

The London Syndicate

by
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To my father-in-law, Bob Klages, for having scads of Agatha Christie books around the house and thus unintentionally getting me hooked on the little Belgian detective. It's your fault.

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Chapter 1

The Trophy

I was in the kitchen brewing a late morning cup of tea when the door opened with a bang.

‘Hastings!’ came the high, energetic voice, followed by the shuffling sound of a hat and coat hung up in the hall. Into the kitchen bustled Hercule Poirot, delight radiating from his face.

‘I have wonderful news, my friend,’ he cried, and before I could step aside he clasped me in a continental embrace. ‘They hate me, Hastings!’

Although completely unable to account for why being hated was a cause for such mirth, I was used to my little friend’s eccentricities.

‘Splendid, old boy,’ I said ironically as I extracted myself and added milk to my cup. ‘Who hates you now? You were meeting with Japp this morning, I know. Have you gotten on his nerves one time too many?’

Poirot did not seem to perceive my jest. He had obtained a tin of chamomile tea and was preparing a beverage of his own, humming jovially. ‘I have spent the morning at the police station, cross-examining a man by the name of Whitcombe, a major player in the Battersea Scandal.’

I nodded at the reference to Poirot’s latest successful case. My friend continued.

‘Japp informed me that Whitcombe had been double-crossed by his associates, and in the course of careful questioning, we have determined that he was working in league with a crime

syndicate on a scale of which we had not dreamed. *Mon ami*, I am disliked and feared by a most notorious criminal organisation!

And preening rapturously, he seated himself opposite me with his tea.

I was torn between amusement at his incorrigible vanity, and a fair bit of alarm at the notion of dangerous criminals with a vendetta against my friend. Only Poirot would take this kind of announcement as nothing more than a supreme compliment to his stellar reputation!

‘For goodness’ sake, tell me about it,’ I pressed. ‘What did you learn from Whitcombe?’

Poirot carefully dabbed at his moustache and set down his cup.

‘The group is commonly known as the London Syndicate. It seems as though a number of crimes we had previously thought disconnected and isolated were, in fact, organised by this group. They deal in all manner of robbery, smuggling, fraud, kidnapping, *tout imaginable*. With one exception— they are not notorious murderers. While certain actors in their midst can be vicious in the extreme, they seem to frown upon murder as being insufficiently creative and subtle in achieving their ends. And, of course, it is bad for business. No, they are not fools.’ He stared dreamily into space.

It seemed prudent to interrupt his transports with a dose of reality. ‘All the same, Poirot, any dog will bite if sufficiently provoked. You can’t count on endless gentlemanly behaviour from that sort of outfit.’

‘No, my friend, you are right. We are not dealing with the bastion of human kindness. There is brutality. There are those in the Syndicate who collect symbols of conquest from their victims. And Whitcombe had the kindness to relay a few of their threats for my information.’

My eyebrows rose, and he went on:

‘Any gang will threaten, *mon ami*. That is simply *par for the course*, as you English with the golf mania would say. Me,’ he shrugged dismissively, ‘I have received threats before, and will again. It is part of the job. All the same, the notion of dealing with

criminals who are *artistes*, who, in the name of *le sport*, do not wantonly murder... it is a most pleasing thought.'

I hardly shared Poirot's views on sportsmanlike conduct, but I could see that my friend was in no state to be reasoned with. We retreated to the sitting room, Poirot to his desk and I to the sofa, and he began to sort through the morning post. Setting down three bills, he regarded a fourth envelope with some interest. He carefully slit it open with a silver paper knife set with a large, deep blue lapis cabochon.

'Ah,' he said with disappointment upon reading it. 'It is another elderly lady who has mislaid her brooch. It has been missing for some time, and she decides at last to do something; *quel dommage*. Yet I very much fear,' he said ruefully, casting a glance at his stack of bills, 'that I must take this job.'

'Well,' I said laughing, 'You may yet cross swords with your notorious criminals. In the meantime, there's the daily grind to deal with— rich old ladies.'

After opening the rest of his mail and considering it indifferently, Poirot placed it in a neat stack on the desk and carefully repositioned his paper knife, with parallel accuracy, a little above the stack. He noted again the address of his lady correspondent, then rose immediately and headed toward the door.

