

*authorial voice*

Whether the events just related were eventually made known to Mrs Appleyard can only be surmised. It is unlikely under the circumstances that Dora Lumley broke her promise of silence to Mademoiselle. At supper that evening, over which the Headmistress presided as she occasionally liked to do, the boarders were quiet and orderly, if not particularly hungry. A little desultory conversation was indulged in, and to all appearances as far as Dianne de Poitiers could judge nothing special was amiss apart from Sara Waybourne's absence with a migraine and Edith Horton complaining to Miss Lumley of a touch of neuralgia in the right cheek. Edith supposed she must have been sitting in a draught in the gymnasium. 'The gymnasium can be a very draughty room,' put in Mademoiselle from her end of the table.

The Headmistress, gloomily attacking a lamb cutlet at the opposite end, might have been engaged in expertly

dismembering a man-eating shark. Actually she had far more important fish to fry, the cutlet being no more than an outward symbol of inner conflict concerning the two letters, one from Mr Leopold and one from Miranda's father, still unanswered on her desk. However, she felt it was necessary for purposes of morale to keep the conversational ball rolling and forced herself to enquire of Rosamund, on her right hand, whether Irma Leopold was travelling to England by the Orient or P. & O. Line?

'I don't know, Mrs Appleyard. Irma stayed such a very short while this afternoon we hardly spoke to her.'

'My sister and I thought she looked rather pale and tired,' piped up the more articulate of the New Zealand pair.

'Indeed? Irma assured me herself she is in perfect health.' The gold padlock on the Head's heavy chain bracelet rattled against her plate. She felt herself start and fancied that the French governess at the other end of the table was looking at her in rather a peculiar way; noted the emeralds sparkling on her wrist and wondered if they were too large to be real. The sight of the jewels brought her thoughts back to the Leopolds, said to own a diamond mine in Brazil. She made a vicious stab at the cutlet and decided to sit up all night if necessary and get Tom to post both letters by the early mail on Friday morning.

Directly the meal was over and the Lord duly thanked for rice pudding and stewed plums, the Headmistress rose from the table, retired to the study, locked the door, and sat down, pen in hand, to her odious task. Most women, faced with a situation so dangerous, so entangled by a thousand side issues, would long ago have taken the simplest



way out. It would still have been possible, for instance, to plead urgent business in England and regrettably close down the College for good. Even to sell it for what it would bring while it remained a going concern. What was it called in business? 'Goodwill.' She ground her teeth. Precious little of that! The College was already being talked about as haunted and God knows what other mischievous nonsense. She might sit in her study behind closed doors for the better part of the day but she had eyes in her head, and ears. Only yesterday Cook had mentioned quite casually to Minnie, that 'they' were saying in the village that strange lights had been seen moving about the College grounds after dark.

In the past Mrs Appleyard and her Arthur had skated hand in hand over some remarkably thin ice. But never before had they been confronted by a situation impregnated with such personal and public disaster. To take a sword and plunge it through your enemy's vitals in broad daylight is a matter of physical courage, whereas the strangling of an invisible foe in the dark calls for quite other qualities. Tonight her whole being cried out for decisive action. Yes, but what kind of action? Not even Arthur could have worked out a plan of campaign while the damnable mystery at the Hanging Rock remained unsolved.

Before settling down to either of the letters, for the second time that day she took the Ledger from the bottom drawer and studied it closely. On present calculations it seemed probable that only about nine of the former twenty pupils could be expected to return when the new term began after Easter. Once again she ran down the list of names. The last to be crossed off was Horton, Edith, whose insuf-

ferably stupid mother had written only today announcing 'other plans' for her only daughter. A few months ago the news would have been only too welcome, and the school dunces easily replaced. Without Edith only nine other names were left, including Sara Waybourne. There was a bottle of cognac in the cupboard behind the desk. She unlocked it and half filled a glass. The thread of fiery spirit touched off a train of clear factual thinking. She sat down at the desk again and made a few notes in the impersonal copperplate hand that gave away nothing of the background character and iron will of the woman who held the pen. It was nearly three o'clock when at last the letters were stamped and sealed and the Headmistress dragged her weary body upstairs.

