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The Innocents

The cottage in which Rupert Coggenhoe had spent the last few years of his life and the first years of his widowhood was in Coombe Barton, in Devon, in the well-heeled southwest, so when a letter arrived at the Peaces' the next day postmarked Newton Abbot no alarm bells were rung. Coggenhoe, when he wished to communicate, had usually rung them, not written, having a writer's natural reluctance to put pen to paper when no financial return could be expected.

The envelope was a large one, and it was puffed out with something soft as well as with paper. When Felicity and Charlie remembered the closeness of Newton Abbot to Rupert's old home they looked at the address, but it was for them not for Coggenhoe, and it had been forwarded from their former post office in Headingley. They looked at each other quizzically, and then opened it. The soft part of the package turned out to be a pair of Y-front underpants and a short-sleeved vest. The paper part consisted of a letter on lined notepaper, which ran:

*Dear Felicity and your husband whose name I can't remember,
I enclose items of laundry which got put into my own draws and
not found until recently. I hope your father has not missed them we*

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were not speaking much in the last days. What happened was sad, but I'm sure there was faults and misunderstandings on both sides when you get to his age you sometimes do things you wouldn't have thought of doing when in your prime. Forget and forgive is my motto which some others here might follow but usually do not. The new people are about to move into the cottage and seem very nice. I'm sure things will turn out well in Yorkshire with you to look after him. I knew when I met you you were capable people, and youll need to be.

*Yours sincerely,
Madge Easton (Mrs)*

They looked at each other. Felicity fingered the two garments, which somehow looked pathetic as well as ridiculous.

'I thought vests like that went out with the collapse of the coal-mining industry,' said Charlie.

'What has gone on?' said Felicity urgently. 'We need to know.'

'I'd like to know,' conceded Charlie. He walked over to the window and looked at the wilderness of back garden. He had a grand vision of calling some gardening firm in, and having a beautiful expanse of lawn in a matter of hours. Somehow November didn't seem the time to have it done, though. He turned back to Felicity. 'Even if we knew what it was, that doesn't mean we could prevent it happening again. Your father is not wise, and he's not receptive to advice.'

'Especially not from people less than half his age,' said Felicity.

'He wouldn't take it from people twice his age,' said Charlie.

'I wish I could remember Madge Easton,' said Felicity, her face wrinkled with the effort. 'We were only there for the funeral, and we met so many people... She'd never have called me "capable" if she'd known me before I met you, would she?'

'We've changed each other,' said Charlie, with unusual

modesty. 'And you were always perfectly capable when you were away from your family. Your parents did tend to unnerve you, I'd admit. The first question is what use will your new capability be to keep your father in line?'

'No, it is: in what ways did he step out of line in Coombe Barton? What has he been up to, Charlie?' She looked down at the vest and underpants in her hands. 'We should put these away in the airing cupboard, or else throw them away. We can't return them to Dad without all sorts of questions being asked on both sides.'

'He can't have missed them,' agreed Charlie. 'And he could hardly ask about them if he had. Using the village ladies to do his laundry for him!' By the time Felicity returned from getting rid of the underwear Charlie had had time to re-read the letter. 'Cunning old bugger!' he said. 'It's obvious there was no question of a quick sale of his cottage and the new owners needing to move in. That was a lie. He took flight.'

'From something or other,' agreed Felicity. 'He'd become so unpopular he needed to move.'

'How do we find out? Ring Mrs Easton?'

But somehow they shrank from that. Checking up on so close a relative seemed distasteful – it was mixing Charlie's professional life too nearly with his private one. It seemed an invasion of Rupert's privacy, as well as treating him like a child – always the first thing to avoid with an ageing person. If he wanted to tell them what happened, he should be allowed to do it in his own time.

The nearest Felicity came to asking her father any of the vital questions was a few days later when he and she were walking companionably towards the shops, with Carola under protest in a pushchair, and her father was being greeted by several middle-aged-to-elderly women in the course of their progress along the main street of Slepton Edge.

'You are getting a little group around you,' said Felicity.

'Everyone is very kind,' Rupert replied, rather primly.

