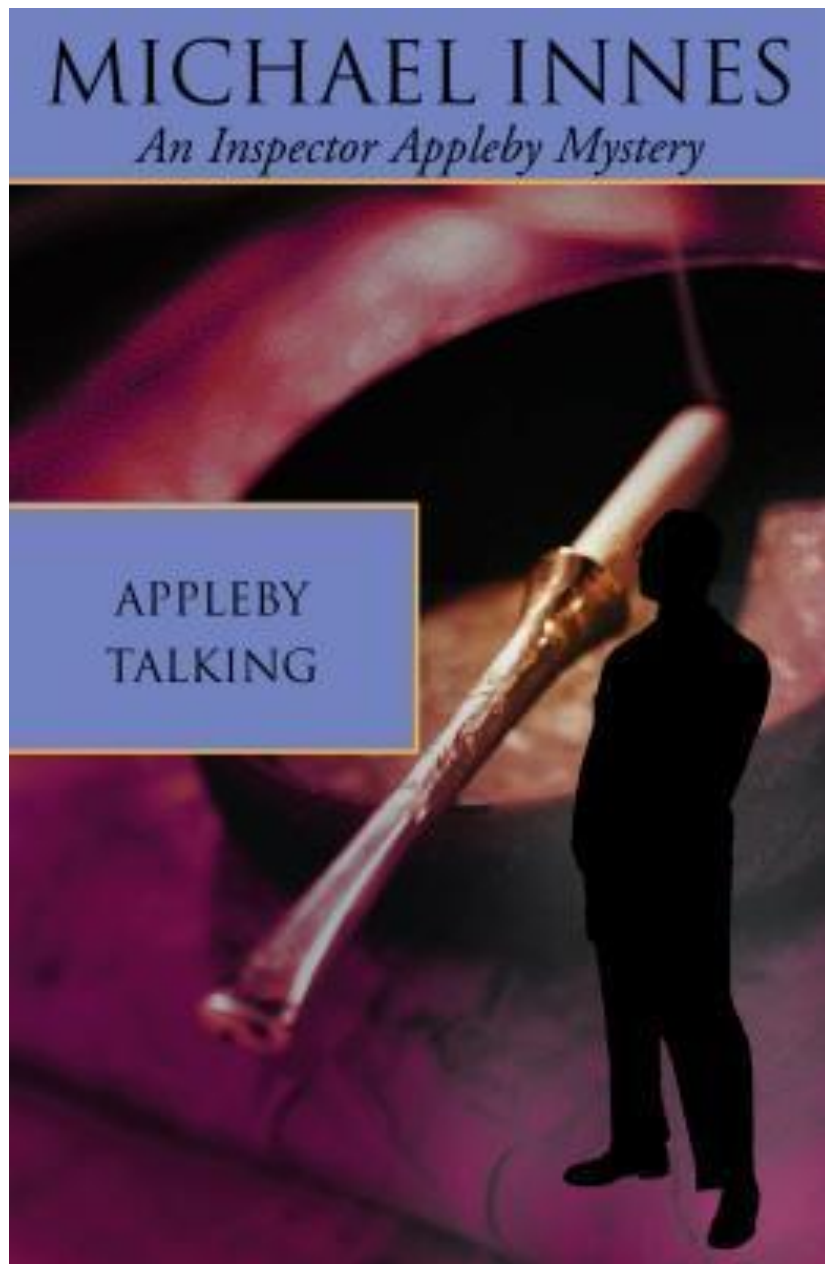


MICHAEL INNES

An Inspector Appleby Mystery

APPLEBY
TALKING



Michael Innes

Appleby talking

House of Stratus, Cornwall (UK), 2010

THE CAVE OF BELARIUS

“This year’s fête,” said the Vicar, “seems to have been even more devastating than usual. There was everything from a grand historical pageant of Sheercliff history down to a jumble sale. The first distracted the schoolchildren from their work for a month, and the second has induced my wife to make the most outrageous raid upon my scanty personal possessions and habiliments. Don’t you detest the fête?”

Appleby nodded. “Certainly. I regard it as being distinctly of the kind that is worse than death.”

The Vicar considered this seriously. “A pardonable exaggeration,” he presently pronounced. “Do you know that the enormously popular roundabout – you can see them dismantling it now – turns out to have been operating for purely private profit? Deplorable – quite deplorable. You agree, Professor?”

The Professor looked around him with caution. “I have quite clear views upon such occasions, I must confess. But about yesterday’s fête my lips are sealed. Your townsfolk did my wife the honour of asking her to open it.”

“And you went along too?”

“I have to admit that I cut it.” The Professor was apologetic. “The afternoon was lovely, and I simply slipped out of our hotel and went for a tramp. For some time I’ve wanted to see your celebrated cave on the other side of the hill.”

“The cave of Belarius?” The Vicar was interested. “You had a look at it?”

“I did.” The Professor hesitated. “And – do you know? – I had a look at Belarius too.”

“You mean you took a copy of *Cymbeline* along with you and read the later acts on the spot?”

The Professor shook his head. “No,” he said slowly. “I don’t mean that. I mean that I had an adventure...and rather a queer one. Perhaps you would care to hear the story. It illustrates an interesting mechanism of the mind.”

“Appleby and I are all attention.” The Vicar smiled. “And whether the mind be indeed a mechanism is something we can talk about later.”