'I shall return forthwith, Hastings. This will not take long.' And collecting his personal effects, he swept out again.

Several minutes later, I received some unexpected callers to the flat— two well-dressed young men, perhaps in their late twenties. They introduced themselves as Mr Brian Westhelm and Mr Matthew Carrington. I explained that Poirot was out, but that I could hear their concern on his behalf.

'Pleased to meet you, Captain Hastings,' said Westhelm, shaking my hand firmly. He was of medium height and weedy, with ash-blond hair and freckles. He exhaled confidence and warmth, and I immediately took a liking to him.

‘Carrington and I are cousins. We’ve discussed our problem, and he recommended that we seek advice from M. Poirot.’

Matthew Carrington shook my hand in his turn. I could see the definite family resemblance: they had the same hair, freckles, and steel-grey eyes; but Carrington was stockier, and his eyes held a pronounced touch of far-off sadness.

I gestured them into the sitting room and asked about their trouble. Neither man sat, but Westhelm began at once.

‘It’s our aunt, you see. She had misplaced a rather valuable item of jewellery last week...’

‘Oh!’ I interrupted, striding over to Poirot’s desk and taking a seat. This sounded familiar. ‘And is the name of your aunt—’ (I picked up the stack of mail and scrutinised the lady’s name on the top envelope) ‘—Mrs Adelaine Brooks?’

Both men, who had followed me to the desk, stared at me. For a moment I fancied that I had impressed them, but Carrington said, ‘No, not at all. Her name is Lady Margaret Westhelm.’

‘I see,’ I said, deflated. Tossing the stack of mail onto the desk again, I added: ‘Please continue.’

Mr Westhelm cast a curious glance at the envelopes before resuming his discourse.

‘Lady Margaret was married to my father’s oldest brother. My cousin and I were calling on our aunt at Rathene Hall two weeks ago when she told us that she couldn’t seem to find her turquoise necklace. It was a valuable piece, set in gold, and one that I’ve seen countless times. Well, a few days ago I spoke to her on the phone, and she mentioned that she’d found it again— seems it was in her armoire the whole time. We went back for another visit and saw the necklace. Captain Hastings, I was sure that something was wrong with it. Auntie doesn’t have the best eyesight, but the necklace didn’t look quite right to me.’

‘I agreed,’ added Carrington, ‘and the two of us talked it over. I have an acquaintance in the neighbourhood who knows a thing or two about jewellery, and we brought him round to tea at Auntie’s that afternoon. Sure enough, as he was leaving, he confided to Brian and myself that the necklace was certainly not genuine.’

Now Carrington was staring at Poirot's stack of mail, but with a more abstracted manner. He seemed to have fallen into a brown study. The more energetic Brian Westhelm resumed the narrative.

'We've kept the matter quiet so far. Matthew suggested bringing in M. Poirot, in the hope that it could be dealt with discreetly.'

'Yes, Poirot has had wide experience in matters of this sort,' I said, removing the envelope of Mrs Adelaine Brooks from under Carrington's glazed expression, and frowning at him a little suspiciously. He didn't seem to notice, however, and continued to look down at Poirot's bills. Finally he looked up again, as though remembering his purpose in coming.

'Captain Hastings, would it be possible for you and M. Poirot to come round to our aunt's house this afternoon? We have not yet told her about her necklace, and I daresay the truth of the matter would come better from the two of you. It will comfort her to speak to someone she knows is on the case.'

When Poirot returned, I met him in the hall.

'You missed some visitors,' I said straightaway, as he doffed his hat and coat. 'Two men. Apparently their aunt, a Lady Westhelm, had missed a piece of jewellery herself, like your Mrs Brooks, and—'

Now it was Poirot's turn to interrupt: 'And she found it again some time later, and it was discovered to be a forgery.'

Seeing the stricken expression on my face, he added, 'I found the brooch of Mrs Brooks; or rather, I did not find it. I located for her, in her house, a brooch of identical description, set with pearls and rubies. It was paste. The first thing I do, you comprehend, when discovering missing jewels is to confirm their authenticity. You do remember, *mon ami*, the case of Mrs Opalsen's pearls at the Grand Metropolitan?'

