

At two o'clock on the afternoon of Thursday the nineteenth of March, Appleyard College was cold, silent and smelling of roast mutton and cabbage. The boarders' midday dinner was just over, the maids off duty. Afternoon classes had not yet begun. Dora Lumley lay on her bed sucking her eternal peppermints and Mademoiselle, seated at a window overlooking the front drive, was re-reading a letter from Irma received in this morning's mail.

The Lodge, Lake View.

Dearest Dianne,

In haste - Mrs C. and I up to our eyes in tissue paper - can't find a pen. Mrs C. says why isn't the lovely French lady here to show her how to fold the dresses? This is to tell you the WONDERFUL news - my darling parents arrive from India this week. I am going to Melbourne to wait for them

in our suite at the Menzies Hotel!! It all feels like the end of a long long storey and now suddenly it is the LAST chapter and nothing more to read. So dearest Dianne I will be calling in at the College on my way to the station probably Thursday afternoon - my last chance to say good-bye to you - and the dear girls - it makes my heart ache to think of them still there at school - and of course Minnie and Tom but I hope NOT Mrs A. if it can possibly be AVOIDED! Oh, what a hateful thing to say but the thought of having to talk to her is MISERY! Dianne I haven't had a chance to buy your wedding present - Manassa's Store has nothing but boots and jam darling and tin billy cans - so please accept my emmerald bracelet with my love - the one my Grandmother in Brazil gave me the one I told you about with the green parrot - remember? anyway now dead so she won't know or mind. Mrs C. wants to know about the blue chiffon you used to like I must go.

Love Irma.

P.S. - I shall come straight up to your room when I arrive - or to the schoolroom if you are in class whether Mrs A. approves or not.

Mademoiselle's was the first of several heads at several windows to see Hussey's cab coming up the drive. From it alighted Irma in a scarlet cloak and a little toque of scarlet feathers blowing this way and that. The Headmistress at her desk downstairs had seen her too and to Mademoiselle's amazement - such a lapse of decorum was unknown at the College - had herself appeared at the hall door before

the governess was half way down the staircase, and was sweeping the visitor into the study on a chill wave of formal greeting.

On the first floor landing one of the statues was permitted on dull afternoons to cast a feeble light. Now Dora Lumley came shuffling out of the shadows. 'Mam'selle! Are you ready? We shall be late for the gymnasium class.'

'That hateful gymnasium! I am coming down now.'

'The girls are so seldom allowed in the fresh air now-days - surely you agree they need exercise?'

'Exercise! You mean those ridiculous tortures with bars and dumb-bells? At their age young girls should be strolling under the trees in light summer dresses with a young man's arm around every waist.'

Dora Lumley was too deeply shocked to reply.

Irma Leopold's visit as far as Mrs Appleyard was concerned could hardly have been worse timed. Only this morning the Headmistress had received a highly disturbing letter from Mr Leopold, written immediately on his arrival in Sydney, and demanding a new and fuller inquiry on events leading up to the picnic. 'Not only on behalf of my own daughter, miraculously spared, but for those unfortunate parents who have still learned nothing of their children's fate.' There was mention of a top-rank detective being brought out from Scotland Yard at Mr Leopold's expense and other looming horrors impossible to thrust aside.

Somehow, to Irma's surprise, the study was a good deal smaller than she had remembered. Otherwise nothing had changed. There was the same remembered smell of beeswax and fresh ink. The black marble clock on the mantelpiece

ticked as loudly as ever. There was an endless moment of silence as Mrs Appleyard seated herself at her desk and the visitor by sheer force of habit dropped a perfunctory curtsy. The cameo brooch on the silk upholstered bosom rose and fell to the old inexorable rhythm.

'Be seated, Irma. I hear you are completely restored to health.'

'Thank you, Mrs Appleyard. I am perfectly well now.'

'And yet you still recollect nothing of your experiences at the Hanging Rock?'

'Nothing. Doctor McKenzie told me again only yesterday that I may never remember anything after we had begun to walk towards the upper slopes.'

'Unfortunate. Very. For everyone concerned.'

'You need hardly tell me that Mrs Appleyard.'

'I understand you are leaving for Europe shortly?'

'In a few days I hope. My parents think it is a good idea to get away from Australia for a time.'