The following day passed without incident. There was a note in the post from Constable Bumphrey saying that he had nothing fresh to report, but one of the Russell Street men would like to see Mrs Appleyard some time next week when convenient. There were one or two points concerning matters of school discipline prior to the day of the Picnic which some of the parents had suggested should be elucidated . . . The weather was mild and fine and Mr Whitehead had requested a long-deferred day off, which he passed in reading the *Horticultural News* with his boots off. Tom went about his duties with his raging jaws tied up in a strip of Minnie's flannel petticoat, and Sara Waybourne, on special instructions from Mademoiselle, spent most of the day in bed. Otherwise, all was as usual.

Saturday was usually a day taken up with small domesticities and household tasks. The boarders did their



mending, wrote their letters home – their correspondence rigorously censored at Headquarters with the aid of a spirit lamp on the desk – played croquet or lawn tennis in fine weather or wandered aimlessly about the grounds. Tom was making heavy weather of a chat with Miss Buck beside the dahlia bed when the arrival of Hussey's cab at the front door set him free. There was no luggage to be taken off, however – only a seedy-looking young man of about his own age carrying a small seedy-looking bag who asked the driver to wait out of sight of the front windows until further instructions. Insignificant as he was in appearance, Tom at once recognized Miss Lumley's cocky little squirt of a brother. It was the first time for several months that Reg Lumley had paid his sister a visit at the College. Why in the name of Heaven had he chosen today? thought the Headmistress, watching him pulling on a pair of gloves and smoothing down a shabby overcoat preparatory to ringing the doorbell. Mrs Appleyard, who secretly prided herself on being able to get rid of an unwelcome visitor within three minutes – if necessary with all graciousness – had recognized Reg at the very first handshake as a sticker and stayer. In short, like his sister Dora, a fool and a bore. However, here he was, or rather his not very clean card with his business address in the township of Warragul. 'You may show Mr Lumley in, Alice, and tell him I am very much occupied.'

Reg Lumley, dank, pompous and half-baked, was a clerk in a Gippsland store, holding Views and Opinions on every subject under the sun from Female Education to the incompetence of the local Fire Brigade. Which of

them, thought the Headmistress, drumming impatient fingers on the desk, was he going to bring out today? And what could have brought him all the way from Warragul without warning? 'Good morning, Mr Lumley. I wish you had thought to write and tell us you intended calling today. I happen to be extremely busy this afternoon and so is your sister. Put your hat down on that chair if it's worrying you – and your umbrella.'

Reg, who had lain awake half the preceding night picturing himself delivering his ultimatum from a vertical position of authority, reluctantly seated himself on a chair with his umbrella between his knees. 'I may say I had no intention of calling today, Ma'am, until I received a telegram from my sister Dora late yesterday afternoon. It upset me considerably.'

'Indeed? May I ask why?'

'Because it confirmed my own opinion that Appleyard College is no longer a suitable place for my sister to be employed.'

'I am not concerned with matters of purely personal opinion. Have you any reason for this extraordinary statement?'

'Yes, I have. A number of reasons. In fact –' he was fumbling in his shiny pockets, 'I have a letter here – in case you were not in, you know. Shall I read it to you?'

'Thank you, no.' She looked up at the clock over her shoulder. 'If you can tell me what you have to say as briefly as possible.'

'Well, to begin with, it's all this publicity concerning the College. In my opinion, there has been far too much



publicity ever since this – er these – er unfortunate occurrences at the Hanging Rock.’

The Headmistress said acidly: ‘I don’t recall your sister being mentioned at any time in the Press . . .?’

‘Well, perhaps not my sister . . . but you know how people talk. You can’t open a paper nowadays without reading something about all this business. It’s not right, in my view, that a respectable young woman like Dora should be connected in any way whatsoever with crime and all that sort of thing.’ (If young Lumley’s heart could have been exposed to view like the poet’s it would have had graven upon it RESPECTABILITY. Publicity was hardly ever respectable in Reg’s opinion, unless you were somebody frightfully important like Lord Kitchener.)

‘Be careful how you express yourself, Mr Lumley. Not crime. Mystery if you like. A very different matter.’

‘All right then – Mystery. And I don’t like it, Mrs Appleyard. And nor does my sister.’

‘My solicitors are confident there will be a solution shortly, whatever you and your friends in Warragul may choose to think. Is that all you have to say?’

