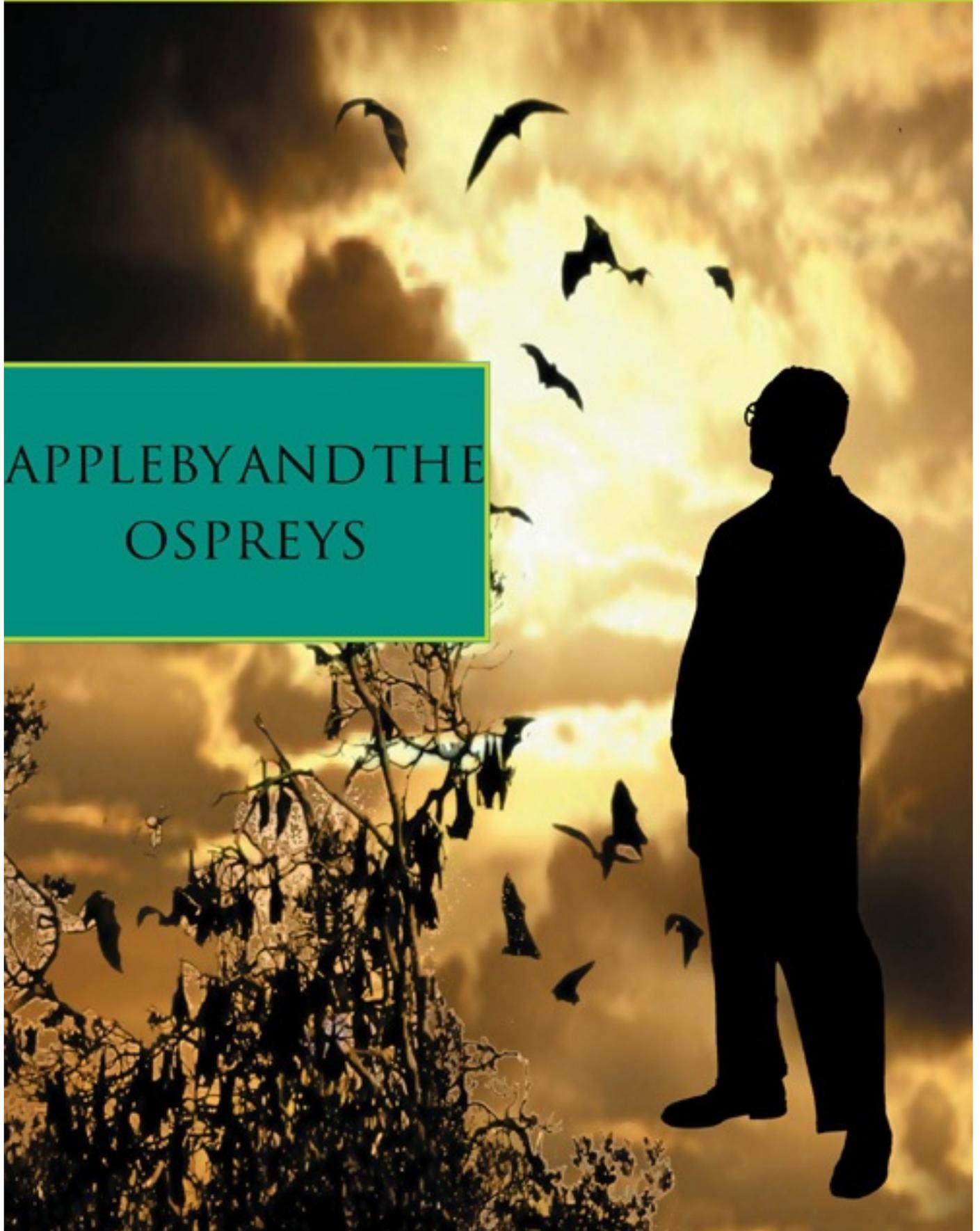


MICHAEL INNES

An Inspector Appleby Mystery

APPLEBY AND THE
OSPREYS



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Appleby & The Ospreys

First published in 1986

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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.

'Reflect, my dear,' Lord Osprey said to his wife. 'Or merely think. Better still, *thinktwice*.'

It was a mannerism of Lord Osprey's to be thus emphatic in his speech. One almost saw words and phrases in italic type as one listened to him. John Appleby, who along with his wife had just sat through a rather large luncheon-party given by the Ospreys, recalled how, one evening not long before, he had idly flicked a switch on a television set, and as a consequence found himself listening to his present host delivering a speech in the House of Lords. Not his maiden speech, or none of the scattering of peers present would have been so discourteous as to go to sleep. As it was, they had suffered Osprey through numerous sessions, and knew their man. So not only were some of them genuinely slumbering; here and there one of the – man or woman – was feigning slumber in the interest of providing more quiet fun for the BBC's cameras. It is proverbial that an Englishman loves a lord, and a gaggle of lords and ladies sleeping their way through parliamentary debates is probably more lovable still. Not that Appleby told himself – that they overdo the quaintness attaching to their labours as legislators. Only the Lord Chancellor on his woolsack is habitually addicted to fancy dress. And the woolsack itself – according to the high theory of the thing – is not inside but just outside the lordships' Chamber.

'Or for that matter,' said Lord Osprey, '*consult* Sir John.'

This was slightly awkward, since Appleby had failed to follow whatever topic the Ospreys were at issue over.

'I'm afraid,' Judith Appleby said, 'that my husband has withdrawn his attention and is thinking about Tom Thumb.'

This ought to have gone down well with Lord Osprey, since it was from an eminent statesman, Charles James Fox, while discoursing on Catiline's Conspiracy, that Dr Johnson had licensed his mind to wander to such odd effect. But Lord Osprey, who had certainly never heard of Catiline's Conspiracy, and hardly of Samuel Johnson either, was merely perplexed so that a moment's silence succeeded.

'I would be so grateful for advice,' Lady Osprey then said unconvincingly. 'Bats in the belfry. And people being disturbed by it.'

'Yes, indeed,' Appleby said. 'One can only sympathize.' This was a reasonable shot in the dark. Perhaps Lady Osprey had been confiding to the company in the matter of some relative undeniably off his head.

'And you feel,' Judith asked quickly, 'a particular responsibility? As leading parishioners? That is to say.'

Appleby glanced at his wife in some alarm. Judith's sense of humour occasionally took a slightly malicious turn. And, after all, parishes do have leading parishioners. Particularly in the countryside. It can be made to sound comical, but is one of the facts of English rural life.

'Just so,' Lady Osprey said. 'And, indeed, a little more than simply that. Oliver, you see,' – Oliver was Lord Osprey's Christian name – 'is the vicar's churchwarden. And a very delightful old village shopkeeper is the incumbent's.' Lady Osprey paused on this, as if to mark it

robustly democratic ring. 'So Oliver, and to some extent I myself, have a responsibility to give a lead in the matter. And, of course, Mr Brackley too. Mr Brackley is the incumbent. One couldn't have a more delightful parson than Mr Brackley. But he is sometimes a little slow when a decision has to be taken.'

'I think Brackley is quite right not to bother his head over anything so rubbishy.'