'I see. To be frank with you, Irma, I regret that your parents didn't think fit for you to complete your education at Appleyard College before embarking on a purely social life abroad.'

'I am seventeen Mrs Appleyard. Old enough to learn something of the world.'

'If I may say so, now that you are no longer under my care, your teachers were continually complaining to me of your lack of application. Even a girl with your expectations should be able to spell.' The words were hardly out of her mouth before she realized that she had made a strategic blunder. It was above all things necessary not to further

USE with Silence USE
antagonize the wealthy Leopolds. Money is power. Money is strength and safety. Even silence has to be paid for. The girl had gone alarmingly white in the face. 'Spelling? Would spelling have saved me from whatever it was that happened on the day of the Picnic?' The little gloved hand came down hard on the top of the desk. 'Let me tell you this, Mrs Appleyard: anything of the slightest importance that I learned here at the College I learned from Miranda.'

'It is a pity,' the Headmistress said, 'that you did not acquire something of Miranda's admirable self-control.' With an effort of her own will that contracted every nerve and muscle in her body she managed to rise from her chair and enquire, quite graciously, if Irma would care to spend tonight in her old room, on the way to Melbourne?

'Thank you, no. Mr Hussey is waiting down there in the drive. But I should like to see the girls and Mademoiselle before I go.'

'By all means! Mademoiselle and Miss Lumley will be taking the class in the gymnasium. For once I think discipline may be relaxed. It is irregular but you may go in and say good-bye. Tell Mademoiselle you have my permission.'

A glacial handshake was exchanged as Irma left for the last time the room where she had so often stood - long, long ago, as a schoolgirl - awaiting commands and reprimands at the Headmistress's pleasure. She was no longer afraid of the woman behind the closed door, whose hand, seized with an uncontrollable tremor, reached for the bottle of cognac under the desk.

Minnie ambushed in the shadowy regions behind the green baize door came running towards her with open

arms. 'Miss Irma, dear. Tom told me you was in there. Let me look at you . . . My! a real grown-up young lady!'

Irma bent and kissed the warm soft neck reeking of cheap scent. 'Dear Minnie. It's so good to see you.'

'And you, Miss. Is it true what we hear that you're not coming back to us after Easter?'

'Quite true. I've only called in today to say good-bye to you all.' The housemaid sighed. 'I don't blame you, neither. Sorry as we all are to be losing you. You've no idea what it's like here these days.'

'I believe you,' Irma said, glancing about her at the gloomy hall which Mr Whitehead's late crimson dahlias in brass vases failed to lighten. Minnie had lowered her voice to a whisper. 'Talk about rules and regulations! The boarders aren't hardly let open their mouths out of school hours! Well, thank Heaven me and Tom are out of it in a few days' time.'

'Oh, Minnie, I am so glad - you're going to be married?'

'Easter Monday. Same day as Mam'selle. I told her I reckoned Saint Valentine had pulled it off for both of us and she says, quite serious: "Minnie, you may be right." Saint Valentine is the patron saint of lovers.'

The gymnasium, commonly known to the boarders as the Chamber of Horrors, was a long narrow room in the West wing, lit only by a row of barred skylights, and designed by the original owner for Heaven knows what domestic purposes: possibly the storage of extra foodstuffs, or unwanted furniture. Now on its bare limewashed walls various instruments for the promotion of female health and beauty had been set out, as well as a rope ladder suspended

The gym
from the ceiling, a pair of metal rings and parallel bars. In one corner stood a padded horizontal board fitted with leather straps, on which the child Sara, continually in trouble for stooping, was to pass the gymnasium hour this afternoon. A pair of iron dumb-bells which only Tom had enough muscle to lift, weights for balancing on tender female skulls and piles of heavy Indian clubs, proclaimed Authority's high-handed disregard of Nature's basic laws.

At one end of the room, on a platform raised a few feet above floor level, Miss Lumley and Mademoiselle were already on duty; the former engaged on looking out for minor misdemeanours below, the latter seated at the upright piano hammering out the 'March of the Men of Harlech'. *One two, one two, one two.* Three rows of girls in black serge bloomers, black cotton stockings and white rubber-soled canvas shoes listlessly dipped and rose in time to the martial strains. For Mademoiselle, the Gymnasium class was a recurring penance. Presently, when it was time for a five-minute break, she would give herself the pleasure of announcing that Irma Leopold was actually here in the building, and would shortly be coming to the gymnasium to say good-bye. *One two, one two, one two . . .* it was possible, she thought, dreaming and hammering, that they already knew on the College grapevine. *One two, one two . . .* 'Fanny,' she said, taking her hands off the keys for a moment, 'you are badly out of step. Pay attention to the music, please!'

