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The Rag-Doll

When Donald got back to his room later that evening after a bar meal in the hotel, the picture of Mrs Motion had been returned to its place on the dressing-table. He had not yet laid eyes on her in the flesh, nor had there been any sign of her husband when he got in. He was doing his best to blot the whole thing out of his consciousness. He went straight to bed, though without in his heart of hearts expecting to sleep.

But the unexpected was what happened: he was asleep almost before his head had touched the pillow.

If it could be called sleep. For immediately he was assailed by atrocious images, lascivious nightmares. They all concerned Mrs Motion; or it might be better to say that they consisted in a protracted assault on the part of Mrs Motion upon his body and his soul. But the fearful thing was that in these dreams Madeleine, his dear wife Madeleine, the love of his life, for whom he had

served twice seven years, or damn near it, was confused, confounded, with the hideous vamp, Mrs Motion! Mrs Motion would put her arms around him, kiss him, seduce him, and he had to succumb because he *knew* that she was really Madeleine. 'It is me,' she insisted. 'You know it is!' And Donald replied – meaning it, too – 'Yes, I know . . . I know your body.' They kissed passionately and Donald began pulling Mrs Motion's clothes off and making love to her standing up against a wall.

Then it seemed to the dreamer that he was awake and that Motion himself had come into the bedroom and was standing in front of the dressing-table watching all this going on. 'I told you that you two would be getting acquainted later on,' he observed smugly, smiling and nodding his head in approval. But Donald no longer had the heart to make love in these circumstances and he felt his sex turning to mush. 'Well, that's good,' said Mr Motion, 'because I've come to offer you a part in a pantomime, my dear.' Madeleine – for the woman was now clearly his wife again – was all eagerness and immediately lost every shred of interest in Donald as she turned her attention towards this meretricious impresario. It was true, too, that in real life Madeleine took part in amateur dramatics. Donald was at once in a frenzy of jealousy but he was completely paralysed and could do nothing to change matters. The dream faded and altered, and after a little it seemed to the advocate – he was really convinced of it – that Madeleine, now once more in the form of Mrs Motion, was performing fellatio upon him as he lay still paralysed, unable to move so much as his little finger, and that Motion was watching it all from just outside the bedroom door.

But at last the dreams ended and after that Donald had two or three hours of sound sleep. It was after nine when he awoke. However bad things have been at night they always seem better in the morning, and he was actually ready for his breakfast. He dressed, washed and shaved rapidly, saying to himself as he did so that he was no longer going to take all this lying down; he was going to take matters into his own hands and let the Motions know that they could not get away with just anything. Exactly what he was going to say he wasn't sure, but the occasion would tell him.

When he opened the door he nearly tripped over a tray. On the tray lay a plate with a couple of slices of burnt, leathery toast, a single portion of wrapped butter and a single individual marmalade; and a chipped Mickey Mouse mug of tea with a scum of milk on the surface, clearly stone-cold. This was too much. Donald purposely stood on the plate and kicked over the mug (after all, it was mere luck that he had looked down when he stepped out of the door) and, rage in his heart, stormed downstairs. But there was no-one about at all, not in the sitting room or the dining room or the kitchen; the house was as deserted as the *Marie Celeste*.

He managed to get a late breakfast in the hotel and then found a public telephone. With his heart in his mouth he dialled the number of the house in India Street. The answering machine was once more on; but this time the voice of Motion said only:

'This is no longer the residence of Donald Humble, Q.C.'

When he had laid down the receiver, Donald Humble, Q.C. held his head in his hands for a few moments, trem-

bling from head to foot. Then he set off walking wherever his feet chose to carry him.

By the time he returned to Tigh-na-Coille in the early afternoon he had made up his mind that the only thing to do was to call the police. This was no mere practical joke: he was convinced that Madeleine was in danger. What it all meant he couldn't even begin to put together. The disreputable Motions had somehow invaded the very fabric of his life like an insidious illness, but how or why it was impossible to imagine. He had no doubt at all that it was Motion's voice on the answering machine; but how could he have got to Edinburgh and back to put it there, in the time since Donald had left? At first he had thought the best course of action would be to drive back home at once to see if Madeleine was safe – but suppose she were not there? Suppose she should arrive here after he had set off and be delivered into the clutches of that corrupt couple?

