bogus Beard had contrived to let me see that his was a disguise, he simply thrust that disguise away and did the stealing. Whereupon his confederate, Real Beard, planted himself before me in my turn, and elicited the response that diverted everybody’s attention while Bogus Beard, still beardless, got away with the booty. If I hadn’t stuck it out, Real Beard would have got away on his turn, loaded with handsome apologies for my irresponsible imagination and outrageous conduct.” Appleby chuckled. “And what a bewildered little ass I’d have felt.”

POKERWORK

George Arbuthnot was a novelist by trade – a rather sordid social comedy was his line – and he had not been broadcasting for long. But already he was popular on the air, potentially far more popular than he would ever be as a fabricator in finical prose of witty if unedifying drawing-room romances. The microphone had brought to the surface a sort of secondary personality, perhaps more effective than genuine, the chief characteristic of which was an abounding and cheerful moral earnestness. Arbuthnot's confident voice with its buoyant nervous tone momentarily smoothed out life's difficulties for thousands. During a precious fifteen minutes weekly his hearers could believe that all might yet be well with their particular private world.

But Arbuthnot's own private world was a mess. He had married a beautiful and slightly crazy girl whose completely amoral nature caught his rather cynical professional interest. It had not been a sensible thing to do; craziness and amorality are not likely to go with hard-wearing domestic virtues; and certainly the wise and confident voice on the air would have condemned the alliance out of hand. Arbuthnot was paying for his rashness now.

His wife had taken a lover, a disgusting man called Rupert Slade, whose suave manner and faint contemptuous smile he had come violently to loathe. And unfortunately the situation left Arbuthnot – humiliatingly as if he were a weak-willed wronged husband in one of his own novels – baffled and indecisive. For one thing it was Slade who, being in on broadcasting, had got him this new means of adding substantially to his income. Probably Slade could do him no harm in that matter now. He was too well established as a star performer. Still, the thing added to life's awkwardness.

And so when he came home from delivering his weekly talk Arbuthnot was often irritated and restless. He was restless tonight – more so than he could remember for some time. It was as if he were endeavouring to thrust back into the depths of his mind impulses to which it would be dangerous to give conscious attention. He tried a cigar, he tried the gramophone, he tried a book which had been listed as "Curious" in his bookseller's catalogue. But nothing served. The book was obscene without being in the least amusing – which might be the plight Arbuthnot gloomily reflected, in which he would eventually find himself as a novelist when the sands of his talent began to run low. As for music – well, by that he was secretly bored at any time. And the cigar for some reason kept going out.

He got up and prowled the living-room of the apartment. He stood before its handsome but unwelcoming electric radiator and thought it was like his wife. His brow darkened, and his chin went up; almost one might have thought that he had achieved one of those clear-cut decisions that he so confidently recommended over the air – and that in the novels were so seldom achieved. But the issue of this appeared not so very dramatic after all. He stubbed out the unsatisfactory cigar, switched off the cheerless radiator, moved to a door, opened it and spoke down a passage.

"Roper," he called, "I shan't be writing tonight, and I'm going to bed. Don't either of you wake up, for Mrs Arbuthnot will be very late."

George Arbuthnot flicked off the lights and left the living-room in darkness.

“A fellow called Slade,” said the Sergeant. With a sense of subdued drama he gestured in the air. “Just hit hard on the back of the head with a poker. The resourceful old blunt instrument. A very simple and fairly certain manner of killing.” The Sergeant’s voice indicated a sort of qualified professional approval. “And no fingerprints either. Here we are.”

A smoothly accelerating lift whirled them upwards. The door of the Arbuthnot apartment, behind which a constable stood guard, was handsome and enamelled in a delicate cream. The sort of place, Detective-Inspector John Appleby reflected, which ate money and bred nervy folk. They entered the living-room, and he glanced curiously about him. “Arbuthnot the novelist?” he asked.

The room gave at a first appearance the impression of gracious and civilised standards. The walls were lined with books – for the most part either new or very old – in French and English. A large late Matisse displayed its salmon pinks and acid greens on the wall opposite the window. But the whole place had been efficiently decorated and furnished in terms of some delicately-considered scheme, and nothing was visible that did not almost ostentatiously blend with the whole.

“A sterile room, Sergeant, for sterile people living by the laws of cocktail-bars and armchair magazines. Have you any kids? Imagine them let loose in a place like this.” Appleby took off his hat. “And who,” he asked unprofessionally, “cares which of them killed whom? Still, no doubt we’d better find out.”

