



Shadow Over Southwold

SUZETTE A. HILL

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2021.

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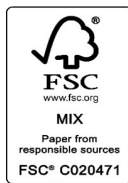
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2721-6

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon LT Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd



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Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

To the happy memory of Alexander Wedderspoon



PROLOGUE

‘You must admit it does rather cast a shadow,’ Miles Loader observed.

‘What does?’

‘Dewthorp’s dispatch. I mean to say . . .’

‘His dispatch? But he died.’

‘Oh yes, he did that all right, but what I want to know is why and how. Personally, I think there is more in this than meets the eye – mine at any rate.’

Reggie Higgs put down his drink and gazed at his companion in some puzzlement. ‘But surely you know?’ he said, ‘It’s common knowledge. It happened when he was exercising Mrs Peebles’ dog at Dunwich and he fell off the cliff – he was always clumsy. Rather bad luck as it had been his birthday. First of April. I know that because he told me the other day when he was browsing in my shop. He was

very taken with a little figurine of Punchinello and said that as his birthday was imminent it might make an appropriate present to himself.'

'Hmm,' the other mused, 'All Fools' Day. Fate's joke in poor taste, one might say. But then, Horace Dewthorp was no fool, or at least I never got that impression. Clumsy, perhaps, but hardly one to be pottering about on the cliff's edge. Not like him at all.'

'The police say the dog had probably put up a rabbit, was rushing too near the brink and Dewthorp had pursued it, tripped on a jagged piece of chalk and went headlong over. His cap was caught in a tuft of gorse, and a dog lead and whistle found near the body. I think he had a slightly dicky heart, so I suppose it cut out when he fell. I gather the dog was found by a cyclist who recognised the name on its collar, shoved it in his basket and took it back to Southwold. Apparently, the dog was quite unperturbed – though Mrs P. was annoyed. She thought Dewthorp had lost it. The irony is the poor chap wasn't all that keen on canines and had only agreed to exercise it as a favour. She had been laid up with the pox.'

The normally phlegmatic Dr Miles Loader (DPhil, History, Oxon.) almost choked on his whisky. 'The pox!' he gasped. 'You mean to say that prim Peebles has caught the—'

'Chickenpox,' Higgs grinned. 'A visitor's small child passed it on to her. It wasn't a bad dose but enough to keep her confined for a bit and out of harm's way, or at least out of our way.'

'That's certainly a relief,' Loader mused. 'I don't fancy Southwold being menaced by murder *and* syphilis!'

‘Ssh,’ Higgs hissed nervously, glancing round at the small back bar of The Crown Hotel. Though never loud, Loader’s voice was clear and precise, and the two words had cut the air like a knife. Luckily, there was only one other drinker present and he seemingly engrossed in his newspaper. In an undertone Higgs urged his companion to control his imagination. ‘Dogs chasing rabbits are one thing, but we don’t want wild hares being sprung all over the place. Southwold is a homely little town, and it would be a pity to have its cheery image tainted by ugly rumour. Bad for business.’ Reggie Higgs ran a small but choice antiques shop off the high street.

‘Conversely,’ Loader murmured slyly, ‘it could be very good for business. The public take a perverse pleasure in the grim and grisly, and a local killing might have them flocking here in droves.’

His friend brightened. ‘Ah, that’s a possibility, I suppose; hadn’t thought of it like that. Perhaps I should increase the Sèvres collection. I was thinking only the other day that it’s starting to look a bit sparse. It could do with a fresh injection.’ He paused, and then added, ‘Since we are on the subject, perhaps we should refill glasses and toast old Horace. He may have been teetotal but he can hardly complain.’

‘Not now he can’t. Your turn, I fancy.’

In fact, contrary to Dr Loader’s assumption, Dewthorp’s mishap cast barely any shadow over the little town, or indeed the peaceful cliffs of Dunwich – and it certainly did not bring the hordes of visitors that he had jovially predicted. Naturally, the victim’s passing caused an element

of shock, but the proverbial nine days' wonder probably amounted to no more than three. The dead man had not been a denizen of Southwold, making only occasional visits up from Cambridge in order, as he had jocularly declared, 'to escape the cloistered racket and to breathe some decent sea air'.