No, no, he must at all costs get to the nearest police station at the earliest moment. How he would set about explaining the bizarre business so as to convey its real seriousness and moment, or even be believed, even be confident of convincing the police that he wasn't crazy . . . well, he would have to cross that bridge when he came to it.

But he had to get there fast.

Motion was standing at the front door of Tigh-na-Coille – dreadful to think that it was the very same house which had welcomed them so often and so warmly – puffing affectedly at a cheroot in the hazy afternoon sunshine.

'Ah, Mr Humble!' he exclaimed expansively, all his sardonic manner gone. 'Your wife arrived about an hour

ago. She was tired after the journey – said she was going to lie down and take a rest.’

‘Oh! – that’s wonderful!’ Donald’s heart leapt with joy and relief, the nightmare instantly dissolved. He positively beamed at the tasteless proprietor as he slipped past him to run eagerly up the stairs. He keeked through the door so as not to disturb Madeleine too soon: he wanted to sneak up and plant a little kiss on her cheek before she knew he was there. Yes, there she was under the duvet, her face turned away from him, her lovely rich brown hair – one of her very best features – spread a little over the pillow behind her. He tiptoed over, bent and pulled back the edge of the duvet to reveal the lovely soft cheek on which he was to plant the kiss, and . . . oh God, oh God, that ever this should be! . . . saw that what was lying in the bed was a life-size rag-doll.

It is impossible to convey adequately what must have been Donald’s feelings at that moment as, bending gently down to reunite himself lovingly with the wife whom he had feared the victim of sinister and nefarious wrongdoing, but who now appeared to be so unexpectedly and joyfully restored to him, he discovered in her place a hideous, mocking parody, a lifeless simulacrum whose dead eyes stared back at his with a blank gaze that nullified love and blasted hope; and found himself certain, beyond the possibility of error, that the hair glued wig-like to that gruesome skull had only hours before been the crowning glory of his wife’s deeply cherished living frame. Who can hope to render that experience with decency or discretion? No, to pry into the inner impressions of a sensate being at such a crisis would be a presumption which one could not hold justified by even the most pressing

imperative of realism.

Enough, then to observe that after gazing open-mouthed at that indecent dummy for some moments, frozen to the spot and held vice-like in the steely grip of those emotions which we have not dared to analyse, and after stretching out his hand to touch the hair and disturbing it enough to reveal at the back of the neck a split in the material through which oozed something which resembled dried-up turkey stuffing, Donald turned his back upon the hideous thing, threw into his bag those few items which he had unpacked the night before, and bolted down the stairs and out the front door as fast as his legs would carry him. As he did so mingled peels of mocking laughter – two, male and female – issued from the house: not from any one source but with a stereophonical effect, as if it were the house itself which had taken on the personalities of its detestable inmates and was laughing out loud with their common voice.

Donald Humble leapt into his car and drove off like the wind in the direction of Achnasheen. He had no idea where he was headed, his only thought was to get away and put a limitless distance between himself and the horrors behind him. But almost at once he had the impression that he was being followed. At first it was only a sixth sense that seemed to warn him, but after two or three miles he did indeed spy in his rear-view mirror, not so very far behind him, a black Range Rover which he now remembered having seen parked at the side of Tigh-na-Coille. Frantically he sought for a means to throw his pursuers off. Taking advantage of a slight bend which hid him from their view, he precipitately swung right into a side road which he didn't remember ever having noticed

before, although he had been familiar with the area for years.

The road climbed twisting into a high moorland beyond which lay heavily forested hills. After a mile or two he began to think that his ruse had been successful, until he reached a high point from which he could see the road winding up below him – and there was the Range Rover, perhaps closer behind him than it had ever been. He drove on, desperately searching for a haven, until the road entered thick pine woods. After half a mile he saw an opening on his left, an old forestry track now partly grown over but still capable of admitting a car, and drove up it for fifty yards or so until it became impassable.

He could still be seen from the road if one was looking, but he must just hope that the Range Rover would sweep past without noticing him. He waited, his eyes glued to the mirror, but it never came. Had it given up the pursuit? Surely not! No, they must have realized what he had done and were playing cat-and-mouse with him, waiting for him to re-emerge to find them right there on his tail! Donald was seized by an ungovernable panic. It was then that he lost his head completely, backed down the track and on to the road, and continued driving down it in reverse like a madman, utterly in the grip of unreason.