'It's just like at Coombe Barton. I still remember all those ladies at Mum's funeral. All with names like Doreen and Rose and Madge and Doris. Such dated names they seemed to have! I'm afraid if I met them again I wouldn't know them – wouldn't be able to distinguish Madge from Doris.'

'I sometimes found it difficult,' said Rupert, a touch of sourness mixing with the primness.

'I suppose you will keep in touch, will you? Ring them up now and then?'

'Good Lord, no. If I phoned one I'd have to phone the lot.' He saw the disapproval on his daughter's face. 'Perhaps I'll send a card at Christmas,' he added lamely.

Then he dived into Gregg's the bakers, and began choosing a selection of sticky buns and cakes. Felicity did not remember her father having a sweet tooth, so she concluded that the sugary treats would be fed to what she was beginning to call his new harem. There was no taking up the conversation again.

A day or two later her attention was distracted from that particular matter in hand. She was on her way home from Chris and Alison's with Charlie and Carola. Charlie had wanted to talk over a case with Chris: a woman whose son had Huntington's chorea, who was suspected of making an attempt on the boy's life. He wanted to discuss the matter with a friend rather than a police doctor: the nature of the disease, the likely length of life after it had shown itself, if he'd known or heard of any comparable cases, and what sort of sentence the killer had received.

'But I suspect it's one of those crimes where sentencing will be all over the place, because sympathy and principles are in conflict,' he said bleakly. Chris, in any case, in his brief time in general practice had never had or known of a case of that disease.

Charlie and Felicity were still talking over the rights and wrongs of the matter and concluding that a right solution simply did not exist, when their ten minute walk took them as always past an estate of new houses. The Hatton Homes estate started on an old road just above their own house in Walsh Street, but extended into two fields that had been sold to developers ten years before. The houses were built in a yellowish brick that was off-putting in its resemblance to vomit, and the design of the houses gave the impression that each room had been squeezed in at the minimum possible size, so that everyone must be living in each other's pockets. But as they passed the edge of the estate, they heard the sound of children singing. Children's singing should have something of the angelic in it, but this singing did not. They stopped, and it was some minutes before they could distinguish the words of what was a chant more than a song.

'Ban, 'Ban, nowhere man,
Put yourself in the garbage can.'

They looked at each other. The chant was repeated, then was varied with assorted jeers – the tone was unmistakable, but the words were unclear. Charlie thought he caught 'rubbish tip' and 'down the sewer'. Felicity said:

'I don't like this.'

'Nor do I.'

'Can't you do anything?'

'It's probably racial,' said Charlie. 'A black policeman off his own pitch is not the best person to intervene. I'll get on the phone when we get home. Using a mobile would amount to provocation.'

'We need to know who's being targeted. I'll go and see if I can get a house number.'

Charlie swallowed back an objection, and merely said: 'Stay well away, and look casual.' He turned and walked on slowly,

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Carola clutching his hand. He was relieved when Felicity caught up to them.

'All the streets have tree names,' she said. 'The street I went up curves, and is called Willow Crescent. The children seem to be outside a house ten up from the one I was standing by, which was number fifteen. So say around number thirty-five.'

'And the children?'

'Two older children – girls of about fourteen or fifteen. The others a boy of about twelve, then four or five girls of about the same age or younger.'

'Urchins?'

'Not so far as I could see. Clean and tidy, even well-dressed. I didn't stop long enough to price their trainers.'

'Good job you didn't. Did you get what they were shouting?'

'Not much more than we heard – that the poor bloody people in the house were human rubbish. But that chant—'

'Ban, 'Ban—'

'Yes. It's based on *The Tempest*: "Ban, Ban, Ca-Caliban, Has a new master – Get a new man."

'You must explain it some time. I suppose the kids are doing it at school.'

'Even the girls didn't look old enough to be doing GCSEs. And hardly any Shakespeare is being done lower down in schools these days.'

'Odd,' said Charlie. 'No sign of the residents?'

'Not a whisker. But I was a fair way away. What could they do? Lying low till the kids went away is pretty much their only option.'

When they got back home and Felicity was persuading Carola to bed, Charlie got on to his best contact in the Halifax force – a man called Peter Harridance: conscientious, thorough, a bit slow and cautious for Charlie's taste, but reliable.

'What have you got?' Felicity asked, when order and quiet

had descended on the small bedroom upstairs and she came back down to find Charlie just putting down the phone.