'Take an order mark, Fanny,' Miss Lumley muttered, scribbling in her little book. The languid physical movements of arms and legs belied the expression of the fourteen pairs

what is the rum?
of eyes, sliding from side to side. *One - two, one - two,* alert and sly as the eyes of Normandy hares in their barred wooden cages. *One two, one two, one two, one two . . .* the monotonous thumping was inhuman, almost unendurable.

The door of the gymnasium was opening, very slowly, as if the person outside were reluctant to enter. Every head in the room turned as the 'Men of Harlech' halted in the middle of a bar. Mademoiselle rose smiling beside the piano and Irma Leopold, a radiant little figure in a scarlet cloak, stood on the threshold. 'Come in Irma! Comme c'est une bonne surprise! Mes enfants, for ten minutes you may talk as you please. Voilà, the class is dismissed!' Irma, who had taken a few steps towards the centre of the room, now paused uncertainly and smiled back.

There were no answering smiles, no hum of excited greeting. In silence the ranks broke to the shuffling of rubber-soled feet on the sawdust floor. Sick at heart, the governess looked down at the upturned faces below. Not one was looking at the girl in the scarlet cloak. Fourteen pairs of eyes fixed on something behind her, through and beyond the whitewashed walls. *It is the glazed inward stare of people who walk in their sleep.* Oh, dear Heaven, what do these unhappy children see that I do not? So the communal vision unfolds before them and Mademoiselle dare not pierce the taut gossamer veil by a spoken word.

dream
They see the walls of the gymnasium fading into an exquisite transparency, the ceiling opening up like a flower into the brilliant sky above the Hanging Rock. The shadow of the Rock is flowing, luminous as water, across the shimmering plain and they are at the picnic, sitting on the warm

dream / nightmare like

music = harmony + form? which is now broken

mysterious passage.

miranda

dry grass under the gum trees. Lunch is set out by the creek. They see the picnic basket and another Mademoiselle - gay in a shady hat - is handing Miranda a knife to cut the heart-shaped cake. They see Marion Quade, with a sandwich in one hand and a pencil in the other, and Miss McCraw, forgetting to eat, propped against a tree in her puce pelisse. They hear Miranda proposing the health of Saint Valentine; magpies and the tinkle of falling water. Another Irma in white muslin, shaking out her curls and laughing at Miranda washing out cups at the creek . . . Miranda, hatless with shining yellow hair. A picnic was no fun without Miranda . . . Always Miranda, coming and going in the dazzling light. Like a rainbow . . . Oh, Miranda, Marion, where have you gone . . . ? The shadow of the Rock has grown darker and longer. They sit rooted to the ground and cannot move. The dreadful shape is a living monster lumbering towards them across the plain, scattering rocks and boulders. So near now, they can see the cracks and hollows where the lost girls lie rotting in a filthy cave. A junior, remembering how the Bible says the bodies of dead people are filled with crawling worms, is violently sick on the sawdust floor. Someone knocks over a wooden stool and Edith screams out loud. Mademoiselle, recognizing the hyena call of hysteria, walks calmly to the edge of the dais with madly thumping heart. 'Edith! Stop that horrible noise! Blanche! Juliana! Be silent! All of you be silent!' Too late; the light voice of authority goes unheard as the smouldering passion long-banked down under the weight of grey disciplines and secret fears bursts into flames.

psycho impact on event!

On the lid of the piano stood a small brass gong, normally struck for silence and order. Mademoiselle struck at it now, with all the force of her slender arm. The junior governess had retreated behind the music stool. 'It's no use, Mam'selle. They won't take any notice of the gong or anything else. The class is quite out of hand.'

'Try to get out of the room by the side door without them seeing you and bring the Head. This is serious.'

The junior governess sneered: 'You're afraid, aren't you?'

'Yes, Miss Lumley. I am very much afraid.'

