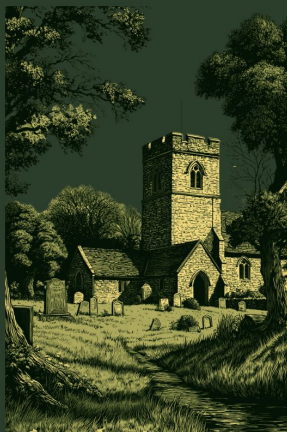




AG *Barnett*

MYSTERY SINGLES



REV. JAMES INNES

—◆—
The Augustus Bust

1940s

CASE No.4

AG BARNETT

The Augustus Bust

The vicarage at Hartley St Martin had not been properly heated since 1943 and there were no signs of this changing any time soon. James Innes stood in the kitchen in his overcoat, waiting for the kettle to boil, and wondered how the previous incumbent had lasted as long as he did before his body had simply given up.

The Reverend Fosse was not dead. He was in a sanatorium in Bath with a chest complaint that the bishop's secretary had described as "likely to persist." James had been sent to cover the parish until Fosse recovered or until the bishop found someone permanent, whichever came first. He had arrived on Friday the tenth, preached his first sermon on Sunday the twelfth, and been called to Hartley Grange on Monday the thirteenth because Major Ashwell was dead and somebody needed to say the right words.

The kettle boiled. He made tea, drank it standing up because sitting down in this kitchen meant committing to the cold, and walked the quarter mile to the Grange.

Hartley Grange was a handsome Georgian house that had spent the war being a signals school and a convalescent home and looked like it had endured both with difficulty. The plaster was cracked, the paint was peeling, and the entrance hall smelled of disinfectant and boiled cabbage. Eight wounded officers were convalescing in the upper

rooms. A matron and two nursing sisters kept order. Mrs Frome, the cook, kept everyone fed on whatever rationing allowed, which was not much and seemed to be getting less.

Major Ashwell had been found at the foot of the main staircase by Mrs Frome at a quarter to seven that morning. A marble bust of Augustus Caesar lay beside him on the flagstones. The official view, held by Sergeant Briggs of Wiltshire County Constabulary and by everyone who found official views comforting, was that the bust had toppled from its plinth on the half-landing and struck the Major as he passed below.

James had seen the body before it was removed. He had said the words. He had noticed the wound on the right temple and the position of the bust and said nothing about either, because saying nothing was a skill he had acquired during the war, in the desert, and refined in Italy and had never found a better use for than the first hour after a death.

Sergeant Briggs had given him the facts in the hallway: the bust on its plinth, Captain Vickers's complaint that it was a hazard, the chess game in the common room. He had also mentioned, almost as an afterthought, that the Major had been unhappy with one of the nursing sisters. Something about her and a young officer in the garden room. Briggs had delivered these details with the satisfaction of a man who believed the case was already closed.

He found Mrs Frome in the kitchen, making soup from something that was presumably a vegetable, but he couldn't guess as to which.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs Frome."

"Thank you, Reverend." She did not look up. She was fifty-six, grey-haired, solid. Her hands moved through the soup preparation without pause. Peel, chop, scrape. She did not look at what she was cutting. "He was a good man. Difficult, but good."

"How long had you worked for him?"

"Since Albert died. Thirty-four. My husband was the gardener here." She set down the ladle. "The Major took me on when Albert passed. Gave me the cottage at the end of the garden path. It's been my home ever since."

James sat at the kitchen table. It was the warmest room in the house, and after the vicarage, it was most welcome.

"You found him this morning."

"I came in to lay the fire in the morning room. He was lying at the foot of the stairs with the bust beside him." She paused. Her voice was steady. "His reading spectacles were still in his top pocket, and I all I could think of was how his hair was so untidy. So unlike him. Such a small thing to notice."

"People notice small things," James said. "Especially in shock."

"I suppose they do." She wiped her hands on her apron. "I brought him his cocoa last night at half nine. He was in the study, reading. I said goodnight. He didn't look up." She paused. "The bust of Augustus was on the console table at the foot of the stairs. He'd moved it there from storage yesterday afternoon. Getting ready for the house to come back to him, you see. The War Office is giving it back in March."

"Did you see anyone else in the hall when you left?"

"No. I locked the kitchen door at a quarter to ten and went to my cottage."