This came from a darkly frowning young man understood by Appleby to be the Osprey's only son, the Honourable Adrian Osprey. (The Ospreys, although they had been barons through several centuries, had never contrived to yank themselves into an earldom – so Adrian, during his father's lifetime, was just a mere Hon. It was possible to wonder whether Adrian Osprey, whose temperament seemed to be distinctly saturnine, contrived to manufacture a grievance out of this lowly status.)

'So the matter of the bats in the belfry is a little hanging fire?' Appleby asked. He was not tolerably assured that the bats were actual bats, and not metaphorical ones in the head of some other difficult relative. 'The bats up there have become really troublesome?'

'It seems so,' Lady Osprey said. 'I am myself quite fond of bats in their proper place. We have them in the park, you know; and they have perfectly adequate roosting areas – if that is the proper term – in a disused barn at the home farm. In the dusk they come quite near to us here, and they particularly like the moat.' Lady Osprey paused on this, and it was clear that she conscientiously took satisfaction in the Ospreys' having such a mediaeval appurtenance to their dwelling. 'The moat has some quite deep pools in places, but in others it is simply rather soggy – and no doubt breeds the midges and things the bats feed on. Everything in its place, I say, and I don't even object to picnickers in the park if they keep their distance. But I feel that bats are not quite in their right place in churches. And in our church the creatures appear to wake up at the wrong time, and come down so that they frighten the village children in the choir. And the children are the choir. I don't know why it is – but there are now no grown-ups left in it.'

These rambling remarks failing to elicit comment from the guests at large, Lord Osprey had to take up the tale.

'At first it seemed simple enough,' he said. 'Bat the belfry bats. Go after them as if they were so many deathwatch beetles. But then some confounded woman came and upset Mr Brackley. Well-connected and so on, and from the Cruelty to Animals. I subscribe to them, as a matter of fact. So you might think they would leave us alone. But not a bit of it. Bats, it seems, are a threatened species. Like badgers and foxes. It seems there would be no foxes left, if one didn't have hunts to go chasing and hallooing after them. I have to subscribe to them too, you know, even although I don't at all regard myself as a landowner. A dozen farms to keep an eye on, of course. But you have to go back a good many generations to find any Ospreys as landed proprietors in a big way.'

Nobody in the small group of guests who had lingered to a civil three o'clock found any remark with which to follow up this genealogical information, so Judith Appleby returned firmly to the bats.

'There is a great deal of misconception about bats,' she said. 'Hardly anyone knows, for example, that they make excellent pets. Those village children ought to be told about that. A bat in a good home responds quickly to affection. And it doesn't need to be fed from expensive tins.'

'Very true,' an elderly woman called Miss Minnychip said. 'If the children ceased to be

scared of them, the bats as they drop down at matins might join in the Benedicite. "O all ye Fowls of the Air, bless ye the Lord: praise him and magnify him for ever." Ananias, Azarias and Misael oughtn't to be left to do all the work.' Miss Minnychip reflected for a moment. 'And more simply,' she then added, 'recall that blessed are they that dwell in Thy house. The psalm explicitly mentions sparrows and swallows, but it says nothing about excluding bats.'

Not unnaturally, this speech occasioned general bewilderment. One or two people, realizing that Miss Minnychip had been quoting scripture, looked actively disapproving. Lord Osprey, although not perhaps a very observant man, did observe this and firmly wound up the topic.

'A tricky matter for Brackley,' he said. 'Either action or inaction is sure to offend some worthy people round about. Nevertheless something must be done, and with our authority behind it. I leave it to my wife, who sees more of our neighbours than I do. Only, she must *reflect*; must give her mind to it. Would anyone care to stroll through the gardens?'

This invitation was Lord Osprey's customary form of *au revoir*, and a sufficient number of his guests were aware of the fact for the party to break up at once. There wasn't, of course, a stampede. Everybody, that is to say, punctiliously murmured their regrets at being unable to accept so agreeable a suggestion, because of one pressing afternoon engagement or another; and the departure of the remaining guests in their cars fell decently short of a cavalcade.

'Roses,' Judith Appleby said as she took her place at the wheel of the ancient Rover. 'There would have been roses – and Lady Osprey would have known nothing about them.'

'She didn't seem to know much about bats either. Nor did her husband, for that matter. But in the way, shall we take a look at the church? There it is, in a corner of the park. A convenient Sunday morning stroll from the big house in fine weather, and in foul no more than eight or nine minutes in a carriage. Inside, there will be a family pew for Ospreys, and three or four other pews hired for various grades of retainers.'

'I don't think it will be quite like that any longer. Very few of the retainers, as you call them, will think of themselves as obliged to go to church if they're to earn their keep. As for the children, those of them that sing in the choir – or that sing in the choir when not scared by an occasional bat – they no doubt have to have various treats and outings laid on for them. But let's take a look, as you suggest.'

The church proved to be – unlike Clusters, the ancestral seat of the Ospreys – unassuming and not in the best repair. Over the crossing there was a squat tower with crockets, and at the west end the belfry was a box-like structure with narrow unglazed lancets. Once inside one had only to stand beneath the belfry and look upwards to see both the bell itself and a small colony of bats depending from the rafters.

‘A breeding roost,’ Judith said knowledgeably. ‘And I rather think they’re the greater horseshoe variety, which is distinctly uncommon in this part of the country.’

‘Shall we give them a shout, or sing a hymn, and see what the effect is?’

‘I’d rather you didn’t, sir.’

This remark or remonstrance came from behind the Applebys, who turned round and saw at once that they were being addressed by the vicar, Mr Brackley. In the Anglican world a sense of trespass always attends upon being detected in a church other than for devotional purposes at some prescribed hour. And if one’s demeanour is in any degree frivolous or even merely cheerful one is apt to feel the impropriety of one’s intrusion all the more keenly.

‘I apologize,’ Appleby said. ‘My suggestions weren’t very seriously intended. It so happened that my wife and I have been hearing about the belfry bats, and we thought we’d come and take a look.’

‘Ah, yes! Yes, indeed. You have been visiting the Ospreys possibly? Excellent parishioners but they have perhaps allowed themselves a shade too much concern about the harmless creatures. I am myself for a little delay, so that an undisturbed *accouchement* be achieved. Until their brood is born, that is to say. But perhaps I may introduce myself? I am Charles Brackley, the vicar of this parish.’

‘Our name is Appleby,’ Appleby said.

‘Ah, yes! How do you do?’ Mr Brackley turned to Judith. ‘Lady Appleby,’ he said, ‘do you take an interest in bats?’

‘I’m afraid I’ve never made a study of them,’ Judith said. She was a good deal impressed by this deftness in identification. ‘But I know one species from another. And it rather surprised me that this lot drop down in a disturbing way into the church – and in daylight too. Normally bats are surely the most crepuscular of creatures.’

‘It is quite an infrequent performance, as a matter of fact. But some of the children find it alarming. What troubles them, I think, is the appearance the bats give of darting around in a helpless and aimless fashion. It is, of course, an appearance only. The truth of the matter is that they fly with a precision that astronauts might envy. Not a single one but has an inbuilt sonar system of the utmost delicacy. The direction, speed, distance of the smallest insect they command through an ability to measure what to us are inconceivably minute fractions of time – and they communicate by a system of squeaks that few, if any, human ears are attuned to hear.’

