

SNAPSHOTS

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THREE REFLECTED VISIONS

The Dressmaker's Dummy

The coffeepot is on the table.

It is a four-legged round table, covered with a waxy oilcloth patterned in red and gray squares against a neutral background of yellowish white that may have been formerly ivory colored—or white. In the center, a square ceramic tile serves as a protective base; its design is entirely hidden, or at least made unrecognizable, by the coffeepot placed upon it.

The coffeepot is made of brown earthenware. It consists of a sphere topped by a cylindrical filter holder with a mushroom-shaped lid. The spout is an S with flattened curves, widening out slightly at the base. The handle has, perhaps, the shape of an ear, or rather of the outer fold of an ear; but it would be a misshapen ear, too circular and lacking a lobe, which would thus resemble a “pitcher handle.” The spout, the handle, and the mushroom lid are of a creamy color. The rest is of a very light, smooth brown, and shiny.

There is nothing on the table except the waxy tablecloth, the ceramic base, and the coffeepot.

On the right, in front of the window, stands the dressmaker's dummy.

Behind the table, the space above the mantel holds a large rectangular mirror in which may be seen half of the window (the right half) and, on the left (that is, on the right side of the window), the reflection of the wardrobe with its mirror front. In the wardrobe mirror the window may again be seen, in its entirety now, and unreversed (that is, the right French pane on the right and the left one on the left).

Thus there are, above the mantel, three half-sections of window one after another, with an almost unresolved continuity, and which are, in turn (from left to right): one left section unreversed, one right section unreversed, and one right section reversed. Since the wardrobe stands in the corner of the room and extends to the outer edge of the window, the two right half-sections of the latter are seen separated only by a narrow vertical piece of wardrobe, which might be the wood separating the two French window sections (the right upright edge of the left side joined to the left edge of the right side). The three window sections, above the half-curtains, give a view of the leafless trees in the garden.

In this way, the window takes up the entire surface of the mirror, except for the upper portion, in which can be seen a strip of ceiling and the top of the mirrored wardrobe.

In the mirror above the mantel may be seen two other dressmaker's dummies: one in front of the first window section, the narrowest, at the far left, and the other in front of the third section (the one farthest

to the right). Neither one is seen straight on; the one on the right has its right side facing the view; the one on the left, slightly smaller, reveals its left side. But it is difficult to be certain of this on first glance, because the two reflections are facing in the same direction and as a consequence both seem to be turned so that the same side shows—the left side, probably.

The three dummies stand in a line. The middle one, whose size is intermediate between that of the two others, occupies the right side of the mirror, in exactly the same direction as the coffeepot standing on the table.

In the spherical surface of the coffeepot is a shiny, distorted reflection of the window, a sort of four-sided figure whose sides form the arcs of a circle. The line of the wooden uprights between the two window sections widens abruptly at the bottom into a vague spot. This is, no doubt, the shadow of the dressmaker's dummy.

The room is quite bright, since the window is unusually wide, even though it has only two sections.

A good smell of hot coffee rises from the pot on the table.

The dressmaker's dummy is no longer in its accustomed spot: it is normally placed in the corner by the window, opposite the mirrored wardrobe. The wardrobe has been placed in its position to help with the fittings.

The design on the ceramic tile base is the picture of an owl, with two large, somewhat frightening eyes. But, for the moment, it cannot be made out, because of the coffeepot.

The Replacement

The schoolboy stepped slightly backward and looked up toward the lowest branches. Then he took a step forward, to try to reach a branch which seemed within his grasp; he stood on tiptoes and stretched his hand as high as he could, but failed to reach it. After several fruitless efforts, he apparently gave up. He lowered his arm and merely continued to stare at something among the leaves.

Next he returned to the foot of the tree, where he took up the same position as before: his knees bent slightly, the top of his body twisted to the right, and his head bent over toward his shoulder. He still held his book satchel in his left hand. It was impossible to see the other hand, with which he was no doubt supporting himself against the tree, or his face, which was almost glued to the bark of the tree, as if to scrutinize minutely some detail about a yard and a half above the ground.

The boy had again paused in his reading aloud, but this time there must have been a period, perhaps even

an indentation, and he gave the impression that he was making an effort to indicate the end of the paragraph. The schoolboy straightened up to inspect the bark of the tree higher up.

Whispers could be heard in the classroom. The schoolmaster turned his head and noticed that most of the pupils were looking up, instead of following the oral reading in their books; even the one reading aloud kept looking toward the teacher's desk with a vaguely questioning, or fearful, expression. The teacher said severely:

"What are you waiting for?"