Above a sea of thrusting heads and shoulders where Irma stood hemmed in by the laughing sobbing girls, a tuft of scarlet feathers trembled, rising and falling like a wounded bird. The voice of evil cackled as the tumult grew. Years later, when Madame Montpelier was telling her grandchildren the strange tale of panic in an Australian schoolroom - fifty years ago, mes enfants, but I dream of it still - the scene had taken on the dimensions of a nightmare. Grandmère was no doubt confusing it with one of those villainous old prints of the French Revolution that had so terrified her as a little girl. She recalled for them the mad black bloomers, the instruments of torture in the gymnasium, the hysterical schoolgirls with faces distorted by passion, the streaming locks and clawlike hands. 'Every moment I thought: they will lose control and tear her to pieces. Revenge, senseless, cruel revenge. That is what they wanted . . . I can see it all now. Revenge on that beautiful little creature who was the innocent cause of so much suffering . . .' Now on a pleasant March afternoon in the

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year nineteen hundred, it was a hideous reality to be faced and somehow dealt with single-handed by the young French governess Dianne de Poitiers. Gathering up her wide silk skirts she took a flying leap from the dais and was hurrying towards the milling group when something warned her to walk sedately with head held high.

Meanwhile, Irma, limp and utterly bewildered, was near suffocation. Fastidious Irma, who deplored all female odours and protested that she could smell Miss Lumley's peppermint-laden presence in the classroom six feet away, was inexplicably hemmed in by angry faces enlarged in hateful proximity to her own. Fanny's little snub nose hugely out of focus and sniffing like a terrier with an exposure of bristling hairs. A cavernous mouth agape on a gold-stopped tooth – that must be Juliana – the moist tip of a drooling tongue. Their warm sour breath came and went on her cheeks. Heated bodies pressed on her sensitive breasts. She cried out in fear and tried in vain to push them away. A disembodied moonface rose up somewhere in the background. 'Edith. You!'

'Yes, ducky. It's me.' In the novel role of ringleader Edith was beside herself, smugly wagging a stumpy forefinger. 'Come on, Irma – tell us. We've waited long enough.' There was a nudging and muttering. 'Edith's right. Tell us, Irma . . . Tell us.'

'What can I tell you? Have you all gone crazy?'

'The Hanging Rock,' Edith said, pushing to the front. 'We want you to tell us what happened up there to Miranda and Marion Quade.' The more silent of the New Zealand sisters, rarely articulate, added loudly, 'Nobody in this

rat-hole ever tells us anything!' Other voices joined in: 'Miranda! Marion Quade! Where are they?'

'I can't tell you. I don't know.'

Suddenly possessed of a power that drove her slim body between the closed ranks like a wedge, Mademoiselle was standing beside her, holding Irma's arm. She cried in her light little French voice, 'Imbeciles! Have you no brains? No hearts? How can la pauvre Irma tell us something she does not know?'

'She knows all right only she won't tell.' Blanche's doll's face was an angry red under the tousled curls. 'Irma likes to have grown-up secrets. She always did.'

Edith's great head was nodding like a Mandarin's. 'Then I'll tell you if she won't. Listen all of you! They're dead . . . dead. Miranda and Marion and Miss McCraw. All dead as doornails in a nasty old cave full of bats on the Hanging Rock.'

'Edith Horton! You are a liar and a fool.' Mademoiselle's hand had come down smartly on Edith's cheek. 'Holy Mother of God.' The Frenchwoman was praying out loud. Rosamund, who had taken no part in all this, was praying too. To Saint Valentine. He was the only Saint she was acquainted with, and so quite rightly she prayed to him. Miranda had loved Saint Valentine. Miranda believed in the power of love over everything. 'Saint Valentine. I don't know how to pray to you properly . . . dear Saint Valentine make them leave Irma alone and love one another for Miranda's sake.'

Not often, surely, is the good Saint Valentine – traditionally concerned with the lesser frivolities of romantic

love – offered a prayer of such innocent urgency. It seems only fair that he should be credited with its speedy and practical answer: a smiling messenger from Heaven in the guise of Irish Tom, open mouthed and gloriously solid and masculine at the gymnasium door. Dear kindly toothless Tom fresh from a visit to the dentist at Woodend and overjoyed, despite his aching jaws, to see the poor young creatures having a bit of a lark for once in a way. Tom, grinning respectfully at Mademoiselle and waiting for a suitable interlude in the larks (whatever they can be) to ease off, so that he can deliver Ben Hussey's message to Miss Irma.