‘Nature in rather an elaborative mood,’ Appleby said.

‘It may be so regarded. But theologians, I believe, would account for all the endless

diversity of created things by evoking the doctrine of what they call the Divine Abundance.' It was clear that the Reverend Charles Brackley didn't presume to reckon himself a theologian.

'I don't think I've heard of the Divine Abundance,' Judith said. 'Is it at all readily made intelligible?'

'I believe it is. God, having all eternity both behind him and in front of him, is always in danger of getting bored. So he occupies himself ceaselessly in thinking things up. Ceaselessly he creates diversity. But whether or not also for our instruction or entertainment, it would be hard to say.'

Thus edified, the Applebys made suitable remarks, and presently went on their way. An Appleby's mind reverted to Lord Osprey.

'So much for the Church's problem,' he said. 'But why should Osprey shove it – for what it is worth – at his wife? He's the churchwarden, not she.'

'Perhaps he has to think about Bills and Budgets and things.'

'Nonsense. The man's a legislative ignoramus. What do you imagine he does with his time? He has to fill it, I suppose. Rather like that parson's God.'

'I've heard that Lord Osprey has a hobby.'

'Judith, I sometimes wonder whether there's anything you *haven't* heard about anybody in this entire county.'

'It's simply because information, however useless, tends to stick in my head. Lord Osprey has a hobby. What could be more useless than knowing that?'

'One never can tell. It certainly isn't very startling information in itself. But perhaps the nature of the man's hobby is a little out of the way. Just what is it?'

'Numismatics.'

'He collects old coins? I do find that slightly odd. I imagine anybody with enough money and with time on his hands, can form a collection of such things. But it's rather a learned field I'd suppose – or is it if one's going to get much satisfaction out of it. One has to be an ancient historian, and a more or less modern one too, to rank as any sort of numismatist. Does Osprey employ some harmless drudge as a curator or secretary or something?'

'Nothing of the kind. Osprey has a brother-in-law who provides the necessary erudition. He was there, as a matter of fact, but I suppose you weren't introduced to him. He was the man who sat in absolute silence next to Miss Minnychip. It seems his name is Marcus Broadwater. So Lady Osprey must have been a Broadwater. The family's not from this part of the world and I don't know anything about them.'

'Do you know whether this learned Marcus Broadwater lives in the house?'

'Only off and on, probably. I think he's some kind of rather peripheral Cambridge don.' Judith was silent for a moment as she negotiated a tricky turn in the narrow country road. 'Talk of the devil!' she then said. 'There he is.'

'Broadwater?'

'Yes, Broadwater. He has just crossed the road, and taken that field-path to the river.'

'An angler, it seems. And, presumably, a keen one, to have got into those togs and all the way from that boring lunch. He must have piscatorial as well as numismatic interests. And his brother-in-law probably owns the fishing rights for a good stretch of the river.'

'Broadwater certainly seems to expect a good catch. Look at the big basket he carries. And that sort of landing-net thing.' Judith appeared amused by the spectacle of so complete an angler. 'But, John, why do men who go fishing always wear deerstalker hats? It seems to me

things up.'

'It's to stick a good variety of their dry flies in, as you can see. All sports have the superstitions. Every seasoned angler believes that there is just one fly that the trout will currently go for, and that he has only to find it and cast it.'

'And cast it, I suppose, when he is himself up to the knees in the stream. Did you notice his waders?' Judith had been much amused by this unexpected appearance. 'Shall we stop the car, and stroll after him, and make admiring noises when he catches anything?'

'Certainly not. Broadwater might very reasonably regard it as an impertinent intrusion.'

'Or we could talk to him about coins.' This suggestion being also unfavourably received, Judith drove on silently for some minutes. 'Coins,' she then said, 'must have rather the same sort of fascination for a collector as diamonds and emeralds and precious stones in general. Unlike pictures or statues or even books, they can be tucked away in a very small space and gloated over.'

'Infinite riches in a little room.'

'That kind of thing. And I have no doubt that a rare and very ancient coin can be worth enormously more than its original face value.'

'Most certainly – and there may be a special fascination in that. Do you think, Judith, that we had been much more prestigious guests than we were – minor royalty, say, or something like that – we might have been invited to gloat?'

'It's possible. But – do you know? – I believe I've heard that Lord Osprey makes something of a mystery of where the collection is kept. It won't be in a kind of strong room with the price of family silver. It will be somewhere more fanciful than that.'

'I doubt it. Osprey doesn't strike me as a fanciful type. In fact, my dear, you get these odd ideas as a kind of reflection from my long association with the *morerecherché* kinds of crime. Appleby fell silent for some minutes after this, and when he spoke again it was in what seemed a random and inconsequential way. 'I was a much better policeman, you know, than I am the country gentleman you've turned me into in my ripe old age.'

'You do hanker, John – don't you? And it isn't for your final eminence as the top bobby in London. It's for the position of the promising young man in the CID.'

'That's deplorably obvious, I'd say.'

'And it's why, every now and then, you still run into mysteries accidentally on purpose.'

'No doubt. But I don't think the Ospreys are a promising hunting ground. In fact they drop out of our lives here and now – until you decide it's time to ask them to lunch or dine.'

'One never knows,' Judith Appleby said.

One never does. Ten days later, and at an early hour, Appleby was called to the telephone.

'Detective-Inspector Ringwood speaking. Sir John Appleby?'

'Good morning, Mr Ringwood.' Appleby had repressed an impulse to say something like 'ain't done nuffink', or even 'It's a fair cop. I done it, sure enough.'

'I'm deeply sorry to have to tell you, Sir John, that his lordship is dead.'

'What lordship? And why are you ringing me up about it?'

'As one of his close friends, Sir John.' The unknown Ringwood sounded cautious and reproachful. 'At Lady Osprey's urgent request, Sir John. She assures me you were that.'

'Lady Osprey overstates the case, Mr Ringwood. She could hardly overstate it more. Lord Osprey has hanged himself, or been strangled by a demented butler, or anything of the

sort, of course I'm sorry to hear of it. But I don't see that you have any occasion to communicate with me. Distraught women – or men, for that matter – frequently make senseless suggestions to the police. An officer of your experience, Mr Ringwood' – Appleby had decided that Ringwood was probably a decent copper but a little confused as well – 'must have come across that sort of thing often enough.'

'I don't know that I have, sir. But if you don't feel you have any concern in the matter, must just apologize for troubling you.'

'There's no occasion for an apology, Mr Ringwood. What has actually happened?'

'Stabbed in the throat, Sir John. And killed outright. It's the way you might treat a pig, if you ask me.'

'I keep a few pigs, Mr Ringwood, to beguile the tedium of old age. But I haven't, as it happens, had to do my own slaughtering of them.'

'Of course not, Sir John. But it's right to tell you that Lady Osprey is much overwrought.'

'Naturally. But are you telling me merely that something horrible has occurred, or is there an element of mystery involved?'

'Definitely a mystery. The perpetrator must be said to have left no clue.'

'Can you mean more, Mr Ringwood, than that, so far, you haven't found one?' This was an ungracious question, and Appleby repented of it at once. 'And Lady Osprey,' he continued, 'wants you – well, to consult with me in the matter?'