I nodded, bewildered at this development.

‘And also,’ he continued with a twinkle, ‘Mrs Brooks is acquainted with Lady Westhelm, and they had already commiserated on their missing jewels. On my visit I was told about Lady Westhelm's missing necklace and deduced a second forgery.’

Steering me into the sitting room, Poirot said, ‘Now tell me everything, my dear Hastings, everything about the visitors who came to call— with method, if you please!’

I related the conversation we had shared as thoroughly as I could. Poirot nodded occasionally, then walked over to his desk to sit. Suddenly I heard an exclamation.

‘*Sacré!* You have been sitting at my desk again, Hastings!’

Shamefacedly, I admitted the fact. Poirot picked up his stack of mail, which I had shuffled untidily, and proceeded to make the stack perfectly neat again alongside the paper knife.

‘Westhelm seemed awfully curious about that letter from Mrs Brooks of yours,’ I said. ‘And so did Carrington, come to think of it. Spacey sort of chap. Even when I moved the letter, he just kept on staring down at your bills as though they puzzled him.’

‘Is that so?’ murmured Poirot. ‘That is most interesting.’

He picked up the envelope containing Mrs Brooks’ letter and examined it. Then, he slowly picked up the envelopes with the bills and examined them, one at a time. I could not see the point of this little exercise in the slightest, but when he got to the final bill (from his tailor), I heard a faint ‘Ah!’

Poirot was standing very still, looking at the papers in his hands, his eyes gleaming like a cat’s. ‘I wonder.’

‘What is it?’ I asked, devoured by curiosity.

‘A little idea, *mon ami*, that is all. *C’est curieux.*’

‘Do you think that Carrington knew about Mrs Brooks’ robbery— that he in fact planned it, as well as the theft from his aunt?’ I wondered, though what this had to do with Poirot’s bills I could not begin to guess.

‘As usual, you misapprehend my train of thought, Hastings. And I could not possibly know anything of the sort at this moment. But clearly, these two women’s cases are connected; of that there is no doubt. I believe we shall have to pay a visit to this Lady

Westhelm, *tout de suite*. But first, we replenish the grey cells with *le déjeuner*.’

He rose from the desk, and we prepared to leave together.

After lunch, I drove the two of us to Rathene Hall, home of Lady Westhelm. A surly butler opened the door to us, Poirot presented his card with a flourish, and we were shown in.

Westhelm and Carrington descended the stairs to meet us. They greeted Poirot with enthusiasm, and led us into a parlour where the lady sat in state.

Lady Westhelm had that quality, possessed by any number of aristocratic women, of appearing both gracious and slightly forbidding, with tightly-bound, greying hair and an imperious expression. Nearby, a young lady’s maid stood, pretty and efficient-looking, arranging a vase of flowers on a nearby table. She started visibly when the four of us appeared, and I followed a penetrating and questioning gaze from her to Mr Westhelm. I could not make out the expression he returned, but the girl’s hand suddenly stole to her apron pocket, which she touched quickly before resuming her task. Poirot seemed to notice, too. But he glanced away again as though disinterested and approached the older woman.

‘Madame,’ said Poirot to Lady Westhelm with a little bow, ‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Earlier today, I have been to see a friend of yours, Mrs Adelaine Brooks, in my professional capacity.’

Lady Westhelm nodded, unsurprised.

‘Adelaine told me some weeks ago that she was unable to find her brooch. She mentioned several times that she thought of consulting you.’

The lady eyed Poirot skeptically, taking in his dandified and distinctly foreign appearance. ‘But one should not jump to conclusions,’ she went on. ‘Getting outsiders involved in domestic affairs should be a *last* resort, I feel. I advised her to continue looking for it herself. These things turn up after some time. Why, even I have misplaced some jewels rather recently, but they have

been found again. Is that why my nephews have bidden you to come see me?’

‘These gentlemen,’ said Poirot, ‘were concerned that the necklace you recovered might be a forgery. The brooch of Mrs Brooks, which I located in her house today, was itself a cleverly-executed paste copy. If you would be so amiable as to perhaps let me see this necklace, I can confirm how things stand.’