Slade’s body still lay prone on the carpet, covered with a sheet. Appleby twitched this away and looked down on the sprawled figure in evening-clothes which was revealed to him. It was just possible to distinguish that on the back of the dead man’s head there had been a bare patch which would have made a very fair target even in virtual darkness. And the blow had been terrific. Blood, brains, and shivered glass lay around. There was a faint smell of whisky. It looked as if the assailant had struck while Slade was standing beside a small table having a drink. Decanters and siphon were still disposed where they had been set the night before.

“Nasty,” said the Sergeant. “Doesn’t have the appearance of something that happened in the heat of a quarrel. Nothing face to face about it. Matter of stepping up softly from behind while the poor devil was believing himself hospitably entertained. Unmanly, I call it.”

“Unmanly?” Appleby frowned. “That blow looks like the work of a blacksmith. But perhaps...”

The Sergeant nodded. “Just so, sir. It seems there are skulls and skulls. And this one was of the egg-shell kind. So it seems to be quite possible that the lady—”

“I see.” And Appleby once more drew the sheet over Slade’s body. “The lady first.”

And Mrs Arbuthnot was brought in. A striking woman with haunted eyes, she strode forward in uncontrollable nervous agitation. “My diamonds!” she exclaimed. “They have been stolen from the wall-safe in my dressing-room. Often I forget to lock it, and now they have simply disappeared.”

Appleby’s glance moved from Mrs Arbuthnot to the sheeted figure on the floor. “Loss upon loss,” he said dryly.

Mrs Arbuthnot flushed. "But you don't understand! The disappearance of the diamonds explains this horrible thing."

"I see. In fact, you suppose them to have been stolen by the man who killed your – who killed Mr Slade?"

"But of course! So it is idiotic to think that the murderer could have been George – my husband, that is."

Appleby received this in silence for a moment. "But husbands," he said presently, "do sometimes kill – well, lovers?"

Mrs Arbuthnot looked him straight in the eyes, and he saw that she was a woman oversexed to the point of nymphomania. "No doubt they do," she answered steadily. "But they don't steal their wives' diamonds."

Behind Appleby the Sergeant sighed heavily, as one who has heard these childish urgings before. "That," he said with irony, "settles the matter, no doubt."

But Appleby himself was looking at Mrs Arbuthnot with a good deal of curiosity. "Perhaps," he asked mildly, "you will give me your own account of what happened last night?"

With a movement at once sinuous and weary, Mrs Arbuthnot sank into a chair. "Very well, although your colleagues have heard it all already. Rupert – Mr Slade, that is – brought me home. It was late and both my husband and our two servants – a man and wife named Roper – had gone to bed. I asked Rupert in. I thought it quite likely, you see, that my husband would still be up, for often he writes into the small hours of the morning."

Appleby nodded. "Quite so," he murmured. "But it just happened that on this occasion you had to continue entertaining Mr Slade alone."

"I gave him a drink. We decided we were hungry, and I went to the kitchen to cook sandwiches. It was while I was away—" Suddenly Mrs Arbuthnot's voice choked on a sob. "It was while I was away that this horrible thing happened."

"I see. And while you were in the kitchen making those sandwiches just what, if anything, did you hear?"

Mrs Arbuthnot hesitated, and Appleby had a fleeting impression of fear and intense calculation. "I did hear voices," she said. "Rupert's and – and that of another man: a totally strange voice. Do you understand? A *strange* voice. It was only a few words, short and sharp. And when I came back into this room Rupert was lying on the floor and I saw that he must be dead. I roused my husband. No doubt I ought to have thought of robbery at once. But the shock was too great for coherent thinking, and it was only much later that I found my diamonds had been stolen." Mrs Arbuthnot paused. "I blame myself terribly. You see, I had left the main door of the flat on the latch behind us. The thief had only to step in."

"No doubt." Appleby looked searchingly at Mrs Arbuthnot. "He was rather lucky to be on the spot, was he not? And you think that he stole your diamonds and then brained Mr Slade just by way of finishing off the evening strongly?"

"I think the thief must have stolen the diamonds and then ventured to explore this room hoping to find something else that was valuable – perhaps he had heard of the Matisse. When he found Rupert barring his way he killed him and made his escape."

And this was the story to which Mrs Arbuthnot stuck. It was not, Appleby reflected, without some faint colour of possibility. But one major difficulty was evident. Slade had been struck from behind – to all appearance an unsuspecting man. And he was in no sense cutting off the supposed thief's retreat; the whole geography of the apartment negated this. To say therefore, that Slade was barring his way to safety was manifestly unsound.

Was Mrs Arbuthnot, then, shielding her husband with this tale of stolen diamonds? Had the two of them concocted the tale together? Suppose Arbuthnot had killed his wife's lover. Was it not very likely that, faced by this frightful fact, husband and wife had got together to present the most convincing lie that occurred to them?