'It appears to be what is in her mind, Sir John. And I would, of course, be very grateful—'

'I simply can't do anything of the kind. You know that as well as I do. It's no less impossible than if I happened still to be Commissioner of Metropolitan Police.'

'Quite so, sir. I fully realize that. But the lady also thinks of you as a personal friend of the deceased, as I've said.'

'I tell you I am nothing of the kind. Just something more than a nodding acquaintance. My wife and I, as it happens, lunched with those people about a fortnight ago. That kind of thing.'

'Am I to communicate to Lady Osprey that you see it in that way, Sir John?'

'Certainly not.' Appleby thought for a moment. 'It's a fair cop,' he said – and this time it was aloud.

'Sir?'

'I mean that it will be only the decent thing to turn up. To condole with Lady Osprey, that is. Are you yourself, Mr Ringwood, at Clusters now?'

'Yes, I am – and the police surgeon too. We are in Lord Osprey's library, where the book was found.'

'The venue must be said to be a little lacking in originality, Mr Ringwood.'

'And, of course, there are those house-party people milling around.'

'Those *what*?'

'It's Lady Osprey's name for them. Weekend guests. There are half-a-dozen of them.'

'And the wretched people haven't had the decency to pack up and leave quietly?'

'I thought it best, Sir John, to ask them to stay on for a bit. They haven't all been too pleased. One of them – some sort of a high-up lawyer, he seems to be – asked me in a direct way whether he was supposed to be helping the police with their inquiries. I said it was just that, and he was quite amused by my reply. Amusement didn't seem to me altogether right in the circumstances—'

'No more it was, Mr Ringwood. But go on.'

'Quickfall, his name is. Outlandish, it seems to me.'

'Rupert Quickfall, would it be?'

'Quite right, Sir John. You'd be knowing him, would you?'

'Only by reputation. I've never met him. But he's a QC flourishing at the criminal bar.'

'Well, Sir John, Mr Quickfall may find himself in a novel part of the court. But so may any of the others. So far, I must say I'm obliged to him. As things stand, I have no right to ask any of them to stay put for as much as half an hour. But Quickfall went round and persuaded them to do so or all except a brother of Lady Osprey's.'

'And you say Lord Osprey's body is staying put too?'

'Certainly, Sir John. Our doctor and the local GP have stirred it around a bit – but that was only to be expected. As I said, it's here in the library, which is where the thing seems to have happened. Except for Lady Osprey herself, I've allowed nobody to come in. But I can't yet give an answer for just what occurred earlier.'

'Obviously not. Are any other of Lord Osprey's relations in the picture?'

'The brother-in-law, Sir John.'

'Mr Broadwater. I know about him. Anybody else?'

'The heir, sir. Mr Adrian Osprey. No other relation, I think.'

'I see. Is there any suggestion, by the way, of something like burglary or theft being involved?'

'Nothing of the kind has been brought to my notice, Sir John. But it's early days yet. Lord Osprey may have come upon a burglar or thief, and lost his life as a result. But it doesn't seem very probable.'

'I suppose not. And I only ask, Inspector, because I happen to know that somewhere in the Clusters there is – or was – what is almost certainly a very valuable collection of old coins. Thoroughly portable, it's likely to be. Very much more portable than mere bullion of the same value. That brother of Lady Osprey's, Mr Broadwater, will be able to tell you about the collection.'

'I'll make a note of it, Sir John. And old coins could be put on the market here and there and now and then without much risk of detection, I imagine. So it would be an attractive haul.'

'Perfectly true. But one further question, Inspector. Can you rule out, out of hand, Lord Osprey's having slit his own throat? In that event, of course, there would be no crime involved.'

'It's certainly no longer a crime to try to do away with oneself. Or to succeed, for that matter. But a criminal charge, sir, may lie against somebody who has facilitated or urged a suicidal act.'

'Deep water there, Inspector.' Appleby decided that he had underestimated Ringwood. The man he was speaking to was a competent officer.

'Not that we mayn't find ourselves in deep water of some other sort, sir. That moat: we may find ourselves dragging it.'

'That may well be. I'll be with you...' Appleby corrected himself. 'I'll be with Lady Osprey in twenty minutes.'

Strictly speaking, andpace Lady Osprey and Ringwood, Clusters didn't have a moat at all. The baronial dwelling, which century by century had grown larger and larger through random additions judged suitably imposing in their day, now covered the greater part of a small island in the middle of a small lake or big pond. Contact with what may be termed the mainland was achieved by substantial causeways running respectively from the main façade of the dwelling and at the back from various offices. Both causeways, although broad enough to admit of a couple of carriages passing one another without hazard on either side, were without rail or parapet, but had been embellished from time to time with chunks of masonry judged to be of the mediaeval taste, including miniature bastions from behind which equally miniature arches might have operated. The lake or pond itself, as if offended by this tomfoolery, had absented itself at least to the extent of shrinking here and there into a condition of puddle or mere sludge. In places, however, it remained quite deep, so that a small rowing boat maintained for the purpose could be potteringly propelled in a zigzag fashion to one or another vantage-point from which guests of the Ospreys might view to the best advantage Clusters as a whole.

Why was the place called Clusters? The late Lord Osprey (as he must now be termed) had been fond of explaining that the original building was a monastery; that an ancestor of his had come by it at the time of the suppression and spoliation of such institutions in the sixteenth century; and that chance had preserved as *Clusters* what had been *cloisters* at an earlier period. Extensive cloisters, in fact, had been torn down – reprehensibly according to some ways of thinking – and Clusters had been built out of the abundant stone thus provided. Historians and philologists from time to time professed a certain scepticism about some of this, but no Osprey had been at all discomposed by them. Moreover, every Osprey knew about the family motto as it appeared cut in stone above an out-size fireplace in the mansion's billiard room. It was:

I prey

The charm of this was that it sounded pious, but that when you took a look at it a different sense appeared. If you happened to have preserved a Latin dictionary from your schooldays and looked up *uppraeda*, you tumbled to the pun (or whatever it is to be called) at once. And the osprey, of course, is so named because it preys upon fish. It is pre-eminently the bird that does that. As Shakespeare's Aufidius tells us, it takes the fish by sovereignty of nature.

In the present set-up at Clusters it was a Broadwater, not an Osprey, who appeared to go after fish in a dedicated fashion. John Appleby – on his way, as he told himself, to condole with Lady Osprey on the untimely death of her husband – was made aware of this to a distinctly perplexing effect. As he approached Clusters, and close to the spot at which Judith and he had seen the man a few days before, he became aware of Lady Osprey's brother advancing towards him – and in his attire and all his piscatory paraphernalia he presented

precisely the appearance that Appleby recalled from that previous occasion. But what was striking now was the evident fact of Marcus Broadwater's proposing to indulge himself in his favourite sport hard upon the violent death of his brother-in-law. Angling is declared in the most famous place to be the contemplative man's recreation, and conceivably Broadwater had decided that casting his fly at elusive trout might conduce to the state of mind required for the solution of the mystery as it were – bringing the current mystery at Clusters successfully to dry land. But however that might be, there remained something distinctly odd in the man's thus deserting his own sister on what could scarcely be other than the most calamitous day of her life.

