ROBERT GRAVES

HE WENT OUT TO BUY A RHINE

'HE WAS A very quiet, very sensitive young gentleman,' concluded Mrs Tisser, 'and punctual to the hour with his rent. I am truly sorry that he took the coward's way out. My own opinion is that the balance of his mind was upset.'

'Witness is not being questioned for her medical opinion,' whispered the Coroner's clerk. 'She is being asked for facts.'

The Coroner said: 'Mrs Tisser, you are not being asked for your medical opinion. You are being questioned for facts. The jury wants to hear more about the demeanour of the late Angus Hamilton Tighe on the morning of his death.'

Mrs Tisser stuck to her guns: 'The young gentleman's demeanour, your Honour, suggested that the balance of his mind had been upset.'

'Enlarge on that, please,' ordered the Coroner, conceding the point.

'He behaved very strangely, your Honour. At breakfast he told me, as I set down the tray beside him on the sitting-room table: "Mrs Tisser, I've been doing it wrong all my life: I keep my mouth open instead of shut." Well, that was what I had been praying for weeks that he would say, because the poor gentleman snored as a pig grunts. So I said: "Well, Mr Tighe, I'm glad to hear you make that confession. You ought to get Dr Thome to operate on your nose, so that you'd never do it again." "Oh, but I enjoy the sensation," he said, with a wild look in his eye. "It invigorates the whole system. And it's a cheap pleasure, like sitting in the sun, or combing one's hair, don't you agree?"'

We glanced gravely at one another, as Mrs Tisser continued: 'I told him that I didn't agree, and that I'd dearly knock a shilling a week off his rent, if he could break himself of the habit. He laughed in what I can only call a fiendish manner, and I left the room without another word. He had never before made mock of me. Not that I felt vexed exactly. But his demeanour was certainly most alarming.'

'That took place shortly after 8 a.m., you say, Mrs Tisser? Did you see him again that morning, before the fatality occurred?'

'I did, your Honour; about five minutes later. We met on the stairs. He seemed to be in a state of suppressed excitement, and told me that he was going out to buy an "eternity" and do the job properly at last. "An eternity?" I asked, thinking that perhaps I had misheard. "A rhine, if you like, Mrs Tisser," he answered, grinning like a devil.'

'And then?'

'And then, your Honour, he was away between ten minutes and a quarter of an hour, and at last came rushing upstairs like a whirlwind. Half a minute went by, and then I heard an extraordinary sound: a sort of muffled explosion from the sitting-room. And I saw him dash through the open door, across the corridor, and into the bedroom where he flung himself headlong at the balcony beyond. I screamed, and hurried downstairs.'

'Thank you, Mrs Tisser, that will be enough. You need not repeat that part of your evidence; we have inspected the french windows and the shattered woodwork of the balcony which bear out your evidence. One more question. Do you know anything about the dead man's emotional life?'

'If you mean, did he ever try to bring a young woman home, he certainly did not, your Honour. He was a most exemplary young man in that respect; his medical studies seem to have been "both parent, child and wife" to him, as the saying goes. The only thing I recall...'

'Yes, Mrs Tisser?'

'One night he confided to me his love for a lady whom he had never met; someone who had taken complete possession of his heart. I thought at first that it must be a film actress, but he said that he didn't even know what she looked like, and he couldn't understand a word of what she said, either. It was then I first began to question his sanity. Well, about a week ago, as I was doing his room, I noticed a crumpled letter lying half-charred in the grate. My eye caught the first line: "O my wonderful Yma." But I was too honourable to read any further, and I hardly like to mention it even now. She seems to have been his dream-lady: because once he came back from a visit to London, and his eyes were shining as he said: "Oh, I am so happy, Mrs Tisser." I asked: "On account of the lady you mentioned?" and he answered: "I spent the whole afternoon with her, Mrs Tisser." "So you've met her at last?" I said. "I mean in spirit," he told me.'

More evidence was called as to the late Angus Hamilton Tighe's state of health, but it proved to be inconclusive. We could not even decide that he had been overworking, or had financial difficulties, or was being blackmailed. Dr Thorne had never treated him for anything more than a twisted ankle. He possessed no close friends among his fellow medical students, and no relatives nearer than Canada. So we retired.

Since it seemed unlikely that Mrs Tisser had pushed him over the balcony, we naturally wanted to spare the feelings of the Tighe family in Alberta, by adding 'while of unsound mind' to the obvious verdict of 'suicide'.

Only one juryman, Mr Pink, a retired chemist, dissented. He called for silence, and then spoke in grave, authoritative tones. 'I think, ladies and gentlemen, that we can improve on that verdict. To begin with, I cannot regard it as a symptom of insanity in myself that I too admire, nay adore, the celebrated Peruvian singer Yma Sumac, though I have never seen her, nor do I know one word of Spanish. Her voice, surely the most wonderful in the world, compasses five full octaves and is true as a bell in every register. Poor young Tighe! I own a rare set of Yma's early recordings which would doubtless have given him infinite pleasure, had I been aware that he shared my view of her genius.

'But I have another observation to make of even greater importance: it is that when we inspected the corpse I noticed a discoloured right nostril.'

We gaped at him as he went on: 'Which did not figure in the post-mortem report and was, in my view, caused by a "sternutatory", not an "eternity"; or by an "errhine", not "a rhine". In non-technical language, by tobacco snuff. If the Coroner permits us, we will send a policeman to visit the only tobacconist in this town who sells that old-fashioned commodity -- Hackett of Cold Harbour Cottages. The officer will almost certainly find that the late Tighe visited Hackett at about 8.15 a.m. The fatal sternutatory is probably contained in the pencil-box on his desk. Moreover, I noticed a familiar medical work on elementary physiology lying on the breakfast table. Look up "sternutation" in the Index, turn to the relevant page, and you will find, I think, a sentence to this general effect:

STERNUTATION: an involuntary reflex respiratory act, caused by irritation of the nerve terminals of the nasal mucous membrane, or by severe luminary stimulation of the optic nerve. The sternutator, after drawing a deep breath, compresses his lips; whereupon the contents of the lungs are violently expelled through the nostrils.

'I remember well the impression that this passage made on me years ago, while I was studying for my pharmaceutical degree. I said to myself, in the very words of the deceased: "I have been doing it wrong all my life; I keep my mouth open, instead of shut." The next time that I felt a sneeze coming on, I duly compressed my lips and, hey presto! found myself hurtling across the room like a stone from a catapult; but fortunately did not make for the french windows. In fact, I knocked myself out on the corner of the mantelpiece. Let me therefore record my opinion that the late Angus Hamilton Tighe died a martyr to scientific experiment and was no more suicidal than I am.'

So we brought in 'Death by Misadventure', after all, with a rider against experimental use of sternutatories; which, I fear, didn't mean a thing to the general public.