Recently retired from his post as senior clerical administrator at one of the Cambridge colleges and with no immediate family to claim him, he had been free to indulge his two interests: wildflowers and Suffolk's wartime coastal defences. And while he had been perfectly affable, being teetotal he had rarely ventured into any of the local hostelrys, and except for a few acquaintances such as Miles Loader and Reggie Higgs, on the whole had seemed content with his own company. Sometimes he would be seen strolling on the common or along the seafront, and occasionally settled in the Sailors' Reading Room absorbed in its newspaper archive. In his early visits he had stayed in a guest house run by Mary Peebles, but the arrangement had lapsed and he had instead rented a small flat near the pier for his periodic retreat from Cambridge's 'cloistered racket'. His death, though sad, had generally been regarded as one of life's unfortunate accidents – except perhaps by the sceptical Loader, an inveterate reader of crime novels.

CHAPTER ONE

A month later, in Cambridge itself, a drama of a more scandalous nature was being discussed.

‘Naturally I cut him dead, quite dead,’ Emeritus Professor Aldous Phipps announced with relish. He glanced around at his assembled colleagues in the senior common room of St Cecil’s, seeking smiles and murmurs of approbation. Few were expressed.

But one voice spoke out: ‘Yes, but you have to admit he is pretty tall, a good six-foot-two I should say.’

Phipps turned a glacial eye upon the speaker. ‘A non sequitur if I may so, Smithers. What has height to do with my cutting of Hapworth?’

‘He may not have noticed you,’ John Smithers replied amiably. ‘Perhaps his mind was fixed on higher things.’

This elicited not just smiles but a loud guffaw from Dr

Maycock, St Cecil's Senior Tutor. 'He has a point, Aldous, you must admit.'

Phipps glared. 'I admit no such thing. Dr Smithers is being gratuitously personal, and I can assure you that Hapworth saw me most clearly. In fact, I rather think he was about to strike up a conversation – which is why I immediately lowered my eyes and spoke to my dog.'

'Ah the compliant Popsie,' Smithers murmured, 'a charming confederate. Where is she, by the way?'

'In her basket enjoying the sleep of the just – not something you are familiar with, I imagine.'

Smithers shrugged and lit a cigarette, disdaining reply.

'Ah well, Aldous,' Maycock interjected hastily, 'I don't suppose you will be the only one cutting him. I daresay Canterbury & Co. have also withdrawn the hem of their chasubles – or soon will if the press gets its way. The newspapers are already muttering about resignation.'

'Inevitable, I should have thought,' snorted Mostyn Williams, the college bursar. 'After all, with one hand in the till and the other up a choirboy's surplice I can't see that he has much choice in the matter.'

The master, who had been mentally honing his address for the forthcoming Founder's Day, woke up and winced. Really, must Mostyn be quite so crude? Besides, nothing had been proved about the allegations and it was currently only gross rumour. He cleared his throat. 'If you don't mind my saying, Bursar, aren't you being a trifle premature? The Reverend Hapworth may not be to everyone's taste, but by all accounts he has been a sound pastor at St Bernard's and is apparently highly esteemed by the upper echelons of the Mothers' Union.'

‘Oh well,’ said Smithers, ‘if he is approved by the Mothers’ Union then he must be all right.’ He turned to Professor Aldous Phipps: ‘Wouldn’t you say so, Aldous? Frankly if I were you, I should be jolly careful whom I cut in future. After all, it wouldn’t do to have phalanxes of heated ladies bearing down on you, would it? Not your scene at all, I shouldn’t think – wrathful or otherwise.’ He lowered his left eyelid and stubbed out his cigarette.

This time it was the turn of ancient Phipps to keep silent, but he thought the more. He had never approved of the fellowship the college had bestowed upon John Smithers; and in his view, having spent a research year at Yale the young man had returned to Cambridge even more distasteful than before. Cocky young pup! Phipps frowned thoughtfully at his neatly pared fingernails, pondering how best to ruffle that slick confidence.

A week later John Smithers’ slick confidence was indeed ruffled – not by the sly wiles of Aldous Phipps, but by the fate of the Reverend Stephen Hapworth. The cleric had been found at half-mast under Clare College Bridge: hanged and blowing in the wind. Or at least, that is how the new cub reporter of the *Cambridge Clarion* had originally put it; a version hastily modified by the editor.

Given the rumours surrounding the victim, suicide of a somewhat public nature had been the first assumption. But once it was revealed that the dead man had sustained a heavy blow to the back of the head, such view was quickly revised. The man could hardly have engineered his own end unaided: the bludgeoning surely suggested another hand at work. But it was evidently the rope, and not the

blow, that had actually carried him off, the immediate cause of death being asphyxia. It had been a quick end, apparently – neck instantly broken and thus no unseemly heavings. The despatch would seem to have been executed by one conversant with the process.