Upon the retired John Appleby this whiff of mystery had what was perhaps a predictable effect. He was moved to break in upon Broadwater's solitude forthwith, and to this end he brought his car to a halt immediately beside the field-path into which he guessed the fisherman would turn. When the man came within two or three yards of him he got out and spoke.

'Mr Broadwater, I think?' he said.

'You have the advantage of me, sir.' Broadwater's tone was distinctly chilly – but that Appleby told himself, was fair enough from one who had been accosted in a most unwarrantable manner while going about his entirely peaceful occasions.

'My name is Appleby, and I was at that luncheon-party at Clusters a few days ago. I had the pleasure of being introduced to you, but your identity was mentioned to me by my wife. She described you as the man who sat in absolute silence next to Miss Minnychip.'

This was far from polite, and presumably intended to be just that. There is much to be said for losing no time in irritating a witness. But if this was Appleby's proposal, it failed entirely. Broadwater's chilliness departed; he set his creel on the ground, leaned his rod casually across the bonnet of Appleby's car, and spoke with gentle amusement.

'Ah yes! Miss Minnychip. It is positively unkind to venture on a remark to her. She is one of those nature's monologists, and conversation upsets her. You must have known people of that sort, Sir John. Some Home Secretaries, for example.'

Thus identified – as by Mr Brackley in his church – Appleby was obliged to fall back on civility.

'I must apologize for accosting you,' he said, 'on your way to what will be, no doubt, a capital day's sport. I've been told that, next after the Test, it's the best trout-stream in England.'

'It comes high on the list, certainly. We could talk about it for some time. A pleasant Curiosity of Fish and Fishing, you know.' Thus invoking Izaak Walton's ghost, Broadwater appeared to relax further. 'But, my dear Sir John, if you are interrupting me, isn't it correspondingly true that I am delaying you? For you are clearly hurrying to bring your professional skill to bear upon the circumstances of poor Oliver's death. Is it not so?'

'Your sister, Mr Broadwater, has sent a message asking me to come over to Clusters, and of course I have complied with her wish. I'll say what I can.'

Marcus Broadwater appeared amused by this evasive speech – as Appleby, indeed, felt the man was justified in being.

'Will it be only to my sister, Sir John, that you will say what you can? And not also to the fellow called, I think, Ringwood – who keeps on taking down what people say in a notebook?'

'I have never met Detective-Inspector Ringwood. But it was he who transmitted on the telephone your sister's invitation to me, and he struck me as a capable officer.' Appleby said.

this with some severity. 'And as I am visiting Clusters anyway, it will perhaps be natural that he should have a word with me about this sad affair he has the duty of investigating. But I have no official standing in the matter at all, and I have no intention of poking around, solving a mystery, building up a case, or anything of the kind.'

'What a pity.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'The old war-horse neighs at the sound of the trumpet, does he not? I am inclined to think, Sir John, that my brother-in-law's sudden death may be an uncommonly seductive trumpet. And you have already responded to it, I may reasonably assert, by deferring your consolation of my sister in order to confront – shall we say to size up? – one promising suspect. He stands before you.'

'Mr Broadwater, you are now talking nonsense, or at least indulging in unseasonable whimsy. What your precise relations with your brother-in-law were, I don't know. But your sister has suffered a particularly painful and brutal bereavement, in the face of which levity or an affectation of levity – ill becomes you. I think I had better drive on.'

'Come, come, my dear Sir John, don't be a prig. I don't know whether killing a brother-in-law rates as fratricide, but I do know that you will be quite wrong not to listen to a brief exposition of the manner in which something of that order may have occurred. I tell you I am a capital suspect. Are you, by the way, in the Queen's commission in this county?'

'If you are talking about being a JP – yes, I am.'

'Then is it not positively a dereliction of duty on your part not to listen to me?'

'I don't refuse to listen to you, Mr Broadwater. It was I who initiated our encounter, and I suppose I ought not to break it off.' Appleby realized that in this bizarre conversation he had been lured into something like a false position. 'If you really want to present a case against yourself, I must no doubt hear it – and pass on to Mr Ringwood whatever you have to say.'

'Capital, Sir John! I hope you will do exactly that. And I will begin by sketching what you have called my precise relationship to Oliver. I am a scholar by trade, and numismatics is my field of study. I pursue it at Cambridge, where I think I may say I am regarded as tolerably competent at my job. Oliver, who probably hoarded half-crowns and sixpences as a small boy, is now – or, rather, was until his death – the owner of a significant – and, of course, very valuable – collection of ancient coins.'

'Which you have been looking after for him?'

'I have been keeping the catalogue up to date, and advising upon acquisitions: that sort of thing. And I do a little cleaning from time to time. As you might imagine, that can quite often be a delicate operation.'

'I see. And where, Mr Broadwater, is the collection kept?'

'I have no idea.'

'My dear sir! That is a most extraordinary statement.'

'I am well aware of the fact. But even a large collection of coins can be tucked away in a very small space. The Osprey Collection, as it may be called, is just like that. Oliver simply wheeled it in.'

'Wheeled it in!'

'On a trolley. The kind of affair you see in restaurants for taking round the puddings and cheeses.'

'And you are telling me that, year after year, you have remained ignorant about the

collection's normal place of security?'

'Just that. Or, at least, that's what I am asserting. But it will only be prudent not necessarily to believe anything I say.'

'You labour the point, Mr Broadwater. Would your sister have known where the coins were kept?'

'I much doubt it. I have never observed her take the slightest interest in the matter.'

'Are you going to claim that you had designs on the Osprey Collection; that you would have made off with it if you could?'

'Oh, most decidedly. And I'd have presented it to the appropriate museum at once.'

'And you ask me to believe that this situation is intimately related to the mystery of your brother-in-law's death?'

'Not quite that. I am merely outlining circumstances which must prompt you to place me firmly on your list – or on Ringwood's list – of suspected persons.'

'But does it, in fact, do that? I can see that, at times, Lord Osprey's secretiveness over his collection may have been extremely irritating to you. But is it in the least likely that, as a consequence of that irritation, you suddenly, and to no practical effect so far as the collection is concerned, stabbed the man to death in his own library?'

'That is very much the question, Sir John, to which I feel your Mr Ringwood should address himself.'

'He is not my Mr Ringwood. He is in a sense, I suppose, your Chief Constable's Mr Ringwood.' Appleby paused on this, and saw that, although true, it was disingenuous as well. He must pull up on that insistent distancing himself from what could be called the Clusters Case. But he needn't pull up on thinking about Marcus Broadwater merely because the man had talked a certain amount of nonsense. Had he offered himself as a promising 'suspect' merely as the consequence of more or less harmless eccentricity, but with some ulterior motive – present wholly obscure? Asking himself this, Appleby decided that it was time to end the encounter. 'A most interesting conversation,' he said. 'But to continue it further would be to keep you most unwarrantably from the trout. And I undertook to be with your sister nearly half an hour ago. So I must drive on.'

'Then good day to you for the present, Sir John.' And with some formality Broadwater doffed his deerstalker (at some hazard since it was so thick with dry flies) and, with a slight ironical bow, picked up his rod and walked away.