‘Only that Dora has told me she wishes to terminate her employment with you, as from today, Saturday, March the twenty-first. In point of fact I have a cab outside waiting to take her away; and if you will kindly tell her her brother is here, and have her pack her bags, the heavy luggage can be sent on later.’

At this juncture, as he later remarked to his sister in the train, the young man had noticed a strange mottled colour creeping up Mrs Appleyard’s neck under the net collar.

*Appleyard transition*

Her eyes, which he had never looked at before one way or the other, had gone round like a couple of marbles and appeared to be jumping out of her head. The next minute the old girl had let fly. ‘Phew, Dora, I wish you’d heard her! Luckily I had complete control of the situation and didn’t attempt to answer back.’

An impartial witness might have observed that the visitor himself had gone a curious shade of waxen green, and was visibly trembling.

‘Your sister is a pink-eyed imbecile, Mr Lumley. I should have given her notice before Easter, even without your interference. Fortunately, you have saved me the trouble. You understand, of course, that by her extraordinary behaviour she forfeits her salary for such a breach of contract?’

‘I’m not so sure about that. However, that can be adjusted later. And by the way, I understand she would like a written reference.’

‘I daresay she would! Although any reference from myself, with a grain of truth in it, would be unlikely to gain her a position!’ Her hand struck the blotting pad with such force that it nearly jumped off the desk, at which Mr Lumley jumped, too. ‘I am a truthful woman, Mr Lumley, and if you don’t know it already allow me to tell you that your sister is a bad-tempered, ignorant dunce and the sooner she gets out of this house the better.’ She pulled the bell rope at her elbow, rose from the desk. ‘If you will kindly wait in the hall, one of the maids will bring your sister and you may tell her to start packing her bag at once. If she hurries, you can catch the Melbourne Express.’



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"But Mrs Appleyard! I insist on you hearing me out! Surely you want to know my point of view about all this? I mean there are quite a number of people who -" The door of the study was somehow behind him. Hatless and trembling with suppressed fury Reg stood alone in the hall. Here, in an agony of frustrated oratory and punctured self-esteem, he was obliged to pass the time as best he could, on a high-backed mahogany chair, devising ways and means of retrieving his hat from the study without loss of face.

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Within an hour Dora Lumley had succeeded in compressing her meagre stock of clothing and few personal possessions - a Japanese fan, a birthday book, her mother's garnet ring - into a wicker dress basket, several bags and brown paper parcels, and was seated beside her brother in Hussey's cab. It is hardly necessary to add that the cab bowled down the drive under the scrutiny of numerous pairs of unseen eyes. Curiosity has its own peculiar means of expression; the spoken word assisted by raised eyebrows, nods, headshakings and the shrugging of shoulders. On the evening of Saturday, the twenty-first, curiosity at Appleyard College was at fever heat. Despite the restrictive rules of silence, a highly sensitized ear would have been aware of a ceaseless gnat-like buzzing on stairs and landings; the wordless hum of female curiosity aroused but as yet unsatisfied. Ever since Miss Lumley and her brother had been seen driving away together late in the afternoon the weird assortment of hastily packed belongings on the box seat had given rise to the wildest speculation. Was the junior governess actually leaving the College for good? And if so, why such haste? It was generally agreed that it was unlike

Miss Lumley to miss a chance of a spectacular farewell. The housemaid was implored to repeat what the brother had said on arrival and how long he was left stranded in the hall. And what Miss Lumley had said when informed by Alice that her brother was waiting below with a cab. All very mysterious and in its way serving as comic relief in an otherwise colourless day: Dora Lumley and her impossible brother having been long ago pigeonholed as figures of fun.

The only member of the household to show no interest in Miss Lumley's departure was Sara Waybourne, who had passed the afternoon in wandering about the grounds with a book. Struck by the child's increasing pallor, Mademoiselle made up her mind to 'take the bull by the tail' and ask Mrs Appleyard to send for Doctor McKenzie. Ever since the scene in the gymnasium Dianne had been conscious of a strange new strength. She was no longer afraid of Mrs Appleyard's individual wrath, now rendered impotent by the impersonal wrath of Heaven.

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There were only five more days left until Wednesday, when the College broke up for the Easter Vacation. After that, Appleyard College would be little more than a bad dream as she lay in her Louis' arms. Rosamund, glancing across the supper table, saw her sudden smile above a plate of Irish stew and rightly guessed her thoughts. Life at the College without Mam'selle's endearing presence would be unsupportable. She thought, 'Why am I here, with all these stupid children?' and decided to ask her parents to let her go home for good at Easter.