Members of the public with a love of the lurid and knowledge of such matters, had discreetly checked the movements of the erstwhile public hangman, Mr Albert Pierrepont; but were disappointed to learn he had been otherwise engaged on the Isle of Wight, mentoring one of his successors. So at least that was one possibility ruled out. Still, with luck there would be plenty of scope for others. Amongst the college common rooms and drinking holes of Cambridge, speculation thrived.

It thrived too in the discreet back bar of Southwold's Crown Hotel, where, sipping a vicious gin cocktail and wearing a smile of placid sweetness, Dr Miles Loader opined that the murdered Reverend Stephen Hapworth, his third cousin once-removed, had been a bugger of the first water and it was merely surprising that he hadn't been given the chop years ago.

His companion on that occasion, Miss Isabel Phipps, nodded in vague agreement, saying that in her view there were an awful lot of them about.

'What, buggers?' asked Miles, a trifle surprised.

'Oh, well yes, those too, I suppose. But I was really thinking of all those in need of the chop . . . Take my brother, for instance.' She sighed and contemplated her sherry.

'Do you mean the Cambridge one, the Classics chap? But I thought he was rather a distinguished scholar – a professor, isn't he?'

‘Oh yes, a venerable emeritus. In theory he’s retired, put out to grass. But that doesn’t stop anything.’

‘Stop what?’

‘His habits. He is fussy, tiresomely nosy and obsessively neat.’

Miles smiled, eyeing the unruly hair, laddered stocking and trailing scarf; and recalling the habitual debris of her sitting room, said, ‘Well, admittedly neatness is not your strong suit – charming though your house is – but I can’t really see why that should bother you. I thought you hardly ever met.’

‘We don’t, but we are about to soon,’ she replied grimly. ‘He is coming to stay – in a moment of madness I invited him. Apparently, the college authorities have decided to renovate a couple of the grace-and-favour houses where he lives. One of them is adjacent to his own and he says the noise will be intolerable, the mess deplorable and it will disrupt his work and shatter his nerves. The dog too will suffer. Thus, he is coming here for the interim.’

‘With the dog?’

‘With the dog.’

Miles cleared his throat, and murmured tentatively, ‘But you are not terribly fond of dogs, are you? And what about the hedgehog, won’t it object?’

Isabel shrugged. ‘Thomas will have to take his chance with the rest of us; and from what I gather the dog is small and spends most of its time asleep in its basket . . . No, the real bore is having to stock up with that searing dry sherry he likes. Takes the skin off your teeth, it does! Typical of Aldous not to be satisfied with a decent amontillado like the rest of us. I remember when we were children: not

content with the usual ginger beer, he always had to lace it with some foul-tasting liquor scrounged from Daddy's drinks cabinet. Lethal stuff!' She screwed up her nose in painful memory.

To assuage the memory her companion went to the bar to order replenishments. Poor old Isabel, he thought wryly, quite a handful. Still, I suppose she'll cope; she generally does. But will the hedgehog? Even lazy dogs are known to rampage.

Returning to his seat he was slightly surprised to see his friend smiling broadly. 'Well,' she said brightly, 'at least Aldous will be able to give us the lowdown on why your cousin met such an untimely end. He is bound to have a theory, he always does.' She took a sip from her glass and nodded appreciatively. 'Now that's what I call a drinkable sherry. They do a very good one here.'

About to sip his own drink, Miles Loader paused and replaced the glass on the table. He gave a discreet cough. 'Uhm . . . well as I said, only a distant cousin: third, once removed. It hardly counts,' he added hastily.

'It's still consanguinity – or all relative, as the police might say.'

'Police?' Miles was startled. 'Oh, but I doubt if they would be interested in me. I mean to say, he and I lost touch years ago. A figure from the past, really. He was a very tenuous connection, very tenuous indeed.'

'And yet you say you didn't like him. So, you must have some knowledge or have made an assessment. And besides, the police love digging up the past, it's their favourite hobby. If they think there is some extramural connection, a friend or relative who could be helpful, they are bound

to make enquiries, especially as Southwold isn't all that far from Cambridge. Anyway, if nothing else, at least dear Aldous will have an angle.' Isabel downed the dregs of her sherry and, gathering handbag and evening paper, stood up. She consulted her watch. 'Ah, just in time to order that rotgut from the off-licence.'

'When does your brother arrive?' Miles asked.