Although he was already late for his appointment, Appleby found himself driving more slowly as Clusters came in view. Ahead of him was a man with his throat cut. And dead. He tried to remember whether just that had ever confronted him before. He had waged a long war against crime – and against the crime of murder often enough. But slit throats had somehow escaped him. Perhaps it was because his bosses had early taped him as the man to despatch when it had seemed a question of *recherché* crime. He had offered that phrase to Judith, he remembered, only a few days ago.

In the dictionary there was a singularly unpleasant word. *Jugulate*. To sever the blood vessels between heart and brain. In former days, when 'cut-throat' razors had abounded, suicides occasionally went about their task that way. Earlier still, when soldiers wore armour, the *coup de grâce* was sometimes delivered in the same manner: you pulled off a helmet and stabbed. Under any circumstances it was bound to be a pretty messy business. And there seemed to be a peculiarly bizarre incongruity in its happening in a library. Not that the library

at Clusters was all that distinguished. At that lunch-party the guests had been offered a glass of sherry in it before going into a dining-room. It was the kind of library, Appleby had noticed that moved abruptly from eighteenth-century sermons to bound copies of *Punch* from 1840 onwards. A significant cultural, shift, Appleby had reflected. So, for that matter, was the invention of the safety razor – which had perhaps been furthered by the career of Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street.

At this point in his wool-gathering Appleby became aware of a cyclist coming towards him. It was Mr Brackley, vicar of the bat-infested church. Brackley raised a hand as if in greeting and then, as if on a second thought, rotated the hand in a manner suggesting a summons to stop. Appleby did so, and reversed a little. Brackley had dismounted.

‘Good morning, Sir John,’ he said. ‘I think you must be making your way to the big house. It was thus that Clusters must be spoken of locally.’

‘Yes, Mr Brackley. I am.’

‘Then I think I ought to tell you—’

‘Yes, I know. Osprey has met a violent death, and his wife has asked me to come over. The poor lady is under some absurd misapprehension about my position in these parts. She supposes me to be, not exactly its chief constable, but at least its Dupin or Mycroft Holmes.’

‘Absurd, indeed.’ Brackley spoke dryly. ‘My own summons has been less idiosyncratic, but perhaps similarly tinged with oddity. I endeavoured to advance the comforts of religion, and I hope not wholly without effect. But the poor woman seemed to confuse me at times with the undertaker. Not that she isn’t sensible and collected, after a fashion. There is to be a quiet burial here, witnessed only by the family, and later a memorial service in town, conducted by members of the higher clergy, and in the presence of numerous persons of quality.’

‘That seems reasonable enough.’ Appleby had been aware of a certain acrid quality in Brackley’s speech. The Ospreys, he suspected, had been a little inclined to treat their vicar less as a beneficed clergyman than a domestic chaplain. ‘There’s something to be said for fixing one’s mind on such matters when in a state of shock. And the shock must have been horrific. To have one’s husband’s throat slit in his own house! Think of it, Brackley.’

‘Yes, indeed. The manner of the thing suggests a desperate malignity. Think of Laertes, Sir John.’

‘Laertes?’

‘Learning that Hamlet has killed his father, he is prepared to cut his throat in the church.’

‘It hasn’t been quite like that – has it? Not a church, but a library. So not even bats witness the thing.’ Appleby was displeased at hearing himself produce this strained quip. ‘By the way,’ he continued abruptly, ‘do you happen to know where Osprey kept that collection of coins?’

‘I’ve no idea.’ Brackley’s features expressed surprise. ‘But Lady Osprey’s brother should know – Marcus Broadwater.’

‘He doesn’t – or he professes not to. I’ve just had an encounter with him, and I brought the matter up. He’s gone off fishing.’

‘Dear me! How slightly odd. Taking the thing, one may say, literally in his stride. I’m surprised the senior policeman up there – a fellow called Ringwood – let him go.’

‘Ringwood could do no more than make a request, and he was backed by a barrister called Quickfall. I’ve gathered most of the house-party – for there has been a small house-party, as you must have noticed – have stayed put. But Broadwater collected his gear and went off.’

'Perhaps to think the thing out in solitude? Anglers, after all, are supposed to be given to meditating on the mutability of human affairs.' Brackley paused for a moment on this. 'Those coins,' he then said abruptly. 'Are you thinking that Lord Osprey's death may have followed upon a robbery or burglary?'

'It does seem to me a possibility. Clusters is, of course, full of what are called priceless things. But most of them are on the bulky side: Italian *cassoni*, full-length Van Dycks, and so on. Quite a large collection of coins could pretty well be carried off in a man's pockets. Are you interested in coins?'

This sharp question – part of a technique Appleby had commanded long ago – did take Brackley by surprise. But he answered easily enough.

'Oh, most decidedly! But not in the sense you intend, Sir John. On a vicar's stipend one has to take care of the pennies. Hence, for example, this bicycle. And I must speed home on it now. As you may imagine, there's rather a tricky sermon to concoct for this coming Sunday. Should you happen to be over here again then, it would be a great pleasure to see you in the congregation. And, meantime, please give Lady Appleby my regards.' Brackley swung a leg over his machine, and then appeared to have an afterthought. 'The butler up there might know something useful,' he said. 'He's an uncommonly knowing man. Name of Bagot.'

'I'll remember that,' Appleby said, and watched the Vicar of Little Clusters pedal away. Then he himself drove on.

Appleby was received by a tall and cadaverous man who was undoubtedly Bagot. Years had probably elapsed since the Ospreys had run to footmen. Bagot was dressed in ever so slightly greasy morning clothes. Like his betters, he would no doubt change into a dinner-jacket when a bell rang in Clusters at seven o'clock. He carried a small silver salver on which he was presumably prepared to receive a visiting card if it was offered to him. Appleby asked for Lady Osprey.

'Certainly, Sir John. Her ladyship is in her sitting-room, and is expecting you. She relies upon you to clear up this horrible affair.'

Appleby might have come down on this like a brisk ton of bricks. He said nothing, however, and followed Bagot down long corridors oppressively hung with a jumble of small paintings and engravings and photographs which it was impossible to imagine anybody ever pausing to glance at. They were broad corridors, but seemed narrow because each as it was entered stretched into a middle distance as if situated in some vast ocean liner. Clusters really was an enormous place. Life, other than that of mice from the cellarage and midges from the moat, was confined to what was called the Georgian Wing, which was itself a very large mansion confidently rather than arrogantly regardless of incongruity with the more modest achievements of Elizabethan and Jacobean builders. Looking for some scores of ancient coins in such a higgledy-piggledy museum would be – Appleby thought – as daunting an enterprise as setting sail in quest of the Golden Fleece.

The doors on the particular corridor down which he was now being conducted were of the duplex or bivalvular sort the ceremonious operation of which requires the regular attendance of a couple of lackeys at each. A practised hand, however, can make quite a show of the business on his own, and Bagot was accomplished at this. Without pausing in his measured pace, he thrust open both halves of such a door, stepped forward, said 'Sir John Appleby' in a subdued and almost casual tone. He then stepped aside to let Appleby past, reversed the movement, walked out backwards, and shut the door more or less on his nose. The low key of his announcement, Appleby concluded, had been designed to match the apartment into which he had introduced the visitor. It was large, but it wasn't at all grand. Lady Osprey's sitting-room – a term unassuming in itself – was furnished and equipped on what might be called a homely note. Appleby felt at once that he had discovered something about the social background of the Broadwaters. Marcus Broadwater was no doubt a highly cultivated Cambridge don, as well as a distinctly eccentric one. But neither he nor his sister belonged to what might be called the authentic Osprey world. Lady Osprey had developed a kind of pattern which fitted Clusters after a fashion. But she had furnished this more or less private boudoir as something snug and nostalgic to retire to when thinking of simpler times.