James nodded. He looked at Mrs Frome's hands. Clean, capable, strong. The hands of a woman who had been lifting pots and kneading dough and carrying trays for thirty years. He looked at the kitchen and the service corridor that led to the entrance hall, and back to the woman in front of him.

"Thank you, Mrs Frome. I'll say a prayer for him."

"He'd have liked that. He wasn't much for church, but he'd have liked it from you I'm sure."

* * *

Captain Vickers was in the common room, sitting by the fire with his leg up on a stool and a walking stick propped against the arm of his chair. He was thirty-four, lean, sharp-featured. A face, James thought, that might have been handsome before Normandy, but was something

else now. He saw that all too often.

"Reverend." He did not get up. "Come to save my soul?"

"Just visiting. How's the leg?"

"The leg is a bloody nuisance. Pardon the language."

"I've heard worse. I spent three years with the Warwickshires."

Vickers looked at him properly for the first time. "North Africa?"

"And Italy."

Something shifted. Vickers straightened slightly. The sharp edge dulled half a degree. "Normandy. Engineers. Got a beam through the leg at Caen."

"That's a bit unfortunate."

"That's one word for it." He almost smiled. "Sit down, Reverend. You're too tall to stand in this room."

James sat. "I understand you and Major Ashwell had words."

"Had words. That's a polite way to put it. I wrote to the War Office about the conditions here. The heating, the food, the general attitude that we should be grateful for a roof and shut up about it. Ashwell intercepted the letter. Called me an ungrateful whelp." He shrugged. "I called him a tyrant who treats wounded men like boarders in a workhouse. Two of the sisters heard it. Not my finest hour."

"And the bust?"

"What about it?"

"You mentioned to the sergeant that it was a hazard."

"It was a hazard. Perched on that narrow shelf on the half-landing. I'd said as much." He paused. "That doesn't mean I knocked it on his head."

"I didn't say it did."

"No. But you're thinking it." Vickers picked up his stick and turned it in his hands. "I was playing chess with Boyle in here until half ten. Then I went to bed."

James looked at the walking stick. "The sergeant mentioned your stick was found at the bottom of the stairs this morning."

"Was it? I must have left it. I do that sometimes. Sometimes when the leg eases off I lean it somewhere and forget it."

James nodded and said nothing. He had learned in Italy that saying nothing after a statement often produced a second statement, and the second one was usually more honest than the first. The silence stretched out between them.

Vickers looked at the fire. "The chess ended earlier than I said. Half nine, not half ten. I went to the dispensary for my medication. The matron had refused me a higher dose and I took one anyway." He met James's eyes. "That's what I'm hiding, badly I'm afraid, Reverend. Not a

murder. A morphine habit."

"We all wear the war," James said, and meant it kindly.

* * *

Sister Price was in the nurses' sitting room on the first floor, writing letters. She finished one, folded it, addressed the envelope, and started the next without looking up. She was forty-one, neat, professional. Nothing in her face that she had not put there on purpose.

"Reverend Innes. Do sit down."

"Thank you, Sister. I won't keep you." He sat in the chair by the window. The first-floor landing was visible through the open door. Below, the entrance hall. The staircase. The half-landing with its empty plinth.

"You were here last night?"

"In this room, from nine o'clock. Sister Gill was with me until ten. I checked on Lieutenant Crosby at ten. He'd been feverish."

"You went down to the ground floor?"

"No. I went along the first-floor corridor. On my way back I stopped at the landing and looked down. The hall was dark. I could see the bottom of the staircase. Nothing unusual."

"What time was that?"

"Just after ten."

James looked at the banister rail visible through the doorway. A scrap of blue wool was snagged on the wood at the turn of the half-landing.

"Your cardigan?"

She glanced at it. "I must have caught it at some point."

James nodded. He sat with the silence for a moment, as he did, and watched Sister Price not fill it. She was good at silence. Most nurses were. You did not survive years of wards and wounds and dying men by talking when there was nothing to say.

"The Major had concerns about you," James said, gently.

Her pen stopped. The composure held, but the pen stopped.

"He found you in the garden room with one of the officers."

"Lieutenant Hargreaves. Yes." She set the pen down.

"Major Ashwell told me he would inform the matron-in-chief. I would be transferred. At my age, that means the end of my career."