'Not till Saturday. Six days of liberty. Toodle-oo.'

Miles gave a vague wave and settled to his cocktail. But somehow it had lost both its savour and his attention.

Instead, he ruminated about the dead cousin. His thoughts went back to his time as an adolescent, canoodling and a bit more with a girl in a cornfield. The process had been going well until bloody Stephen leapt up from behind a circle of stooks, toting a butterfly net and pair of binoculars. He had said he was trying to catch a Brimstone Yellow, but the binoculars suggested other, more human interests. Days later, the bugger had approached him for money, muttering about God, the wrath of parents and the sins of the flesh. Miles had clocked him one, and mercifully the older man had taken the hint, backed off and dropped the matter.

Stephen Hapworth had later become a clergyman, and other than at an occasional family funeral Miles never saw him again, being careful to keep a wide berth. Time had passed and water flowed. And now the chap was a murder victim in Cambridge, and a rather spectacular one at that. Intriguing, most certainly, but hardly his business. Embarrassing, really. Sanctimonious sod.

* * *

As Miles Loader was brooding dispassionately upon his relative's unseemly fate in Cambridge, in London's fashionable Sloane Street – untouched by cliff-top fatalities and corpses dangling under bridges – Felix Smythe, proud proprietor of Smythe's Bountiful Blooms, was telephoning his good friend Professor Cedric Dillworthy.

'I've just had such a lovely surprise in the post,' he exclaimed, 'you'll never guess what!'

'The Queen Mother wants you to supply a floral collar for one of the corgis,' Cedric suggested drily. (Her Majesty's patronage of Felix's flower boutique was a source of exquisite joy to its owner – as evidenced by the daily and meticulous polishing of its Royal Appointment plaque.)

'Oh, very funny, I'm sure,' Felix sniffed. 'No, it's from Suffolk, from that group of Aldeburgh musicians I encountered when we were up there a few years ago. You remember, the distinguished composer and his friends who kindly invited me to their soirée at Crag House. Charming.'

'But I thought they had dropped you,' Cedric said casually.

'Dropped me? Most certainly not. What on earth do you mean!' Felix's look of glee was replaced by a scowl and he very nearly stamped his foot.

'Well, you didn't receive a Christmas card this year, did you?' Cedric replied mildly.

'Card be damned. I've got better than a card, I can tell you. What I have received is an invitation – an invitation to join them in a little celebration.'

'Celebration of what?'

Felix hesitated. He wasn't sure – he would have to check the wording. Had it been to do with that concert place in

Aldeburgh, the Jubilee Hall? Maybe it was an anniversary of its founding; something like that, probably. But the essential thing was that his name was on the guest list. Clearly, he had found favour after all. They had been an engaging group, he recalled, and he had done his best to fit in and make a suitable impression (not easy with scant musical knowledge). Yes, a party in Aldeburgh was a most enticing prospect. He must cancel all other engagements . . . unless of course Clarence House should require him to discuss the next flower order. One could hardly cancel HM!

‘Celebration of what?’ Cedric repeated patiently.

‘Come to supper tonight and I might tell you,’ Felix said airily. ‘Oh, and do bring that bottle of Montrachet you prised out of Angela Fawcett. I’ll make some bouillabaisse and we can pretend we’re on St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat again chez Mr Somerset M!’

‘I did not prise it,’ began Cedric indignantly, ‘I merely asked if ...’

But his words were lost, for replacing the receiver, Felix had hustled off to deal with fish and travel arrangements.

When Cedric arrived that evening at Felix’s slightly over-ornate flat, it was to find his friend less exuberant than he had expected. Despite the delicious aroma wafting from the kitchen and two wincingly dry Martinis standing sentinel on the mantelpiece, its occupant appeared worried.

‘Hmm,’ Cedric remarked quizzically, handing over the Montrachet, ‘you sound a bit *piano*, thought you might be doing handstands by now.’ He took the proffered Martini and they sat on the sofa while Felix revealed his woes.

‘It’s too bad,’ he complained, ‘I telephoned the Sandworth – you know, the hotel at Aldeburgh on the seafront and which was so good to us when we stayed there before – but they say they don’t have a vacancy for the dates I want. Apparently if I check with them later, they might be able to help, but for the moment nothing’s doing. I did think of the other one at the opposite end of the front, but it’s closed for repairs.’

Cedric asked if he had tried The Swan or Crown at Southwold.