The faces were all lowered silently and the boy began again, with the same studious voice, expressionless and a bit too slow, that gave each word equal emphasis and spaced it evenly from the next:

"Therefore, that evening, Joseph de Hagen, one of Philippe's lieutenants, went to the Archbishop's palace on the pretext of paying a courtesy call. As previously stated the two brothers . . ."

On the other side of the street, the schoolboy peered again at the leaves on the low branches. The teacher slapped on the desk with the flat of his hand:

"As previously stated, *comma*, the two brothers . . ."

Searching out the passage in his own book, he read aloud, exaggerating the punctuation:

"Start at: 'As previously stated, the two brothers were already there, so that they might, if need be, protect themselves with this alibi . . .' and pay attention to what you are reading."

"As previously stated, the two brothers were already there, so that they might, if need be, protect them-

selves with this alibi—a suspect alibi in truth, but the best available to them at this juncture—without allowing their mistrustful cousin . . ."

The monotonous voice stopped abruptly, in the middle of the sentence. The other pupils, already raising their eyes toward the paper puppet hanging on the wall, immediately returned to their books. The teacher turned his glance from the window back to the boy who was reading aloud, on the opposite side of the room, in the first row near the door.

"All right, go on! There isn't any period there. You don't seem to understand what you are reading!"

The boy looked at the teacher, and behind him, slightly to the right, the puppet made of white paper.

"Do you understand, or not?"

"Yes," said the boy without much conviction.

"Yes, *sir*," the teacher corrected him.

"Yes, *sir*," the boy repeated.

The teacher looked at the printed text and asked:

"What does the word 'alibi' mean to you?"

The boy looked at the puppet cut out of paper, then at the blank wall, straight in front of him, then at the book lying on his desk; and then again at the wall, for almost a full minute.

"Well?"

"I don't know, *sir*," said the boy.

The teacher slowly looked over the other pupils in the class. One boy raised his hand, near the window in back. The teacher pointed at him, and the boy stood up alongside his bench:

"It's to make people think they were there, *sir*."

"Just what do you mean? Who are *they*?"

"The two brothers, sir."

"Where did they want people to think they were?"

"At the Archbishop's, sir."

"And where were they really?"

The boy thought for a moment before answering.

"But they were really there, sir, only they wanted to go somewhere else and make people think they were still there."

Late at night, hidden under black masks and wrapped in huge capes, the two brothers slid down a long rope ladder into a small, deserted street.

The teacher nodded slightly a couple of times, as if he were giving his halfhearted approval. After several seconds, he said: "Right."

"Now you will summarize for us the whole reading passage, for the benefit of your friends who may not have understood."

The boy looked out the window. Then he glanced down at his book, then up again toward the teacher's desk.

"Where should I start, sir?"

"Start at the beginning of the chapter."

Without sitting down, the boy leafed through the pages of his book and, after a short silence, began to summarize the conspiracy of Philippe de Cobourg. In spite of frequent stops and starts, he did it almost coherently. On the other hand, he stressed unduly a number of secondary matters, while hardly mentioning, or even omitting, certain crucial events. As, moreover, he was disposed to dwell on actions rather than on their political motives, it would have been extremely difficult for an uninformed listener to puzzle

out the reasons for the episode or the connections between the various events described, or between the different people involved. The teacher allowed his glance to travel gradually along the windows. The schoolboy had returned to the spot below the lowest tree branch; he had put his satchel at the foot of the tree and was jumping up and down, stretching one arm upward. Seeing that all his attempts were in vain, he again stood motionless, staring at the inaccessible leaves. Philippe de Cobourg had set up camp with his mercenaries on the banks of the Neckar. The pupils, who were no longer required to follow the printed text, had all raised their heads and were silently staring at the paper puppet hanging on the wall. He had no hands or feet, but only four crudely cut-out limbs and a round head, oversized, through which ran the supporting thread. Several inches higher, at the other end of the thread, could be seen the little ball of chewed-up blotting paper that held it on the wall.

But the boy who was reciting was losing his way among wholly insignificant details, so that the teacher finally stopped him:

"That's enough," he said, "we know enough about that. Sit down and we will take up the reading again at the top of the page: 'But Philippe and his followers . . .'"