Arbuthnot himself was brought in. He was a man, it struck Appleby, who either as witness or accused would make a poor impression on a jury. He was obviously clever and almost as obviously insincere – a man wavering, perhaps, between incompatible attitudes to life, indecisive and therefore unreliable and possibly dangerous. And now he was in an awkward situation enough, for his wife's lover had been found murdered beneath his roof. Nevertheless, at first he faced things confidently.

"I went to bed early and read," he said. "I never really go to sleep until my wife gets home."

"And of late that has frequently been in the small hours?"

The man flushed, hesitated, and then ignored the question. "But I did eventually doze off and all I can say is that I heard three distinct voices. Not what they said, but just the sound of them."

"That's it!" Mrs Arbuthnot broke in anxiously. "My voice, Rupert's voice, and then the voice of the thief and murderer. He must have tried to bluff when he blundered in on Rupert."

Appleby ignored this. "You mean," he asked Arbuthnot, "that you heard three voices engaged in conversation?"

"I couldn't say that. And I can't be sure that the third voice said very much. But the other two were Slade's and my wife's, all right. So I suppose her explanation fits well enough."

"Do you, indeed?" Appleby spoke dryly. "By the way, was this third voice a cultivated voice?"

Arbuthnot hesitated. "Well, yes; I'm pretty sure it was. I sleepily felt something rather disconcerting about it, as a matter of fact."

"A gentleman cracksman. And one, incidentally, who turned with some facility and abruptness to murder." Appleby paused. "Mr Arbuthnot," he continued abruptly, "you must be very aware of one likely hypothesis in this case. Are you prepared to swear – in a criminal court, if need be – that last night you didn't get out of bed, enter this room while your wife was making sandwiches in the kitchen, and here – well, encounter the dead man?"

Arbuthnot had gone pale. "I did not," he said.

"And you are sure that this story of a third voice, and of stolen diamonds, has not been concocted between your wife and yourself?"

"I am certain that it has not."

Appleby turned to the Sergeant. "There are two servants – the Ropers. Are they in

position to corroborate this story in any way?"

The Sergeant fumbled with a notebook. And Arbuthnot gloomily cut in. "Not a chance of it I'm afraid. I told them to go to bed. And they sleep like logs. It's been a regular joke between my wife and myself."

Mrs Arbuthnot nodded. "They wouldn't hear a thing," she declared confidently.

Appleby moved to the bell. "We'll have them in," he said. "And the whole *dramatis personae* will then be present for the conclusion of the play."

Arbuthnot started. "The conclusion, did you say?"

And Appleby nodded. "Yes, Mr Arbuthnot. Just that."

The Sergeant buried his nose in his notebook. He was thinking that he had heard his superiors employ that sort of easy bluff before.

The Ropers sprang a surprise. They had, after all, been very much awake, for a crash in the kitchen had aroused them. And at this Mrs Arbuthnot's hand flew to her throat and she gave a little choking gasp. "The bread bin!" she said. "I knocked it from the shelf."

"Ah." Appleby turned to the man Roper, a quiet, wary fellow with the ability to stand absolutely still. "And, once aroused, will you tell us what you heard, either from this room or from any other room in the apartment?"

"We heard three people talking in here: Mr and Mrs Arbuthnot and the dead man, Mr Slade."

"It's a lie!" Arbuthnot had sprung to his feet.

And his wife too sprang up, quivering. "How dare you," she gasped, facing the servant. "How dare you tell such a wicked untruth."

But Roper merely looked very grim. "There's no lie in it," he said quietly. "It's true we both quickly fell asleep again, perhaps before the murder happened. But your three voices we can swear to. So it is Mr Arbuthnot who is lying when he says he never left his bed."

There was a silence. Appleby turned to Mrs Roper, a pale, nervous woman who was softly wringing her hands. "You have heard what your husband has just said. Do you corroborate in every detail?"

Mrs Roper nodded. "Yes," she said. "Yes, it's true – God help them."

"Do you know anything that you believe it would be useful to add?"

But Mrs Roper shook her head. "No, sir. There isn't anything more."

Arbuthnot was now pale to the lips. "There were three voices," he said hoarsely. "But not mine. I didn't stir."

Suddenly Mrs Arbuthnot gave a shrill, hysterical laugh and turned to her husband. "George," she said, "it's no good. They heard you. My fibs about burglars and diamonds are useless. There's nothing for it but to confess that you came out of the bedroom and – and quarrelled with Rupert as you did." Again she laughed wildly. "You had reason enough, George knows. And I will admit it – admit it openly in court. Perhaps that will save you."