The words certainly had a ruffling effect on Lady Westhelm. She turned to her young maid and said sharply: ‘Fetch the turquoise necklace, Parker.’

The maid cast an alarmed look at all of us, and another fleeting glance at Mr Westhelm, before hurrying out of the room.

She returned in a moment with a small black jewel case, and at a sign from her mistress, handed it to Poirot. He opened the case and lifted out a gold necklace dripping with turquoise. Retrieving his pince-nez, he proceeded to make a careful examination of the piece, then put it down with a sigh, turning to Westhelm and Carrington.

‘Your fears are confirmed,’ he said, adding to Lady Westhelm: ‘It is true. This piece is a worthless forgery.’

I pass over the extent of the great lady’s subsequent litany of disbelief, acceptance, shrieks, and general commotion, which Poirot pacified somewhat by promising to do all that he could for her. He proposed to question the members of the household in turn to glean any information that each could remember, insisting that the memories could be best recovered by questioning each person individually.

Carrington willingly accompanied Poirot and myself into a little alcove in the hall, while Westhelm and the maid waited in a study opposite. The door was open, and I could see them clearly from our position. Their heads were together and they conversed in low tones that seemed most uncommon for a maid to adopt with a nephew of her mistress. A little bewildered, I turned back to Poirot, who was asking Carrington about the family and household in general; was it a harmonious one?

‘Oh, Auntie’s not a bad sort, once you get used to her,’ said Carrington with feeling. ‘She’s rather old-fashioned in her ideas

about people, of course, but I suppose that's to be expected. Brian— Mr Westhelm, that is—and I get on wonderfully with each other, but I've gotten the feeling lately that he and Auntie have done a bit of quarrelling. Poor devil's had some trouble with some investments, and his creditors are starting to come round. I'm not too badly off and have offered some assistance, but he won't hear of it.'

'This falling out— was it because he asked Lady Westhelm for assistance?'

'No, it's not that,' Carrington said, hesitating. His eyes flickered into the room across the hall where his cousin stood. Then he crossed his arms, his sad eyes looked into Poirot's, and he said enigmatically: 'Auntie can be damned unfair about people sometimes.'

'I comprehend, monsieur.' I wondered what Poirot had comprehended, because the statement communicated very little to me. 'Now, what can you tell me of the lady's maid, Mlle Parker? She was in the habit of handling her mistress's jewels, yes?'

'Miss Nettie Parker took the job of lady's maid here about a month and a half ago, I understand. She's done jobs as companion or maid for several of the matrons in the neighbourhood. I suppose she frequently handled Auntie's jewellery. But if you're asking whether she's likely to be a thief, I'd call that nonsense. A nice girl, perhaps a little simple sometimes. Brian's here visiting more often than I am, and I know he thinks she's a brick.'

'Thank you. If you would have the kindness to wait in the parlour with your aunt while I speak to your cousin, I would be much obliged.' Poirot bowed, and Carrington departed.

My friend turned to me. 'Retrieve M. Westhelm for me, please, Hastings.'

I ducked out of the alcove and made for the open study door, but what I saw brought me to an abrupt halt. It happened quickly, but the gesture was unmistakable. It was Miss Parker, one moment with an opened envelope in her hand, whipped from her apron pocket... the next moment, she had thrown it into the fire in the grate.

I turned back to Poirot, aghast. ‘Did you see that?’ I whispered.

His eyes narrowed. ‘*Oui, mon ami,*’ he replied, ‘and so did Westhelm. Yes, I should like to speak with him next.’

When Westhelm had been brought to our alcove, leaving Miss Parker alone in the study, Poirot dropped his voice to address him.

‘Monsieur, I want you to think very carefully before you answer my question. The necklace of Lady Westhelm, when she thought it to have been found. You saw it a few days ago, and you were suspicious. Recall— what about that necklace did not look quite right to you?’

Westhelm appeared to be concentrating deeply.

‘I’m sure I couldn’t say. I’d no idea at the time, only the impression that something was wrong. But—’ he snapped his fingers suddenly— ‘I think it might have been the stones themselves. Yes, it was. The pattern on them looked quite different.’

‘I see,’ said Poirot. He looked satisfied, but grave. ‘It would be in your best interests to keep that information to yourself for the present, monsieur. I, Poirot, advise this most firmly. And perhaps, you would also now be good enough to tell me what your relationship is with the lady’s maid, Mlle Parker.’