"A strong motive."

"For a great many things, Reverend. Not for murder." She picked up the pen. "I was in this room all evening. Sister Gill will confirm it. I did not go downstairs."

* * *

On his way out, James passed the study. The door was open. It was a handsome room, or had been once. Good shelves, a leather chair worn thin at the arms, a reading lamp angled over it. The cocoa cup was still on the side table, unwashed, with a skin forming on the surface. Beside it lay a pair of reading spectacles, one lens smudged with a thumbprint. The room smelled of old tobacco and cold air.

He closed the door quietly and left.

* * *

James walked back to the vicarage in the dark. The lane was unlit and the cold was the particular January cold of Wiltshire: damp, still, and patient. He filled his pipe in the doorway and got it lit on the third match.

He thought about the bust.

The sergeant believed it had fallen from the plinth. That was the comfortable answer. But James had stood on the half-landing that afternoon and looked at the plinth. It was built into the wall, level, with a shallow lip around the edge. He had placed his hand on it and pushed. Solid. He had stamped on the floorboards. Nothing moved. The bust could not have toppled without being lifted clear of the lip.

He thought about the wound. Right temple. But the staircase descended to the left. If the bust had fallen from above and to the left, the wound would be on the left side, or the top of the skull. Not the right temple. You hit the

right temple of a man facing you if you swing from his left. If you are standing beside him, or behind him, at the same level.

He thought about Mrs Frome's account. She had described finding the Major lying at the foot of the stairs, the bust beside him. His reading spectacles still in his top pocket.

But the spectacles had not been in his pocket. James had seen them himself, an hour ago, on the side table in the study, beside the cocoa cup.

Ashwell had been reading when Mrs Frome brought the cocoa. He would have had his spectacles on. When he finished and went to the staircase, he would have left them behind. By the time he reached the hall, the spectacles were in the study, not his pocket.

Mrs Frome described the spectacles in his pocket because she saw them there. But she saw them when she brought the cocoa. Not when she found the body.

She was describing what she saw at half past nine, alive. Not what she found at a quarter to seven, dead.

James stood in the doorway of the vicarage with his pipe going out and the dark lane ahead of him, and he thought about a cook who had worked in that house for years and knew every corridor and every routine. Who brought the cocoa at half past nine and knew the Major would cross the hall to the staircase at a quarter to ten, as he always did. Who had access to the service corridor that ran from the kitchen to the entrance hall. Who found the body the

next morning and spoke warmly and wept gently and volunteered that the bust had always been unstable on its plinth.

A small thing, the spectacles. The kind of thing a person says when the truth and the lie are very close together and the wrong detail slips across the gap.

James relit his pipe. It took two matches.

Something was very wrong at Hartley Grange, and it had nothing to do with a falling bust.

* * *

James rang Sergeant Briggs from the vicarage telephone at eight o'clock on Tuesday morning. The conversation was brief. He asked two questions. Briggs checked his notes and answered both, and the silence that followed was one of a man revising his opinion of a country vicar.

They met at the Grange at ten. The entrance hall was cold and the flagstones had been scrubbed but the stain was still visible at the foot of the staircase, darker than the stone around it.

"You said the wound was to the right temple," James said.

"The pathologist confirms it. Right temple, slightly upward angle."

"The staircase descends to the left. A bust falling from the half-landing would strike the top of the skull or the left side. Not the right temple. And not at an upward angle."

The blow came from someone standing at the same level, swinging the bust in an arc."

Briggs had his notebook open. "The pathologist did note the angle was unusual for a falling object."

"There's more. The blood and hair on the bust are on the brow ridge. The face. If the bust fell base-first, as it would from a plinth, the blood would be on the bottom. The bust was held face-forward and swung. The chip on the base came from being dropped on the flagstones afterwards, as staging."

"Someone hit him with it and then put the bust on the landing to make it look like it fell."

"The plinth has a raised lip. I tested it. The bust cannot topple without being lifted clear. It was never an accident."

Briggs wrote. He was a slow, careful man, which James preferred to the alternative.

"Captain Vickers," Briggs said.

"The argument was real. The anger was real. But the chess game ended at half nine, not half ten. Captain Boyle will confirm it. Vickers went to the dispensary for pain medication he'd been refused. That's what he was hiding. I think he only confessed to me as a man of the cloth and one who had seen action at that. He passed through the hall on his way upstairs at about ten to ten and left his walking stick at the newel post. An absent-minded habit, not evidence."