Arbuthnot was staring at his wife with dilated eyes. "For God's sake—" he began.

But the Sergeant closed upon him. "George Arbuthnot, I arrest you on the charge of the wilful murder of Rupert Slade. And it is my duty to warn you—"

Appleby, who had been making a quick tour of the room, intervened. "No," he said. "Mr Arbuthnot is entirely innocent. It was his wife who killed Slade."

“She wanted to get rid of both of them – her husband and Slade,” Appleby explained later. “Heaven knows why – probably some uncontrolled passion for another man.”

The Sergeant nodded dubiously. “Well, sir, I must admit she looks a bit that sort.”

“Sex-crazy, no doubt. But she has brains as well. She planned the whole thing. And there was more to it than you might think.”

“There was more to it than I can make head or tail of.” The Sergeant was slightly aggrieved. “For instance – ”

“Take it quite simply, and step by step. Mrs Arbuthnot brought Slade home with her at a hour to suit herself. Her husband never really slept before she returned, and so she knew that he would be awake or dozing and hear the sound of voices. She knew that by knocking down the bread bin she could arouse the Ropers and ensure that *they* heard the sound of voices too. And in that way she would gain the conflicting – and damning – testimony she desired.”

The Sergeant looked increasingly perplexed. “But that’s just where the puzzle lies! The evidence on the voices *is* conflicting, and you appear to be accepting Arbuthnot’s story. But why disbelieve the Ropers? You haven’t shaken their evidence in the least. And they both swear that the third voice—”

“Was Arbuthnot’s. Well, so it was. But it came from a disk on the gramophone. I found it there before Mrs Arbuthnot had any chance to remove it.”

“Oh, come, sir.” The Sergeant was expostulatory. “That’s an old trick enough. But here simply doesn’t fit the facts. For Arbuthnot himself, whom it appears we are to believe, swears that he stopped in bed, that from there he heard this third voice, *and that it was a strange voice.*”

Appleby nodded. “Precisely so. But you will find that the trick *does* fit the facts. And that it is not an old trick, but a very new one.

“Consider what Mrs Arbuthnot wanted to contrive: that the Ropers should hear a voice which they knew to be Arbuthnot’s, and that Arbuthnot should hear a *strange* voice. Once Arbuthnot had told his story, and it appeared to be disproved on the evidence of the unexpectedly wide-awake servants, and she had turned round upon him with her devil’s trick of appearing to see the uselessness of shielding him further and urging him to confess – once she had got him there it would seem there was only the gallows before him. She would be rid of both husband and discarded lover at a stroke. She and the public executioner would have shared the job between them.”

Appleby paused and gazed sombrely round the room. Slade’s body had been lugged away. Arbuthnot had made off to some country retreat; beyond the kitchen the Ropers could be heard packing their trunks. In this expensive setting life had dried up and come to a stop.

“On what, then, did Mrs Arbuthnot’s plan turn? On a very simple psychological fact, well known to anybody who has recorded for broadcasting and had the result played back at him. Under these circumstances a man is utterly unable to recognise his own voice – although, of course, everybody else does so. People have even been known indignantly to deny that these noises could possibly be theirs! Now, Arbuthnot had recently taken to broadcasting, and he

wife got hold of a recorded talk – conceivably through Slade himself who had some sort connection with that sort of thing.

“She brought her victim – her first victim – home and gave him a drink. She went to the kitchen and made enough row to waken the Ropers. She knew that her husband, too, would hear any voices in this room. Then she invited Slade to listen to a bit of the record – perhaps as some particularly choice idiocy of her husband’s. So the Ropers were sure they heard Arbuthnot in this room, and Arbuthnot was equally sure he heard a stranger. Nothing more was required. The moment had come, and she hit Slade hard on the head.”

Appleby paused. “How did I tumble to it? Well, Arbuthnot mentioned that the strange voice had some rather disconcerting quality, and I chewed on that. But the first step was earlier. It was when I saw that we had to do with a premeditated crime, and not with the result of some flare-up of passion on the spot. The poker, you know, must have been thoughtfully provided beforehand, since this room has nothing but that electric radiator.”

And Appleby reached for his hat. “A beastly sterile room, Sergeant, as I said at the start.”

THE SPENDLOVE PAPERS

“Two novels and a detective story.” The Vicar’s tone was disconsolate, and he set down with every appearance of distaste the three books he had been carrying. “I don’t know what our local library is coming to. Again and again I have impressed upon the committee that the best use of the library’s budget for biographies and memoirs is to be found in an inexhaustible store of edification and pleasure.”