*Irma's this
big writing*
The arrival of Tom caused a moment of distraction and turning of heads, in which Irma shook herself free; Rosamund rose from her knees, Edith pressed a hand to her burning cheek. The messenger presented Mr Hussey's compliments, and if Miss Leopold was set on catching the Melbourne Express she had best come this minute; adding as a personal postscript, 'And good luck to you Miss from meself and all in the kitchen.' It was all over, as simply and quickly as that, with the girls falling back in the old orderly manner to let Irma pass between them and Mademoiselle kissing her lightly on the cheek. 'You will find your parasol hanging up in the hall, ma chérie – au revoir, we shall meet again.' (Ah, but never... never again, my little dove.)

There was a perfunctory murmuring of farewell as they watched her walking with the old remembered grace towards the gymnasium door. Here, filled with an infinite compassion for sorrows unguessed at and forever unexplained, she turned, waved a little gloved hand and wanly

smiled. So Irma Leopold passed from Appleyard College and out of their lives.

Mademoiselle was consulting her watch. 'We are late this afternoon, girls.' The gymnasium, always poorly lit, was rapidly darkening. 'Go at once to your rooms and change those ugly bloomers to something pretty for supper tonight.'

'Can I wear my pink?' Edith wanted to know. The governess looked up sharply.

'You may wear what you like.' Only Rosamund lingered.

'Shall I help you tidy the room Mam'selle?'

'No, thank you, Rosamund, I have a migraine and would like to be alone for a little while.' The door closed on the empty room. It was only now that she remembered that Dora Lumley had never come back with the Head.

It is no easy matter to emerge with dignity from a crouching position in a narrow cupboard with one eye glued to the keyhole. Something pretty indeed! Dora Lumley, who now thought it prudent to step out from safe asylum, could hardly believe her ears.

'So! The brave little toad has come out of its hole!' A trickle of saliva moistened Dora Lumley's dry lips. 'You are insolent, Mam'selle!' Dianne, meticulously putting away her music, tossed the junior governess a contemptuous glance. 'I might have guessed! You made no attempt to give my message to the Head?'

'It was too late! Somebody would have seen me... It seemed better to stay here until it was over.'

'In the cupboard? Oh, the wise little toad!'

'Well, why not? The girls were making a disgraceful exhibition of themselves. There was nothing I could do.'

'You had better do something now and help me put some order into this horrible room. I don't wish that the servants notice anything unusual tomorrow morning.'

'The point is, Mam'selle, what are we going to tell Mrs Appleyard?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'You heard me! Exactly nothing.'

'You astound me! If I had my way they should be whipped.'

'There is a word in the French language that fits you à merveille, Dora Lumley. Malheureusement, decent people do not use it.'

The sallow cheeks flushed. 'How dare you speak to me like that! How dare you! I shall inform Mrs Appleyard myself of these disgraceful goings on. This very night.'

Dianne de Poitiers had picked up an Indian club from the floor. 'You see this? I have the wrists exceptionally strong, Miss Lumley. Unless you give me a promise, before you leave this room, that you will not tell one little word of what happened here this afternoon . . . I will hit you with it very hard indeed. And nobody would suspect the French governess. You understand what I say?'

'You are not fit to be in authority over innocent young girls.'

'I agree. I was brought up expecting something much more entertaining. Alors! C'est la vie. You promise?'

Dora Lumley, looking desperately towards the closed door, decided the necessary dash was too much for her fallen arches and heaving chest.

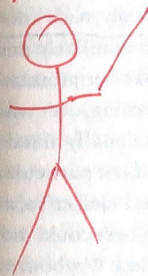
The Frenchwoman was idly twirling the Indian club. 'I am perfectly serious Miss Lumley. Though I don't intend to give you my reasons.'

'I promise,' gasped the other, now trembling and marble white as Mademoiselle calmly replaced the club on top of the pile. 'Mercy on us! What's that strange sound?'

From the far corner of the room now almost in darkness came a single rasping cry. Miss Lumley, under the stress of a most unpleasant afternoon, had forgotten to unfasten the leather straps that held the child Sara rigid on the horizontal board.

Mademoiselle

Mrs Lumley



vs



???

significance