Westhelm froze. Clearly he was not expecting the question.

‘I see you are not interested in answering. *Eh bien,* perhaps I can try a different tack: what was in the envelope Miss Parker burned in the grate just now, in the study?’

‘That,’ the young man said stiffly, ‘is none of your business. You’ve been asked here to investigate this business with my aunt’s necklace, not pry into other matters.’

‘*Pardon,* I am most maladroit. I ask you, then, what I asked your cousin: your family in this place, they are harmonious? And your aunt, you get along?’

Westhelm’s underlying frustration was more evident than ever. ‘I have been quite harmonious with all my relations... but Auntie... she can be unreasonable sometimes.’

‘Thank you, monsieur,’ Poirot repeated with a bow, and again requested that he join his aunt and cousin in the parlour while he concluded his interviews with Miss Parker.

Westhelm left, looking discomfited, and Poirot surprised me by asking me to join them as well.

‘I shall not be long with mademoiselle,’ he said firmly.

I took my leave reluctantly, wholly baffled by Poirot’s abrupt lines of inquiry. From my point of view, we did not seem to have gained any useful information at all!

When we bade farewell to the household of Lady Westhelm shortly thereafter, Poirot announced that he had some further investigations to conduct that would take him a full week. He did not want to trouble Lady Westhelm, he said, but would the two cousins and Miss Parker please call on us at Whitehaven Mansions one week from today, at which point he was sure to have more information to share? They agreed: Westhelm a little sullenly, Carrington with visible relief, and Miss Parker with bemused hesitation.

I was eager to see how Poirot meant to proceed with his investigations in the following week; figure to yourself my intense annoyance when he seemed to do absolutely nothing at all! He did not even deign to discuss the case with me.

‘But I have done my work, *mon ami*,’ he insisted as he sat at his desk, trimming his moustache complacently. ‘I placed a call to Chief Inspector Japp. He will be of great assistance.’

I was incensed at the notion of Poirot just handing this over to Scotland Yard without further legwork— two different jewel robbery cases, no less— but I learned long ago that doing battle with Poirot at his most inscrutable was a losing game.

Our visitors arrived together the following week, and Poirot greeted them graciously. He steered everyone straight into the kitchen, where he had prepared sandwiches and tea.

‘Permit me, Hastings,’ he said quietly, and he opened again the front door I had just shut, leaving it slightly ajar. A single look

from him enjoined me to leave it so and say nothing. I obeyed, mystified.

We all settled down to our refreshment. Poirot regretfully informed our guests that there had not been many developments yet, but shared some thoughts and speculations about elderly ladies as victims of jewel robberies in the abstract, relating a few of his past cases. Suddenly, he gave a sharp cry and reached toward his mouth.

Mon Dieu, it is the toothache! It has troubled me for some days, has it not, Hastings?’

This was a clear sham, the first I’d heard of a toothache. I managed to return a sympathetic expression.

‘A little brandy would be of great relief,’ he added. Carrington hopped up to fetch the brandy from the sitting room, and Poirot received it with many thanks.

At length, Westhelm said, ‘Well, I suppose we must be going.’ The party rose from the table and prepared to depart.

‘*Bien sûr*, my friend, although, perhaps first...’ he paused. Our three visitors looked up. Poirot beckoned us into the sitting room, and as we entered, he strode over to his desk, standing behind it and facing us. He bent down to make some observation, then gave a sharp nod and looked up at us again.

‘And now perhaps, M. Carrington,’ he said pleasantly, ‘you will be so good as to replace that which you removed from my desk just now.’

The accusation took my breath away! I looked between Poirot and the astonished Carrington, then down at Poirot’s desk. Nothing at all seemed to be missing from it; every implement was in its usual perfect order. What on earth did he mean?

Slowly, Carrington approached the desk, staring at Poirot.

‘I know everything,’ my little friend said quietly. ‘It would be wiser not to play the farce with Hercule Poirot.’

Still staring at Poirot (and, I noticed, with increasing disfavour), Carrington reached into his pocket and drew out a shining, silver knife. Instinctively I rushed forward in alarm, but Poirot quelled me with a gesture of his hand.