‘Well – not quite what we thought. A white couple called Norton, late sixties, recently gave up their own small independent bakery in the south – Lewes, he thought. They wanted to be near a daughter who’s a teacher in Bradford. They sold their house in Sussex for much more than they paid up here, and they were delighted and pleased to be in a house “where everything worked” they said. No trouble whatever until two or three weeks ago. Then suddenly children started gathering in the street outside the front of the house. Not children they recognised from the Hatton Estate. First there were shoutings and jeers, then chanting. Not surprisingly they were upset by the language and direction of the taunts. No one likes to be told they’re sink people, human garbage, and so on.’

‘And they called the police?’

‘Three days ago. That sort of thing isn’t a priority – no crime involved – and by the time a couple of PCs arrived the children had gone. Apparently they generally are gone by nine o’clock – bedtime, presumably.’

‘What did the police advise?’

‘That the Nortons try talking to the children, find out what’s bugging them, why they’ve got it in for people they don’t even know.’

‘I can’t see *that* doing much good,’ said Felicity tartly.

‘No, it’s not that impressive. But what would you advise?’

Felicity thought. Charlie often did this when she criticised police tactics.

‘I admit I can’t think of much. The same thing but done by a policeman, I suppose: old people would probably appear dim bunglers to these kids, whereas the police would be nonsense and know what they were doing.’

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‘Touching. But bring in the police and that would be giving the matter a sort of importance it hardly deserves – priority over burglary, drunken violence, domestics – could you justify that?’

And Felicity had to admit that she couldn’t.

It was two days later, when Charlie was just back from Leeds and changing out of his working clothes in the bedroom upstairs, that he saw the pack of children again. They must be the same children. They corresponded to Felicity’s description: tidy, well-dressed and scrubbed: not a mob of cheerful urchins, but something more menacing. They were going past the house, very visible in the street lights, not talking or giggling together as might be expected, but walking slightly apart, and silently, as if on a secret mission or a raid – which probably was how it had been presented to the younger children, to add further spice and excitement. As they passed the house each of them, as if at some invisible sign, took out masks – rubber masks from pockets, hand-held masks from under jerseys and jackets. Then they turned, still silent, into the Hatton Homes estate and soon passed from view.

Charlie ran downstairs and got on the phone to Peter Harridance, but got little joy.

‘Not a chance of getting anyone out there for the next hour or so, Charlie.’

‘Any objection if I go along and have a look?’

‘None at all. But Slepton is a small place. Everyone knows everyone else’s business, and you stand out. I bet you’re well known already as a Leeds copper, and at the sight of you they’ll melt away like snow in April.’

Charlie was pretty sure that Nick would be proved right, but the initial signs were encouraging. As he approached the turn-off that the children had taken he heard them giving raucous voice to a variation on their earlier chant.

‘Man, man, nowhere man,
Shove a pigstick up his arse,
And chuck him down the pan.’

This was succeeded by cries louder and more disciplined than any he had heard before. He turned up into the estate, but when he made the second turn into Willow Crescent he realised the noise had suddenly ceased, and all he saw were legs and bottoms disappearing around the corner at the far end of the Crescent.

He kept on his way, and stopped outside number thirty-five. Lights were on in the living room and in what was probably the kitchen at the back. No human form was visible. The main door was on the near side of the house, and it seemed to open into an unlit hallway. Charlie rang on the doorbell, then waited in utter silence. He bent down and opened the letter-box.

‘Mr Norton! Mrs Norton! I’m a policeman. Inspector Peace. I’d like to talk to you about the children please.’

The silence remained unbroken. He could imagine them cowering in the dark little hall. He tried a second time, with no better result. Then he turned and left the estate where everything was ‘new and worked’. Except the human relations, perhaps.

Once home he phoned Directory Enquiries and got the Nortons’ number. When he rang it, he was answered cautiously.

‘Er...yes?’

‘Mr Norton, my name is Peace. Inspector Peace. I was just round at your house—’

‘Oh yes, Mr Peace. Er, Inspector Peace. We didn’t want to open the door, in case there were still any children around, and they saw. Telephone is much better.’