“But they keep on ordering fiction, all the same?” Appleby drew a second chair to the fire in the club smoking-room. “I agree with you on the pleasure to be had from memoirs, but I’m not so sure about the edification. Consider the case of the Spendlove Papers.”

“The Spendlove Papers?” The Vicar shook his head as he sat down. “The title seems familiar to me. But I doubt whether I ever set eyes on them.”

“You never did. In point of fact, they have remained unpublished. And thereby hangs the tale.”

“Splendid!” A man transformed, the Vicar gave his library books a shove into further darkness, and beamed happily on the steward who advanced to set down a tea-tray in the usual place. “Pray let me hear it, my dear fellow.”

“Very well. Lord Claud Spendlove never gained the political eminence customary in his family. In state affairs he was much overshadowed by his elder brother, the Marquis of Scattergood, and he never attained more than minor rank in the Cabinet. When it came to social life, however, it was another matter. For more than fifty years Claud Spendlove went everywhere and knew everybody; his persistence in the field of fashion eventually more than made up for any lack of positive brilliance in it; and he had one marked endowment which was never in dispute. Lord Claud was the most malicious man in England.”

The Vicar looked doubtful. “It may be so, my dear Appleby – although one day you must let me tell you about Archdeacon Stoa. But proceed.”

“Moreover, Spendlove was known to be a diarist in a big way, and it was confidently expected that eventually he would put all the masters in the kind – Greville, Creevey, and the rest – wholly in the shade. There was a good deal of speculation as to just how scandalous his revelations would be. Some declared that the book would be so shocking that publication would be impossible for at least fifty years after his death. Others maintained that such a concession to decency was alien to the man’s whole cast of mind, and that he would see to it that his memoirs were just printable pretty well as soon as he was in his grave. In the end it appeared that this second opinion was the right one. On his seventy-fifth birthday Spendlove announced that his book was ready for the press and would go to his publisher on the day of his funeral. He had decided to call it *A Candid Chronicle of My Life and Times*.”

With a fragment of crumpet poised before him, the Vicar shook his head. “It must have had for some an ominous sound.”

“Decidedly. And presently Spendlove died. He was staying with his aged brother the Marquis at Benison Court at the time, and there was a quiet country funeral at Benison Parv. I myself knew nothing about all this until, on the following day, an urgent message reached

me at New Scotland Yard. Fogg and Gale, the dead man's solicitors, were in a panic. The manuscript of *A Candid Chronicle* had vanished.

"At first, I couldn't see that it was particularly serious. But they explained that through the length and breadth of England there was scarcely a Family – old Gale enunciated the word with a wonderful emphasis on that capital letter – that might not be outraged and humiliated by some revelation in the book. Spendlove had let himself go from the first page to the last but had agreed to some arrangement for pretty stiff editing of what would, in fact, be offered to the first generation or two of his readers.

"It became clear to me that the solicitors were right, and that we were facing a real crisis. In the first place, the missing manuscript was a blackmailer's dream; anyone well up in the line of business could make a large fortune out of its ownership. In the second place, it contained a mass of stuff that could be fed dispersedly into the sensational Press without any acknowledgement as to its source. And in the third place, a great many threatened parties must have had a strong motive to get hold of the thing and destroy or suppress it. I travelled down to Benison that night."

"A beautiful place." The Vicar had shamelessly turned his attention to an *éclair*. "One of the most mellow of the great English houses. I hope you saw the orangery and the great fountain."

"My dear Vicar, I had other things to think about. For instance, finding a room."

"Finding a room?"

"I preferred not to stop at Benison Court itself. And the local inn was full."

"Ah – the tourist season."

"Not a bit of it. This was in mid-November. So I was rather surprised to see old Lord Whimbrel crouching over a smoky fire in the lounge, and Sir Giles Throstle gossiping in the bar with Sharky Lee."

"Sharky Lee? What an odd name."

"Sharky is one of the smartest blackmailers in England. There were also the Duke and Duchess of Ringouzel, who had been obliged to put up with an attic; and in a yard at the back there was Lady Agatha Oriole, who had arrived with a caravan. I drove on to Benison Magna and then to Abbot's Benison. It was like a monstrous dream. The entire nobility and gentry of these islands, my dear Vicar, were encamped round Benison Court – and the only escape from this uncanny social elevation was into the society of an answering abundance of notorious criminals. They had begun to arrive in the district before noon on the day on which *The Times* had announced that Lord Claud Spendlove was sinking. Some of the most resolute of them – mostly members of the peerage – had openly imported house-breaking implements and high explosives. With the usual resourcefulness of their class, they had contacted the charitable organisations for assisting reformed cracksmen, and had taken the most skilled professional advice."