Not only Sara Waybourne, but Mrs Appleyard was in need of Doctor McKenzie's attention. She had lost a great



apple yard transition

deal of weight in the past few weeks and the full silk skirts hung loosely about her massive hips. The flaccid cheeks were sometimes pale and sunken, sometimes mottled a dull red and 'blown up' as Blanche whispered to Edith, 'Like a fish left too long in the sun.' The two girls giggled in the shadow of Aphrodite, watching their Headmistress slowly mounting the staircase from the hall. Halfway towards the first landing the Headmistress caught sight of Minnie coming up from the back stairs with a tray, nicely set out with a lace trimmed cloth and Japanese china. She enquired acidly, 'Have we an invalid in the house?'

Mam'selle is pragmatic

Minnie, unlike Cook and Alice, was never intimidated by Mrs Appleyard. 'It's Miss Sara's supper, Ma'am - Mam'selle asked me to slip up with something, seeing there's no homework for the young ladies of a Saturday night and the child's feeling poorly.'

The girl had just reached the door of Sara's room when Mrs Appleyard, retiring early to her vast bedroom directly above the study, called her back. 'Kindly tell Miss Sara not to put out her light until she has had a word with me.'

Sara was sitting up in bed with the gas turned very low, her heavy hair unbraided and falling about her narrow shoulders; and looking, Minnie thought, almost pretty, thanks to a fevered flush and dark glittering eyes. 'See, Miss, I've brought you a nice boiled egg on Mam'selle's special orders. The jelly and cream is something I pinched for you myself off Madam's dinner tray.' A thin arm shot out from under the coverlet. 'Take it away. I won't touch it.'

'Now, then, Miss Sara, that's real baby talk! A great girl of thirteen - isn't that right?'

'I don't know. Even my guardian doesn't know for certain. Sometimes I feel as if I was hundreds of years old.'

'You won't feel that way when you leave school and all the boys are after you - Miss - all you need is a bit of fun.'

'Fun!' repeated the child. 'Fun! Come over here. Close to the bed and I'll tell you something nobody at the college knows except Miranda, and she promised never never to tell. Minnie! I was brought up in an orphanage. Fun! Sometimes I dream about it even now, when I can't go to sleep. One day I told them I thought it would be fun to be a lady circus rider on a lovely white horse in a spangled dress. The matron was afraid I was going to run away and shaved my head. I bit her in the arm.'

'There, Miss. Don't cry.' The kind-hearted Minnie was horribly embarrassed. 'Look, lovey, I'll leave the tray here on the washstand in case you change your mind. Lor', that reminds me! Madam said to tell you not to turn out your light till she comes in to see you. Sure you won't try a bit of the jelly?'

'Never! Not if I was starving!' She turned her face to the wall.

In a second-class compartment of the Melbourne train Reg and Dora Lumley had talked without ceasing; the sister now and then dabbing at angry tears with interjections of 'Monstrous! Oh surely not! You don't say! How dare she!' as the wayside stations flew past in the gathering dusk.



Already the brother was planning ways and means of extracting the full term's salary, in Reg's opinion a matter of extreme urgency.

'Why, Dora, for all we know the old girl may be bankrupt any day – or getting that way.'

When the train drew in at Spencer Street Station it had been decided that Dora would accompany her brother back to Warragul, there to housekeep for three in the dilapidated cottage of an ageing aunt. 'In my opinion, Dora, you might do a great deal worse. After all, Aunt Lydia cannot live for ever.' On which inspiring note they stepped out of the train and boarded a tram to a respectable small hotel in a respectable city street. Dora was filled with admiration for her strongminded capable brother who had even engaged beforehand two cheap single rooms for the night, in the back wing. They were just in time for a late evening meal and after swallowing some cold mutton and strong tea the brother and sister retired exhausted to bed. About three o'clock in the morning an oil lamp, left alight too close to a blowing curtain on the wooden stairs, fell to the floor. The flames began licking up the shabby wallpaper and blistered paintwork. Curls of smoke poured unseen into the street from the staircase window. Within minutes the whole of the back wing was a roaring vault of fire.

Significance of this event?