‘Just as you like, Mr Norton. I’m not a Halifax policeman, by the way. I’m a Leeds one, but I’ve come to live fairly close to you, in Walsh Street. I’m interested in these children, and wonder why they’ve fixed on you and your wife for this...persecution, shall we call it?’

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‘It’s that all right! If only we knew why, Inspector, we might be able to make some sense of it. But we don’t know, just can’t fathom it. You can imagine how upset my wife is. We’d thought of this little place as ideal for our retirement. Now it’s like taking up residence in prison, I tell you.’

‘You’ve had no contact with these particular children before?’

‘None. We don’t recognise any of them.’

‘There’s nothing in your past that they could take exception to? Anything you’ve said that’s been reported?’

‘Good Lord, no. We’re not public figures, Inspector. There’s no reason why any reporter should get on to anything I’ve ever said. Anyway, what could it be about? And where could they have seen it, because we’re not from round here? I’m not even the sort of person who sounds off about the younger generation. There’s good and bad in every generation, that’s what I say.’

‘You’ve no criminal record?’

‘No, I haven’t. You’re thinking of paedophiles, aren’t you, and the one that was hounded to death in the north-east? No, there’s nothing like that, Inspector. It’s just...unbelievable. I tell you, we can’t stand much more of it. We’ve put the house on the market – tactfully, like: no boards up or anything. But if someone came to view, how could we *not* tell them about what’s happened and why we’re leaving? They’d have a real grievance if they moved here and the same thing happened. I tell you, we’re at our wits’ ends!’

And Charlie felt the same way, as far as offering any advice or comfort was concerned. He gave them his home phone number, said he’d keep as much of an eye as was possible on how things were going, but in his mind there hung over the whole matter an air of the bizarre, of something totally irrational. Or was he just failing to get into the minds of the children?

He was just slipping into his car next morning when he saw

Chris Carlson's car approaching from his home two streets away. The back seat was loaded with an easel and the equipment for a day's painting.

'I don't want to keep you from your art—' began Charlie.

'Sarky bugger.'

'Not at all. It's my kind of art. I just wondered what you know about these children who've been terrorising an elderly couple on the Hatton Estate.'

Chris Carlson frowned. Charlie had the impression he felt he was expected to know pretty well everything that happened in Slepton.

'Nothing at all. I've not even heard about it.'

'That's unusual for you.'

'Maybe it's because it's the estate. The people there tend to keep themselves to themselves. The younger ones go off to pubs and clubs on the local circuit, and the older ones don't seem to feel the need to go to the pubs here. So what's been going on?'

Charlie told him, and Chris Carlson's expression told of a mixture of interest and bewilderment.

'Three points that interest me,' Charlie ended up, 'are these. First, the Nortons don't recognise the children. That may be because the Nortons are new here, but it seems odd. Then, the children are very well organised by the elder ones. What I heard last night was disciplined chanting and disciplined shouting of abuse. And the third thing is just an oddity: the basis of the chanting seems to be some lines from *The Tempest*, according to Felicity.'

'Ah!' Light seemed to flood into Chris's eyes.

'Ban, 'Ban, Ca-Caliban...'

'Has a new master – Get a new man.'

'That's it. Where would they have come across that in today's schools?'

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'Try talking to Harvey Buckworth. He's a teacher. Came up to me with rather an interesting story the other night.'

'The night we were in the pub?'

'I think it may have been.'

'I picked out one of your "patients" as a schoolmaster right away.'

'Smartarse.'

'Not at all. Usually when I do that the "schoolmaster" turns out to be an SAS man in mufti. Where does this man teach?'

'That's the interesting thing. He's at Westowram High, a couple of miles down the road. It's where the kids from here go, and it has a very strong drama and stage tradition. Several kids from there have got parts on television – bit parts in police dramas, or long-term child parts in soaps. Harvey is part of the drama set-up, part of its great success. But he's worried.'

'What about?'

'I'd better let him tell you that, hadn't I? And perhaps get you a look at the class that's doing *The Tempest*. I'll arrange it. Harvey will be keen to talk to you. I'll phone you tonight.'

And raising his hand he went off to capture on canvas Bolton Abbey or Haworth moors or the main street of Heptonstall, happy as a sandboy with his life of fulfilment and liberation.