‘It is all right, Hastings,’ he said calmly. ‘He knows better than to attack, particularly in a room full of witnesses.’

Carrington, looking steadily at Poirot, carefully laid the knife down in front of him. It was then that I noticed: the knife was identical to the paper knife already on Poirot’s desk! Carrington made to reach for the other knife, but Poirot said, ‘No, monsieur, I am afraid you must leave it. It is evidence. And the Chief Inspector Japp might not wish for you to carry even a comparatively dull knife with you into the police car. Is it not so?’

Poirot nodded pointedly across the room and down the hall, and to our ever-mounting amazement, there stood Japp behind us in the entrance hall!

‘Afternoon, Poirot. I got your invitation, and I think you mentioned there was a person here I might like to have a little chat with.’

‘So it was Carrington after all,’ I breathed, as Japp let him out of the flat. Poirot was escorting the shocked Brian Westhelm and Nettie Parker to the door, along with another constable, where they would be taken to the police station for further questioning. My friend promised to join them shortly to explain, and when the others had left, he turned to me with a satisfied air.

‘They weren’t all in on it, were they?’ I said in disbelief.

‘Oh, no, *mon ami*. Westhelm and the maid are quite innocent. You were wondering about the burned envelope and the suspicious behaviour of the two during our visit to Lady Westhelm, *hein?* Mlle Parker had not been informed that I was visiting, and at the sudden sight of me, she was *bouleversée*. From the eyes the two were giving each other (how do you not notice such things, my poor friend; and with your flair for the obvious!) it was unmistakable that she and Westhelm had formed an attachment which would certainly have been regarded scornfully by Lady Westhelm, who was beginning to suspect. The girl had a private letter in her pocket, perhaps with terms of affection from Westhelm. Then, this Belgian gentleman shows up, prying and asking questions! She

panicked, afraid that I would discover all and divulge the truth to her mistress. The letter was burned in a brief moment of panic, and quite unnecessarily. I guessed as much and asked her about it when I interviewed her privately. She admitted it, and I assured her of my discretion. *C'est tout.*'

'It was Carrington after all,' I repeated, trying (and failing) to bring myself *au courant* of the situation.

'Yes, my friend, and your acute powers of observation, as well as a chance remark, gave me just the little idea I needed to make a test.' He clapped me on the arm fondly, which caused him to notice and then brush off a speck of some foreign matter from my jacket front.

'Let us start earlier.' He gestured back to his desk, and we returned to it. 'When you mentioned Carrington concentrating on the mail on my desk during his first visit, I could not think of a reasonable explanation for his behaviour, other than simple vagueness of manner. But it did not satisfy me. I could find no *logique* in the matter, but when I examined the cut edges of the envelopes, a little idea, as you know, came into my mind.

'Perhaps, the man had not been staring down at my mail at all. Perhaps he had been staring at *this*.' And Poirot held out his silver paper knife, set with the exquisite blue lapis lazuli. 'And studying it intently with a plan to make a duplicate, *mon ami*, with the practiced eye of the professional thief. After all, we were at that moment tracking a thief who left jewellery replicas behind him... it was an interesting line of speculation, that.'

'But why take such a risk? Stealing and duplicating an item from a celebrated detective! And suggesting to his cousin that they call you in to start with.'

'Exactly, Hastings, *c'est ça!* That is why he did it! It was a chance he took, indeed, and it was his downfall. He did not expect me to notice the substitution, at least not immediately, and meanwhile he took steps to assign guilt of the other thefts to the maid, and perhaps also to his cousin by association. Think of how he drew my attention to the maid's recent employment and her previous employment with other elderly ladies, Westhelm's need for funds and his quarrelling with the aunt! Carrington would have

escaped the law and scored a major *coup* against Hercule Poirot for the London Syndicate!

‘Why do you assume he works for the Syndicate?’ I asked, puzzled.

‘Ah, *parbleu*, is it that you still do not understand? Did I not tell you last week that it was discovered that members of this gang seek to obtain trophies from their adversaries? This was to be Carrington’s trophy, *mon ami*.’

He gesticulated with his paper knife, causing me to flinch slightly as it flew past my nose.