The whole class, as one, leaned over the desks, and a new reader began, in a voice as devoid of expression as his classmate's, although conscientiously indicating the commas and the periods:

"But Philippe and his followers were not of this opinion. If the majority of the Diet—or even only the

barons' party—were to renounce in this manner the prerogatives accorded to them, to him as well as to them, as a result of the invaluable assistance they had given to the Archduke's cause at the time of the uprising, they would be henceforth unable, either they or he, to demand the indictment of any new suspect, or the suspension without trial of his manorial rights. It was absolutely essential that these negotiations, which seemed to him to have begun so inauspiciously for his own cause, be broken off before the fateful date. Therefore, that evening, Joseph de Hagen, one of Philippe's lieutenants, went to the Archbishop's palace on the pretext of paying a courtesy call. As previously stated, the two brothers were already there . . ."

The faces remained dutifully leaning over the desks. The teacher looked at the window. The schoolboy was leaning against the tree, absorbed in his examination of the bark. He crouched down slowly, as if to follow a line running down the trunk—on the side not visible from the school windows. About a yard and a half above the ground, his movement stopped and he tilted his head to one side, in the same position he had formerly occupied. One by one, the faces in the classroom looked up.

The pupils looked at the teacher, then at the windows. But the bottom panes were of frosted glass, and, above, they could see only the treetops and the sky. Not a fly or a butterfly appeared on the windowpanes. Soon all eyes were again fixed on the white paper cut-out of a man.

The Wrong Direction

The rainwater has accumulated in the hollow of a shallow depression, forming among the trees a wide pond, roughly circular in shape, some ten yards in diameter. Round about, the earth is black, without the slightest trace of vegetation between the high, straight trunks. There is neither brush nor shrubs in this part of the woods. The ground is covered only with a uniform, feltlike layer made up of twigs and leaves reduced to their veins, from which a few patches of moss protrude slightly in spots, half decomposed. High above the tree trunks, the bare branches stand out sharply against the sky.

The water is transparent, though brownish in color. Bits of debris fallen from the trees—small branches, empty seed pods, pieces of bark—have lain at the bottom of the shallow pond, steeping there since the start of winter. But none of these fragments is light enough to float, to rise and break the surface, which is everywhere uniform and shiny. There is not the slightest breath of air to ruffle this immobility.

The sky has cleared. It is the end of the day. The sun is low, to the left, behind the tree trunks. Its shallowly slanting rays create, over the entire surface of the pond, narrow luminous bands alternating with wider dark bands.

Parallel to these strips, a row of thick trees runs along the water's edge, on the opposite bank; perfect cylinders, vertical, with no low branches, they run downward in a very brilliant reflection of much greater contrast than the real subject—which by comparison seems vague, even somewhat out of focus. In the black water, the symmetrical trunks shine as if varnished. A line of light emphasizes their outlines on the sides turned toward the setting sun.

Yet this admirable landscape is not only inverted, but also discontinuous. The hatching of the sun's rays over the surface of the mirror cuts through the picture with brighter lines, equally spaced and perpendicular to the reflected tree trunks; it is as if the view there was veiled by intense lighting, revealing innumerable particles suspended in the thin top layer of water. Only the shadowed zones, where these particles are invisible, are strikingly brilliant. Thus each tree trunk is cut off, at more or less equal intervals, by a series of uncertain rings (which nevertheless suggest their real models), giving this part of the "deep down" woods a checkered appearance.

Within a hand's grasp, close to the south edge of the pond, the reflected branches join with old, submerged leaves, reddish but still whole, whose intact lacework stands out against the muddy bottom—oak leaves.

Someone, walking noiselessly on the mulchy carpet of the woods, has appeared on the right, moving toward the water. He comes up to the edge and stops. Since the sun is shining directly into his eyes, he has to step to one side to shield his glance.

He then perceives the banded surface of the pond. But, for him, the reflections of the tree trunks merge with their shadows—at least partially, since the trees directly in front of him are not perfectly straight. Moreover, the sunlight prevents him from distinguishing anything clearly. And there are probably no oak leaves at his feet.

This was, then, the end of his walk. Or does he, only now, observe that he has gone in the wrong direction? After a few hesitant glances around, he turns back to the east through the woods, again walking silently, following the path that he had taken to reach this spot.

Once more the scene is empty. On the left, the sun is still at the same height; the light is unchanged. Opposite, the straight, smooth tree trunks are still reflected in the unwrinkled water, perpendicular to the rays of the sunset.

Deep in the shadowed zones shine the sectioned reflections of the columns, upside down and black, washed miraculously clean.

(1954)