‘Yes, but they are full up too. It’s maddening!’ As often when in a state of agitation Felix ran his fingers through his short spiky hair and pouted. Apart from the pout, the *en brosse* style crowning his thin features made him look not unlike an older version of Tommy Steele.

‘You might be able to find a pub in the outlying district, some of them do rooms these days.’

‘Spending hours on the telephone and then taking pot luck with some meagre hostelry out in the sticks is not my idea of fun,’ Felix replied haughtily. ‘Naturally, if I am to mingle with the musicians and to make the best of my time with them, I shall need a decent base in or close to Aldeburgh and to which I can invite members of their circle for a drink – should chance arise.’

‘Ah, like the tenor, I suppose,’ Cedric said slyly.

Felix gave a careless shrug. ‘Anyone who is convivial, naturally.’

As it happened, Cedric felt sorry for his friend. Some people could cope with such irritants but he and Felix shared the same respect for the smooth and predictable. Having something planned and then finding those plans

blighted could be most tiresome – galling even, especially if the project had been special (as it clearly was to Felix). He studied his Martini, and suddenly had an idea. ‘I’ll ask Miles Loader, he may be able to help. In fact, I could telephone him now if you like.’

‘Who’s Loader – a travel agent?’

Cedric explained that Dr Miles Loader was a historian he had encountered from time to time at publishers’ parties and various academic events, and who happened to live not far from Southwold. ‘He was abroad last time we were there, otherwise I would have introduced you. Quite a pleasant cove, though I haven’t seen him for ages. Anyway, the point is he is bound to have various local contacts and may be able to fix you up with something suitable. You never know, it’s worth a try.’

Felix agreed, and brightening somewhat, went off to the kitchen to attend to the bouillabaisse. Whether the Loader person would be any good remained to be seen, but as Cedric had said, it was worth a try. He prodded the fish and hoped.

An hour later, with a second Martini under their belts and most of the burgundy gone, matters were considerably lighter. Miles Loader had been very helpful, explaining that he had a niece on the staff of the Sandworth who might pull a string on Felix’s behalf. With luck she could fix him a room in time for the party. It wasn’t certain, of course. Meanwhile, as a safety net, Miles was sure he could find him a decent guest house in Southwold and from where, if all else failed, he could easily drive over to the party.

The news mellowed Felix and he cordially invited Cedric

to join him in Suffolk. ‘I don’t mean to attend the party,’ he said quickly, ‘the invitation only mentions the one name and it might be infra dig to bring another, but we could spend a few days up there, do a bit of touring around and perhaps even go into Norfolk. After all, we aren’t due on the Riviera with dear Willie and friends till September – ages away. A little preliminary jaunt would be a warm-up before the Big One.’ He winked.

‘My dear boy,’ Cedric exclaimed, ‘I wouldn’t dream of gatecrashing the musicians’ thing – one would feel terribly awkward. No, no, that’s absolutely your pigeon. But certainly, a little break from London would be most refreshing and I’m sure something can be arranged. Mind you, at the moment I am a bit tied up with the paper I’m writing – that new archaeology journal wants a fresh angle on the Cappadocian hermitages – so I may have to come up later. But meanwhile, for your sake let us hope that Master Loader does his stuff.’

As it happened, Loader did his stuff rather well. Given hints of a slap-up meal at The Swan, his niece at the Sandworth assured him that in the event of a cancellation Mr Smythe would be the first to be informed. There was also a chance that a room currently being refurbished might become available, and she would see that it was reserved. Thus, things seemed promising. But wisely Loader had also enquired of Mrs Mary Peebles in Southwold, whose guest house though small, was centrally placed and generally deemed reliable. When he had told her that Mr Smythe’s plans were somewhat fluid and that his stay might be cut short, he had feared she might be tricky (she sometimes was),

but surprisingly there had been no objection. ‘Provided he doesn’t bring a mistress or hordes of offspring, he can be as fluid as he chooses,’ she had said tartly. When Loader relayed this proviso to Cedric, the latter remarked that he could think of few things less likely.

So that was the programme: Felix would stay in Southwold on the off chance of de-camping to the hotel in Aldeburgh, and at some point be joined by Cedric. Other than replenishing his favourite cologne and filling up with petrol, all that remained was to give meticulous instructions to his new assistant not to address the Sloane ladies as ‘duckie’, and on no account permit General Withers to run up a tab. The latter may have served superbly in the Great War and knew a lobelia from a camelia, but in other ways his memory was ‘playing tricks’. Especially, it seemed, in matters financial.