'Dear Sir John, how kind of you to come. Do sit down.' Lady Osprey waved in an indicative manner at several chairs in quick succession. 'Poor Oliver – such a shocking thing! And quite unlooked for, too. I simply don't know where to turn. My brother Marcus is still with us, and he might be expected to take matters in hand a little. But Marcus has simply gone out to show

things.'

'To fish things, Lady Osprey. I have just run into him fully equipped as a fisherman. But your son is at home, I take it, and must be a support to you in this very sad situation. May I say at once how much I feel for you. And my wife has asked me to say how grieved she is for Appleby, who was genuinely sorry for this – as he felt – wholly unremarkable woman, going through these formal expressions without difficulty. He remained a little wary of Lady Osprey all the same. It seemed not improbable that she would expect him to whip out a magnifying glass and fall at once to scrutinizing the carpet with it, or something like that. 'But you have your son,' he repeated a shade hastily. 'He must be a great comfort to you.'

'But Adrian knows so little. And that is true, too, of the people now visiting us at Clusters. There is almost a house-party at present. Oliver, you know, liked that sort of thing. He was brought up to it. But that's true of Adrian too, I suppose. Yet Adrian doesn't like it a bit, either. His friends are in quite a different set, he says. It's an odd expression, and I think he must have picked it up from an old-fashioned novel. But I understand what it means. It means, among other things, that he will be barely civil to his parents' guests.' Lady Osprey managed a flash of spirit as she said this, but immediately afterwards her tone became plaintive again. 'Of course there is always Bagot,' she said. 'Bagot is a man who can be useful in all sorts of ways. But I have to confess I am always a little uneasy with Bagot. So, Sir John, I do very much hope that you can help me.'

'Anything I can appropriately do, I'll certainly do,' Appleby said – and at once felt that this speech had been unnecessarily wary: almost, indeed, ungracious. But at least it hadn't been unnecessary. Lady Osprey, he supposed, was firmly convinced that he was a kind of superior bobby who was happily in the neighbourhood at the right time, and the misconception must be cleared up at the start. 'Fortunately,' he went on, 'Detective-Inspector Ringwood appears to be a thoroughly able and conscientious—'

'Furniture-removers,' Lady Osprey interrupted. 'I am sure, Sir John, that you can help me there. It won't be a large undertaking, but some of the things are rather valuable, and a little fragile as well. And you know what most removal men are.'

John Appleby, who is not on record as easily stupefied, came close to being so now.

'Do you mean,' he asked, 'that hard upon Lord Osprey's sudden death, you are giving thought to packing up and leaving Clusters?'

'Yes, indeed, Sir John. I have never liked this overgrown place – nor a lot that goes with it. All those dinner-parties and luncheon-parties and long weekends! Chatter, chatter about anything one can think of. Bats in the belfry, and heaven knows what.'

'And people bringing picnics into unsuitable parts of the park.' Appleby had now recovered himself. 'Do you intend to go far? It's long-distance removals, I take it, that can be rather tricky.'

'Only to the dower house.' Lady Osprey said this with a touch of grandeur: there was something to be said for a dower house, just as there was for a moat. 'The dower house, which is no more than a mile away, has of course been in the hands of tenants. But – more conveniently, isn't it? – their lease has just run out. Bagot – I've discussed it with Bagot – says that my moving there at once would be a little unusual. Because of Adrian's still being unmarried, he means. Unmarried eldest sons seldom want to have great houses all their own themselves. Bagot says they usually have other ideas; that it would be much too much like settling down. One understands what he means.'

'Yes,' Appleby said. 'I suppose one does. Is Adrian fond of field sports: hunting and shooting and so on?'

'He certainly hunts. But hunting is something anybody can do anywhere – if he has the money, that is. And if, when I go away, he simply lets Clusters to an American millionaire, or somebody of that sort, he could no doubt reserve the fishing and shooting rights. I think that's the phrase.'

'Have you spoken to Adrian about your plan to move out, Lady Osprey?'

'No, not yet. I thought I'd leave it until after poor Oliver's funeral.'

'Which is when people will begin to address your son as Lord Osprey. There is much to be said for sticking to the proprieties in all these matters.'

Appleby was unsure whether he had offered this observation with any inflexion of irony. Certainly Lady Osprey's mind appeared to be behaving oddly – if not positively improperly – in the context of the immediate state of affairs at Clusters. Fleetinglly, Appleby wondered whether she was in a condition of such deep shock that she scarcely knew what she was talking about. But there was no real indication of anything of the kind. She disliked the place, an event had now happened which presumably caused her to dislike it even more; she was in a position to leave, and that was what she was going to do.

Or this – Appleby told himself – was the appearance of the matter. But about his own encounter with Lady Osprey was there not more than a hint of oddity – almost implausibility? Had he really been begged to come to Clusters only to find himself asked for advice about furniture removers – a subject which until now the lady hadn't with any tenacity pursued? And there was surely something grotesque in her almost totally ignoring the elements of mystery surrounding her husband's horrible death. Quite suddenly, Appleby found himself wondering whether this seemingly artless person was in fact playing rather a deep game, presenting, for some end of her own, a kind of additional or subsidiary puzzle to a man who had been rising to puzzles through a long professional career. There was at least something disturbing in the notion that there existed, so to speak, more than one angler in the Broadwater family.

'I do hope you will stay to lunch with us,' Lady Osprey said. 'You could have a chat with Adrian. And everybody seems to be staying at least till the afternoon. The policeman, I am told, was anxious they should do that in order that he could take statements from them.'

'Thank you: I shall be delighted,' Appleby replied – not, perhaps, without a certain sense of having taken the hook in his gullet. 'And now I ought to have a word with that policeman simply in a friendly way. I haven't met him, but when he gave me your message on the telephone he sounded a sensible man.'

'But with an odd name. Ringworm, or something of the sort. And I'm afraid Adrian was rather rude to him. So be as nice to Mr Ringworm as you can.'

Appleby failed to take this injunction kindly, but refrained from revealing the fact. Lady Osprey rang a bell, and Bagot answered it so promptly that it was difficult to believe he hadn't been listening at the door. Had he in fact been committing this improbable impropriety, Appleby reflected, he would have learnt little that he didn't already know.

Detective-Inspector Ringwood had established himself – by this time with a considerable entourage – in the Music Saloon.