"Sister Price?"

"She was on the first floor all evening. Sister Gill will no doubt confirm it until ten o'clock. Price left to check on a patient, Lieutenant Crosby, along the first-floor corridor. She looked down from the landing at ten. The hall was dark. Ashwell was already dead by then. The wool on the banister is from days earlier. She snagged her cardigan on a loose nail."

"Which leaves Mrs Frome."

James nodded. "Mrs Frome told me she found the Major lying at the foot of the stairs with the bust beside him. She said his reading spectacles were still in his top pocket."

Briggs raised one eyebrow waiting for the point.

"Your report notes that no spectacles were found on the body. They were in the study, on the side table, beside the cocoa cup."

Briggs turned back through his notes. James waited. Outside, a blackbird was singing in the cold January air with an optimism that seemed excessive.

"Confirmed," Briggs said. "Spectacles recovered from the study. Not on the body."

"Mrs Frome brought the cocoa at half past nine. Ashwell was reading. He would have had his spectacles on. When he finished and walked to the hall, he left them behind. By the time he reached the staircase, the spectacles were in the study, not his pocket."

"She described what she saw when she brought the cocoa. Not what she found in the morning."

"The two memories are very close together. The cocoa at half nine, alive and reading. The body at a quarter to seven, dead on the flagstones. She mixed them. The spectacles belong to the earlier scene. It's the kind of mistake that only matters if you were there both times."

Briggs closed his notebook. Opened it again. "The service corridor."

"Runs from the kitchen to the entrance hall. I walked it this morning. There's a smear of white dust on the wall, waist height, three feet from the hall doorway. Marble dust. Someone carried the bust through that corridor and brushed against the wall."

"Nobody uses that corridor except Mrs Frome."

"Nobody uses that corridor except Mrs Frome."

They stood in the entrance hall, the two of them, with the scrubbed stain on the flagstones and the empty plinth above them on the half-landing and the house settling around them in the January cold.

"Why?" Briggs said. "Why would she kill him?"

"I don't know," James said. "But a woman who kills to protect something usually keeps it close. You'll want to search the kitchen."

Briggs looked at him for a long moment, then closed his notebook and walked down the service corridor towards

the kitchen. James waited in the entrance hall. The house was quiet. Somewhere upstairs, one of the convalescent officers was coughing. The sound drifted down through the cold stairwell.

Briggs came back twelve minutes later carrying a ledger bound in brown card. He set it on the console table and opened it without a word.

Mrs Frome's handwriting. Neat, careful columns. Three years of household stores sold to a man named Parfitt in Devizes. Tea, sugar, butter, coal. Everything that rationing was supposed to prevent.

"The Major must have found out about this," Briggs said.

"She told me he was a difficult man. That he'd been going through the house, getting it ready to take back from the War Office. A man like that would check the stores."

"And he confronted her."

"And she knew his routine. Cocoa at half nine. The hall at a quarter to ten. Every night, the same. She brought the cocoa, went back to the kitchen, waited for his footsteps, and came through the service corridor."

Briggs looked at the staircase. "The bust was on the console table. He'd moved it there from storage on Saturday afternoon."

"And she only had to lift it once."

The silence held. Briggs closed the ledger.

"The warm one," he said. "The one who cried."

"People can be both," James said. "In my experience, they usually are."

He left the sergeant to his work and walked back to the vicarage in the thin winter sunlight. The lane was muddy and the hedgerows were bare and England looked exactly like what it was. A country that had survived something terrible and was trying to remember how to live in its new world.

James filled his pipe. It took three matches. He was humming a hymn before he reached the gate, and he did not notice he was doing it.

* * *

Mrs Dorothy Frome was arrested on Wednesday 15th January 1946 at her cottage on the Hartley Grange estate. She was charged with the murder of Major Cedric Ashwell, MC, and with offences under the rationing regulations. The marble bust of Augustus Caesar was returned to storage. Captain Vickers was transferred to a hospital in London, where he received proper treatment for his injuries and, eventually, for the other thing. The Reverend Fosse returned to Hartley St Martin in March, and James Innes moved on to a parish in Shropshire where, he was assured, nothing ever happened.