‘It is not a piece of the most staggering value, to be sure, but it would represent a victorious feat of cunning and daring to that unscrupulous man. He had skill, to be sure; an excellent memory, and a string of successes behind him. *Peut-être*, one of the chief players the Syndicate has for this line of jewel fraud. I have no doubt that he has organised many such thefts of this kind—jewels from old ladies and other harmless folk. Ha, but he made a fatal mistake, in his arrogance and pride, to take on Poirot!’

As he puffed out his chest and drew himself up to his full five feet and four inches, I wondered if Poirot sensed any irony in accusing Carrington of exaggerated pride.

‘Why call in his friend the jewel expert to determine his aunt’s necklace was faked? Was that, as well as his consultation of you, meant to be a cover of sorts?’

‘*Oui*, there is that,’ replied Poirot, straightening his pen tray which I had nudged a little askew. ‘Recall, if you will, the fact that Lady Westhelm was acquainted with Mrs Brooks, who had mentioned to her the missing brooch. Nothing would be more natural than also mentioning that she was thinking of consulting me. Carrington had spoken with his aunt; he knew that I would soon be on the track of the robberies. By suggesting to M. Westhelm that I be consulted, he appears less suspicious. Also, by bringing in his friend the “jewel expert”—did it not strike you, Hastings, that he happened to have a jewel expert friend?—he attempted to conceal the fact that he regularly dealt in jewels himself.’

Taking the paper knife from Poirot and lifting its replica from its place on the desk, I said, 'It's remarkable that you could tell so easily that this knife was a replica at all. They look tremendously alike. Carrington went into the sitting room for the brandy, of course, and I see that you arranged that— but you couldn't have seen him make the switch. You were still just guessing at that point, surely.'

'But if my guess proved right, Hastings, I knew I would find a replica on my desk. And I did. How did I know?'

He pointed to the two knives in my hands. 'Use the eyes that the good God gave you, *mon ami!* The lapis gem. See you not that the matrix and inclusions of these two stones are completely different? Lapis is a very commonly-faked stone, but it is not so easy to try to duplicate any one particular stone of its kind. Each stone has its own unique inclusions and a distinctive appearance that would not be as immediately obvious in, *par exemple*, a transparent gem.

'Our thief made the same mistake with his aunt's turquoise necklace. Do you remember what Westhelm said alerted him, at a glance, to the fact that the necklace was not genuine? He said that the stones looked different! The dark veins of turquoise stones are very striking and distinctive— a fingerprint of sorts. An observant person who had seen that necklace several times would notice straightaway that a duplicate looked wrong; other turquoises, either real or fake, would stand out. However, an unobservant person, or one with poor eyesight, might not notice at all.

'I did not want Westhelm to alert his cousin to his observation of the stones, which was the precise nature of the thief's failure. For a substitution that might possibly have been brought home to himself, he should have chosen the sort of jewels that were not so individually distinctive. I saw that there was a chance that, having studied my silver knife, Carrington was hoping to effect a substitution there, and I could get him to repeat that error and thereby incriminate himself. If Westhelm had been the guilty party, he would never have pointed out to me the glaring difference in the necklace's stones, and having thus warned me of

his mistake, then tried to abscond with my paper knife while making the same mistake again!

Eh bien, I make it clear to Carrington that he would be invited back to our flat in a week's time. How relieved he looked! *Tout à fait*, but how easy it would be! Plenty of time to create his replica, and there would be no need even to break into our flat to substitute the knife. He'd walk out the flat with my knife in his pocket, in full view of Poirot, pretty as you please!

Poirot laughed, perhaps a little maliciously, and took the matching knives from me.

'And now, what have we? It is not *they* who have a trophy of their adversary, but I, Poirot, have taken one instead!'

Unable to resist a smile at his giddy self-satisfaction, I said:

'One more thing... you said earlier that a chance remark I made helped put you on the right track. It wasn't the observation about Carrington staring at your desk, but something else?'

Oui, mon ami,' beamed Poirot. He held up the paper knives. 'When I first received Mrs Brooks' letter (with disappointment), you comforted me with the notion that I might yet *cross swords* with the London Syndicate. Your good Chesterton, he has written, has he not, that the knife— which you might find in your pocket— is simply a short sword?'