“In itself as you know, the cave isn’t terribly exciting,” the Professor began. “It starts off as a mere cleft in the rock, becomes an arched chamber of no great size, and then narrows again to a cleft which, by dint of stooping, one can follow for another fifty feet. If Shakespeare’s banished lord had really brought up two young men in it they would certainly have been a quarrelsome couple through sheer irritation at their cramped quarters.

“Nevertheless, I explored the place faithfully enough. Caves are always fascinating. If you are superstitious, you may believe them to be tenanted by the ghosts of your remote ancestors who once inhabited them. If you are a scientist, you know that these ghosts do, at least, still haunt the inside of your own head; they are slumbering there, and special circumstances may at any time prompt them to wake up and walk about. Enter a cave by yourself, therefore, and you have to be pretty strong-minded to remain entirely convinced you are alone. You agree?”

The Vicar nodded. “Certainly. And it was so on this occasion?”

“Not at first. As I explored the place my mind behaved in a thoroughly rational fashion. I wondered how the cave came to be associated with *Cymbeline*, and I recalled what I had read about prehistoric remains found in the district – that sort of thing. Then, upon coming out, I sat down on a boulder in the sun. It’s a pleasant spot, with the cave giving upon a broad, grassy platform on the side of the hill. I reflected that here, perhaps, was the source of the

association with Shakespeare's play, since the effect is very much that of a stage. The sunshine was delightful, and I felt lazy and relaxed. I certainly had no sense of anything unusual or paranormal as being about to happen."

"Nevertheless it did?" Appleby was looking with some interest at the Professor.

"Decidedly. I was quite alone. For a few seconds I may have closed my eyes. When I opened them, it was to discover that I had a companion. Standing in the mouth of the cave was a Stone Age man."

"A *Stone Age* man?" The Vicar had sat up abruptly.

"Or, if you prefer it, Shakespeare's Belarius. He is commonly played as a bearded, skin-clad figure, so it comes to much the same thing. He was carrying something on his back – it might have been the buck or hart that is also traditional with Belarius – and after looking around him for a moment he disappeared into the cave. I was extremely interested. It was a striking instance of the mind's power to produce eidetic imagery."

"To produce *what?*" The Vicar was dismayed. "Do you mean, my dear fellow, that you had experienced a hallucination? And were you not very alarmed?"

"Alarmed?" The Professor smiled comfortably. "Dear me, no. Had I seen *myself* I should have had some cause for uneasiness. The *Doppelgänger* type of hallucination is rather a bad symptom. But eidetic imagery of this sort, although intensely interesting, is the most harmless thing in the world."

Appleby was looking thoughtfully at the ground. "And that," he asked prosaically, "was all that happened?"

"Well, no – as a matter of fact it was not. I sat for some time looking fixedly at the mouth of the cave, determining my pulse-rate, estimating the distance at which the hallucinatory appearance had seemed to stand, and that sort of thing. Reported occurrences of this sort by trained scientific observers, you will realise, are uncommon and can be important. Then it struck me that I had better traverse the

cave again, and verify its being, in fact, completely empty. I had just reached its mouth when another figure emerged from it.”

“Bless my soul!” The Vicar appeared yet more disturbed. “Another hallucination hard upon the first? I wonder whether you ought not really to consult – ”

“Nothing of the sort. This second figure was flesh and blood – as I happen to know from the very simple fact that he bumped straight into me. And he was, oddly enough, an unmistakable parson in mufti – a rather haggard, clean-shaven fellow in well-worn clerical grey flannel. He made me a civil apology and then walked straight down the hill. I called after him, but he didn’t stop. I was disappointed, because an extraordinarily interesting possibility had struck me.”

“A possibility?” Appleby had suddenly looked up.

“This fellow was certainly agitated. I had remarked that. So what occurred to me was this. Perhaps there had been a small group hallucination – the formation of a joint eidetic image, common to us both, and involving some form of telepathic communication between us.”

“You mean” – the Vicar took this in slowly – “that the parson too may have fancied he saw Belarius?”

“Precisely so. And, being no scientist, he was upset about it.”

“As I should certainly have been.” The Vicar chuckled. “And did you, in fact, then inspect the cave again?”

“Most certainly. And it was, of course, empty. There are a few cracks in which you could hide a dog or a cat, but there is certainly no lurking-place for a man. That Belarius had no material existence, therefore, we can take to be a matter of certainty. You agree?”

The Vicar looked doubtful, and then appeared to decide that the best reply would be humorous in tone. “I’ll agree,” he said, “if Appleby will agree. Appleby – ” He broke off. “Dear me – where *is* Appleby?”

“Perhaps he has been taken ill. But no – how very odd! I think I can hear him using your telephone.”

“Belarius,” said Appleby five minutes later, “broke prison across the moor early yesterday morning. At Sheercliff he hung about the fringes of the fête, penetrated into a tent with the costumes for the

pageant, and got himself up as an ancient Briton. That gave him a respite, since scores of people were going about in historical costume. He used the opportunity to stalk something which would excite less remark elsewhere, and managed to get away with some of the Vicar's old clothes from the jumble sale. With these in a bundle he made off across the hill, spotted the cave, and slipped into it to change. When he had done so, he thrust the Stone Age dress into a crack, came out, was startled to meet the Professor, and made off as fast as he could."

The Vicar shook his head solemnly. "How very dull the truth can be."

Appleby, staring across the moor beyond the town, nodded. "Quite so. It's no fun hunting down a poor devil of an escaped convict. But it would be rather enchanting to capture an eidetic image."