The Vicar looked thoughtful. "Lord Scattergood," he ventured presently, "must have felt some cause for alarm."

"I don't think he did. The Marquis, as I have mentioned, was a very old man; and when I saw him next morning he seemed to have the unruffled confidence that sometimes goes with old age. He took me to his late brother's sitting-room himself and showed me what had happened. A window giving on a terrace had been forced open, and so had a handsome bureau in the middle of the room. Splintered wood and disordered papers were all over the

place, and one capacious drawer was entirely empty. The Scattergood Papers, roughly ordered into *A Candid Chronicle*, had been in that.

“I asked a number of questions – pretty discreetly, for Lord Scattergood had held, as you know, all but the highest office in the realm, and was a person of decidedly august and intimidating presence. He answered with the unflawed courtesy one would expect, and very coherently in the main. If his years showed at all, it was in the way that a certain malice – what one might call the hitherto suppressed family malice – peeped through the chinks of his great statesman’s manner. And he was decidedly frank about his younger brother’s proposed book. Claud had never acknowledged the responsibilities proper in a Spendlove; his incursion into the Cabinet had been a fiasco; and while he, the elder brother, had toiled through a long lifetime to sustain the family tradition of public service, Claud had done nothing but amass local scandal in high places, and acquire the ability to adorn and perpetuate it with what was undoubtedly a sufficient literary grace. To this last point Lord Scattergood recurred more than once. But I see, Vicar, that you have guessed the end of my story.”

The Vicar nodded. “I think I have. None of the folk congregated in those nearby inns had anything to do with the disappearance of *A Candid Chronicle of My Life and Times*. The Marquis of Scattergood had himself staged the burglary, and saved his family’s honour by pitching the wretched thing in the fire.”

“You are at least half-way to the truth.” And Appleby smiled a little grimly. “That night I stopped at Benison Court after all – and did a little burglary of my own. Lord Scattergood, too, had a sitting-room, and Lord Scattergood, too, had a bureau. I broke it open. The manuscript was there.”

“He had preserved it?”

“He had begun to transcribe it. And with a new title page. *The Intimate Journals of Eustace Scattergood, Fifth Marquis of Scattergood*. It was as a writer that he would have chosen to be remembered, after all.”

THE FURIES

“The death of Miss Pinhorn,” said Appleby, “was decidedly bizarre. But it was some time before we realised that it was sinister too.”

“I remember Miss Pinhorn slightly.” The Vicar set down his tankard. “My daughter called on her once when collecting for European relief. Miss Pinhorn owned a cottage here, I think. She gave the poor girl sixpence.”

The Doctor chuckled. “She was quite astonishingly mean.”

“She would have lived, if she could, on free samples of breakfast cereals,” said Appleby. “But she died, nevertheless, of something odder than starvation. In a sense, she died of drink. But I see I must tell the story.”

“Capital,” said the Doctor. “And we’ll try a second pint ourselves.”

“Amelia Pinhorn was a woman of considerable fortune and marked eccentricity.

“For most of the year she lived in London the normal life of a leisured person of her sort. Then for a couple of months each summer she came down here and led a solitary and miserable existence in a small cottage.

“She had no contacts with anybody – not even the milkman.

“I don’t exaggerate. Everything was sent down from town before she arrived. She lived on tins.

“And then one day she was drowned. Or at least, it is supposed that she was drowned.

“For we never, you see, recovered the body. The poor lady went over the cliff just short of the lighthouse. You must know about the current that sweeps in there and then goes out to sea again past the Furies.

“And this was awkward when the rumours began to go round. It might have been particularly awkward for Miss Pinhorn’s niece, Jane. Old women over their teacups would have credited the poor girl with the most masterly crime of the age.”

The Vicar looked disturbed. “This is not *really* a crime story, I hope?”

“It certainly is – but whether masterly or not, you must judge. The initial facts were perfectly simple, and fell within the observation of a number of people who were about here at the time.

“Miss Pinhorn emerged from her cottage, locked the door behind her, and set out on what appeared to be one of her normal solitary rambles. She came in the direction of this pub, and as she neared it she was seen to be hurrying – like a seasoned toper, somebody said, who is afraid of being beaten to it by closing time.

“But she wasn’t known to drink, and she had certainly never been in this very comfortable private bar before.

“Well, in she came, talking to herself as usual and looking quite alarmingly wild. She called for two pints of beer in quick succession, floored them, planked down half a crown, and bolted out again. By this time she was singing and throwing her arms about.

“It was only when she had gone some way that she appeared to lose direction and wheel round towards the brow of the cliff.