The Music Saloon was much the largest and grandest room in Clusters. Except when the Ospreys gave a ball (which was about once in a generation) hardly anybody ever entered except persons armed with ladders and mops and vacuum cleaners. The lofty ceiling dripped enormous chandeliers; vistas of equally enormous mirrors suggested Versailles; at regular intervals between these rose Corinthian columns which, being unfortunately too plump even for their considerable height, were evocative less of Greece than of Pharaonic Egypt. There was a chimneypiece so elaborately (if inappropriately) besculptured with mermaids and tritons that it invariably formed the frontispiece of every book about chimneypieces to be published. There was also, in a rather deep recess between two of the wodgy columns, the celebrated *trompe-l'oeil* door. Visitors were indeed sometimes admitted to the Saloon to take a peep at this. The door had a harp perched against it, but the point a conducting Lord Osprey had to make was, of course, that the harp wasn't a real harp nor the door a real door; what one was looking at was nothing but paint skilfully applied to canvas. The late peer had been fond of explaining that the dodge had been copied at the Duke of Devonshire's Chatsworth although there were books absurdly asserting that the borrowing had been the other way round.

The Music Saloon was also provided with a large platform for an orchestra, and it was on this that Ringwood – who, Appleby judged, must have a whimsical streak in him – had located the small assemblage of officers, male and female, which now, it is claimed, constitute the Murder Squad in all properly developed English constabularies. These weren't at all *trompe-l'oeil*: there they solidly were, complete with wireless telephones, electric typewriters, cameras and the computers that have become so indispensable in the fight against crime.

Appleby took this in respectfully enough, but as he shook hands with the Detective-Inspector he murmured something about finding somewhere for a quiet talk.

'We'll go to the library, Sir John,' Ringwood said. 'You'll want to view the body.'

Appleby, in fact, didn't want to view the body. He had viewed plenty of bodies in his time and had no inclination to add that of the late Lord Osprey to the list.

'I think not,' he said. 'If the thing came to a murder trial, and it became known that I'd had a sniff at the corpse, I might find myself under subpoena as a witness for the defence, or something of that kind. It wouldn't do, Mr Ringwood. It wouldn't do at all.'

'I'll just ring through to the men in the library, sir.' Ringwood was by now fully aware of his distinguished colleague's instinct for evasive action. 'If the photographers have finished the job, the corpse may already have been taken away to our mortuary. You wouldn't mind having a look at the room itself?'

'Not in the least. As it happens, I was in it a few days ago, drinking sherry. But I didn't take much account of it. The only thing I remember is a strong impression that the Ospreys as a family have seldom been very bookishly inclined. So telephone away.'

And Ringwood telephoned – not without betraying some satisfaction in the up-to-date contraption enabling him to do so. Then he turned back to Appleby.

‘As I thought,’ he said. ‘Taken away ten minutes ago. The *corpus delicti*, as they say. I suppose it may have to be brought back later, to some sort of family vault or mausoleum. You’d expect an outfit like Clusters to run to something of that kind.’

‘No doubt that’s so.’ Appleby rather approved of Ringwood’s thus reaching for a more familiar note. ‘It’s only the rude forefathers of the hamlet who are likely to be buried in Mr Brackley’s churchyard. Not that the little church doesn’t run to a few storied urns – and even animated busts. But not, I think, to capacious tombs. No doubt Clusters has, as you suggest, its own provision of that sort of thing on or near the premises. Bagot will know. And I have a feeling that Bagot knows a good deal.’

So the men made their way to the library, amiably conversing as they covered the considerable distance this entailed. They found a couple of constables still on guard there. They looked at some coagulated blood on a rug. They looked round the large apartment as a whole. Appleby did his best to bring a fresh eye to the job, but was for the moment only confirmed in his impression that through a good many generations the pleasures of scholarship had eluded the Ospreys. And Ringwood, for his part, seemed positively depressed by the place.

‘What you might call uncommunicative, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘A necessary adjunct of what they term a stately home. But not really loved by anybody.’

‘The window at the end there has a curious view. A narrow terrace and then what they call the moat. Slightly Venetian in effect, you might say. It might be some magnifico’s water-gate.’ Appleby paused on this remark, frowning as if displeased at its inconsequence. ‘Is there any notion yet of approximately when the wretched man was killed?’

‘The doctor’s first impression is very late last night – even, perhaps, in the small hours. He says the top forensic man who’s now on his way to us may come out with something more confident and definite. But he added that the fellow is paid to do just that.’

‘I see.’ Appleby was non-committal before this slightly unseemly scepticism. ‘What about the weapon?’

‘Probably quite a sizeable affair, he says. Not all that sharp, but distinctly up to its job. My men have carried out a pretty thorough search already, and have found nothing. The killer must have carried it away with him. Perhaps he chucked it in the moat. I don’t envy the fellows who’ll have to hunt there. About as mucky a job as you could imagine.’

‘Yes, indeed.’ Appleby glanced round the room. ‘What about the space behind all those rows of books?’

‘Those, of course. I’ll have every volume shoved hard back to the panel behind it.’

‘That for a start.’ Appleby was silent for a moment. ‘It might be better to have them out shelf by shelf. If you have the man-power, that’s to say.’

‘Of course I have the man-power, and I’ll do as you suggest.’ If Ringwood was offended by this virtual instruction, he didn’t show it.

‘You know, it’s odd what one sometimes doesn’t see. Did you ever read a yarn by Edgar Allan Poe called *The Purloined Letter*?’

‘I can’t say I have, Sir John.’

‘It turns on the notion that when one is hunting for what one believes to have been *concealed* one tends to stare straight through what has *not* been concealed. The letter

there under the searchers' noses, stuck – if I remember correctly – “in a trumpery filigree card-rack”.

‘You couldn’t very well stick a sizeable dagger or the like in a card-rack.’

‘What about those trophies, Mr Ringwood?’

‘Trophies, Sir John?’ If the word conveyed anything to the Detective-Inspector, it was perhaps to be applied to cups or mugs or jugs handed out at the close of an athletic occasion.

‘The name is given, I think, to the sort of large-scale decorative arrangement of weapons and armour you see there on either side of the chimneypiece. Spears from the Zulu wars, the helmets of Roman legionaries dug out of the clay, dandified stiletos from these *seicent* muskets once discharged against the armies of Napoleon, bayonets and hand-grenades from Flanders: the lot. And all radiating in a symmetrical design from a hub purporting to be nothing less than the shield of a Greek hoplite or a Japanese samurai. The idea is that your ancestors have been a martial crowd ever since they tumbled out of Noah’s ark. And disposed as they are here in a library, the weapons assert that an aristocrat has better things to do than learn his ABC.’

It is to the credit of Detective-Inspector Ringwood that he listened to this unusual flood of eloquence on Sir John Appleby’s part with attention and respect.

‘So you think,’ he asked, ‘that our murderer simply snatched one of those museum pieces from the wall, went to work with it, and then simply put it back in place again?’

‘It’s just a possibility, Mr Ringwood.’

‘And if we take down the whole lot we’ll find freshly congealed blood on one weapon or another?’

‘That would possibly be so. The blood group would then be determined: all that. And what else would follow?’

‘Quite a lot.’ Ringwood spoke slowly, like a man finding his way on unfamiliar ground. ‘The murder of Lord Osprey becomes unpremeditated, and a matter of imaginative resource and quick thinking as well. There’s also a kind of gambling element in it or – or something almost taunting, crying “Catch me if you can”.’

‘Just that.’ John Appleby knew how to be briskly approving. ‘It couldn’t be better put, Mr Ringwood. And if we’re right, if we find Osprey’s blood on a blade, we have something like a psychological sketch of the man – the man or woman – who wielded it.’

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