“By that time she was in a thorough-going state of mania, and she went straight to her

death.

“Perhaps, you may say, she had a repressed tendency to suicide, and the need for that took charge when her inhibitions were destroyed by the poison. For this is a story of poisoning – as you, Doctor, have no doubt realised.

“My aunt was the first person to suspect foul play. That needs qualifying, maybe.

“For the notion of poisoning seems to have arisen almost at once at what you might call folk-level. Everybody was whispering it.

“What my aunt certainly spotted was the significance of the beer. It indicated, she said, sudden pathological thirst. Together with the very rapid onset of a violent mania or delirium, should give us a very good guide to the sort of poison at work.

“When I say ‘us’, I mean, of course, the local police and myself. It’s a queer thing that seldom quit Scotland Yard to spend a week in Sheercliffe with my eminently respectable kinswoman without her involving me in something of a busman’s holiday. But I felt bound to peer about.

“For a very little thought suggested to me that my aunt – in this instance at least – was talking sense. Had the body been recoverable I’d never have bothered my head.

“Miss Pinhorn’s cottage was not a difficult place to search thoroughly.

“There was a tremendous store of patent medicines – something quite out of the way even with a maiden lady – all put up in very small packs. But each was more utterly harmless than the last.

“They were, in fact, almost without exception, free samples which had been stored away for a long time.

“A related inquiry to this was that into the dead woman’s recent medical history.

“We learned from her maids in town that a few months previously she had been having trouble with her eyes, and that for some unknown reason she had to be hurried off to a nursing-home.

“But now I must tell you about the chocolates.

“You see, it really comes down to a sort of sealed-room mystery. Miss Pinhorn is poisoned – and yet *nothing* has gone into her cottage for days.

“Or so we thought until I happened, during the search, to take a second look at this half-pound box of chocolates. It was lying in the sitting-room, with the top layer gone.

“It wasn’t anything about the chocolates themselves that struck me. It was the lid.

“You know that slightly padded sort of lid that confectioners go in for? It was of that kind. And just visible on it was the impress of three or four parallel wavy lines. That box had been through the post, lightly wrapped, and here was a faint trace of the postmark.”

“Most astonishing!” The Vicar was enthusiastic. “My dear Appleby, a fine feat of detection, indeed.”

“I don’t know that I’d call it that. But at least it sent me to the waste-paper basket. And there, sure enough, with a London postmark and Miss Pinhorn’s address, was the scrap of wrapping I expected.

“And there was something more – a slip of notepaper with the words: ‘To Aunt Amelia on her birthday, with love from Jane.’

“So I hunted out the postman. Apart from a few letters, he had delivered nothing at Miss Pinhorn’s for weeks – until the very morning of the day on which she died. On that day he had delivered a small oblong parcel.

"I looked like being hot on a trail. That evening, while the remaining chocolates were being analysed, with what was to prove an entirely negative result, I went up to town and sought out Jane Pinhorn.

"And I didn't care for what I found. Jane was as nice a girl as you could wish to meet, and she had liked her eccentric aunt. This birthday box of chocolates had been an annual occasion with her. She was a highly intelligent girl, too.

"Miss Pinhorn's symptoms, so far as we knew about them, were consistent with the ingestion of some poison of the atropine group. The sudden thirst, and the delirium resulting from incoordinate stimulation of the higher centres of the cerebrum, were consistent with this.

"Deadly nightshade, as you may know, is not in fact all that deadly. But one could no doubt cram a chocolate with quite enough to cause a great deal of mischief, and Jane Pinhorn had possessed the opportunity to do this.

"Moreover, she had a motive. Along with a male cousin – a ne'er-do-well in Canada – she was the dead woman's only relative and co-heir.

"I saw suspicion inevitably attaching itself to this girl.

"I came back to Sheercliffe that night seriously troubled, and as soon as I arrived I went straight out to the dead woman's cottage.

"The rest of that night I spent prowling from one room to another.

"And then, quite suddenly, I found that I had come to a halt in the little hall and was staring at an envelope lying beside the telephone directory on a small table. It was a plain manila envelope, stamped ready for post, and creased down the middle.

"For a second I didn't see the significance of that crease. What had touched off some spring in my mind was the address – a single-spaced typescript affair of the most commonplace sort. International Vitamin Warehouses Limited, if mildly absurd, was nothing out of the way and wouldn't have troubled me.

"The snag lay in what followed. I know my East London fairly well. And the street in which this pretentious organisation claimed an abode contains nothing but mean private houses and a few shabby little shops.

"And so the truth came to me... The truth, to begin with, about that crease. This envelope had come to Miss Pinhorn folded inside another one.

"I slit the thing open there and then. '*Send no money. Simply fill up the back of this form.*' It had been a diabolically clever scheme. And it had, of course, been a completely fatuous one as well."

Appleby paused. The Vicar was looking largely puzzled. But the Doctor drew a long breath. "The nephew in Canada?"

"Precisely. He knew about the sealed-room effect. He knew about Jane's annual birthday gift. And he knew about his aunt's idiosyncrasy to belladonna.

"Some months before, its use by her oculist in a normal clinical dose had made her so seriously unwell as to take her into a nursing-home. The nephew believed that he could get over the gum of a reply-paid envelope a quantity which in her special case would be fatal.

"Miss Pinhorn, you remember, could never resist a free sample of anything. So she would fill in the form, lick the envelope – and perish!

"The envelope, if posted, would go to what was in fact a shady accommodation address in London, and our precious nephew would pick it up when he came over to England. He would also pick up the half of his aunt's fortune – or the whole of it if the unfortunate Jane was

hanged on the strength of her chocolates.

~~“But this amateur in poison had confused a lethal with a toxic dose.”~~

“With this particular drug, as it happens, the margin between the two is unusually wide. Having her special susceptibility to it, poor Miss Pinhorn did go horribly delirious, just as she had on a previous occasion.

“But that she chose to hurry on to this pub near the cliff, and thus put herself in the way of tumbling into the sea when the attack was at its worst, was pure chance.”

Appleby paused and stood up. “It wasn’t, as it happened, the last stroke of chance in the Pinhorn case. You may wonder what happened to the nephew.”

The Vicar nodded vigorously. “Yes, indeed. He was certainly a murderer.”

“He had aimed at being that, and showed a certain efficiency.

“But he hadn’t the stuff that an effective killer is made of. No sooner had he set his plot in motion, it seems, than he cracked up badly and went on a drinking-bout. Staggering home one morning in the small hours, and making his way through some public park, he fell into a very small pond and was drowned in six inches of water.

“At just about the same hour that tremendous current must have been drawing Amelia Pinhorn’s body to unknown depths beneath the Furies.”

EYE WITNESS

"It is sometimes alleged," the Doctor said, "that the law and medical science don't always see eye to eye. And it may be true in regard to one big problem – that of what constitutes a true understanding of the wrongfulness of a course of action."

The Vicar nodded. "Pleas of insanity, and that sort of thing?"

"Precisely. But in the main, the law has been very quick to accept and profit by scientific progress in medicine. The light that blood-grouping can sometimes throw on matters of disputed paternity is a good instance."

"And what a lot of them there are!" Appleby had glanced up from the newspaper he was reading. "But I suppose the Pelter case was unique – an upside-down business."

"The Pelter case?" The Doctor shook his head. "I don't remember it. And what do you mean by calling it upside-down?"

Appleby let his paper drop to the floor. "In most of these affairs some unfortunate woman is trying to establish that a particular man – also sometimes unfortunate – is the father of her child. In the Pelter case the claimant was a *man* attempting to establish legal paternity. He came forward to declare that Peter Pelter, then a five-year old boy, was his legitimate child. I'm surprised you don't recall the affair."

"We neither of us do." The Vicar produced his pipe. "Which gives you a chance of telling us about it."

"Very well – I'll try. And although it may sound a bit complicated at first, it was in its essence a tolerably simple affair."

"Some time in the nineteen-thirties an English girl called Sylvia Vizard, coming of a wealthy family in good society, kicked over the traces in a mild way, and went off in defiance of her parents to become an art-student in Paris. She was dead serious about it, apparently; gave herself into a suitable *atelier*; and for the rest lived a lonely sort of existence, working like a mad. Then she met a young American, Terry Pelter, who was also an art-student, and who had a similar somewhat unsociable slant on life. And this was important, as you will presently see."

"These two got married – in an unquestionably valid but, again, thoroughly unobtrusive way. Then they departed back into a sort of shifting and impermanent studio life that leaves very little trace of itself behind. Later, it was going to prove extraordinarily difficult to find anybody with precise memories of them. Vague impressions abounded – but, so to speak, the crucial eye witness was missing every time. Nor did the marriage last long. In fact, it broke up within eighteen months."

The Vicar looked distressed. "Montmartre, I am afraid, would not be the best place in which to build a stable union."

"It was certainly far from being that. Mrs Pelter turned up on her parents. She brought an infant son, Peter Pelter, and the news that her husband had cleared out. She rather thought that he had gone off to fight in the Spanish civil war."

"So the Vizards cared for the mother and child, and refrained from asking too many

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