Poirot crossed the paper knives before him and grinned up at me from beneath his splendid moustache.

'We have crossed swords indeed... and Poirot... he has triumphed.'

Chapter 2

The Rival Gang

It was an ordinary summer evening, a Wednesday. I had spent the day visiting friends several blocks away from the flat which Poirot and I shared, and had been taking advantage of the hazy, comfortable summer evenings for lengthy strolls about the neighbourhood. The hour was late, and the sun had long since set. Stars were appearing in the darkening sky, and as I rounded the corner of the second block of my familiar route, my eye was drawn to the somewhat dilapidated warehouse that stood a little way back from the street.

It was, as usual, a lonely, forbidding-looking place; but something out of the ordinary struck me. Peering across the street into the gloom, my eyes fastened on a few narrow beams of light from electric torches. A small band of people were standing just outside the building in the side lane, and—were my ears deceiving me?—I heard a funny, muffled sound. It suggested something like a cry for help, but I could not be sure.

Without hesitation, I strode across the lamp-lit street and made my way toward the mysterious figures. The shadows closed in again as I approached. But before I could say a word, I felt a sharp shove from behind. Stumbling and exclaiming in surprise, I looked up to see the figures coming up quickly. A heavy hand clamped onto my shoulder, preventing me from rising. When the figures came into full view, my blood froze.

I had heard of *Mauta* before—heard of the gang's ties to a certain Indian family; their occasional clashes and animosities with

the larger and better-organised London Syndicate; their distinctive scarlet insignia. But as the swarthy faces of four ruthless-looking men, dark scarves on their heads, glared down at me, one particular detail about the gang swam before my mind: unlike the Syndicate, they had no compunctions about murder. Also unlike the larger gang, Mauta was, as far as anyone knew, a very small and comparatively inactive band. But the incidences that had been connected with their name— mostly related to drug-smuggling— had also involved vicious incidences of murder. I'd no idea that they had operations anywhere near this neighbourhood.

Struggling against the pressure on my shoulder, I managed to get to my feet, casting a quick glance around for a possible source of that muffled cry I'd heard. But I saw no one else at all in that shadowy lane.

'Look here—' I said, as steadily as I could manage, but the tallest of the four shadowy men cut off my feeble protestation.

'I know who you are,' he said, a slightly eastern inflection in his growling voice. He shone his torch in my face. 'You work with the detective Poirot. He is a busybody. Mauta has engagements that will not be interrupted by any interfering investigator. You tell him that.'

I forced myself to squint through the blazing light into the dark, shadowed face. His eyes were hard and black. The men on either side of me closed in and gripped my arms painfully. The scarlet insignia of Mauta winked out of the darkness from their scarves. In spite of the danger, their insolence galled me, and I found myself speaking.

'Poirot doesn't respond to threats, especially from the likes of you.'

The initial blow came so swiftly, I hardly remember feeling anything. There was a dizzying moment of blackness; then as the light swam back into view, so did the realisation of pain. Several blows followed, then stopped suddenly. The man who had been speaking to me had presumably stayed the attack. He stooped down to where I was sprawled on the ground.

'Do you know what we could do to that little Belgian?' he hissed softly. 'He would not last five minutes.' I started and tried to

raise myself up on my hands, but my limbs were like lead. The man's tone was caustic.

'Perhaps you think your friend is too smart for us. But there is such a thing as being caught unawares. And for those caught by Mauta... there is no escape.'

My head was spinning, and the torch light seemed to grow dimmer. When I felt myself fully coming to once more and could sit up, I realised that it had indeed grown dimmer; the men had retreated and vanished, leaving me alone in the dark lane. I paused and took a few deep breaths. The action of my lungs was sore inside my chest, which had been struck several times. I rose shakily to my feet, my heart pounding, and found that I could walk. As quickly as I could manage, I strode back across the street and back to my regular route home.

The thought had taken hold that I must get back to the flat and find Poirot. My regular action of passing that warehouse on my walks must have spooked the gang called Mauta, and they thought Poirot and I knew something of their movements. Was that location used for their drug smuggling? Of one thing, I was certain: Poirot was not currently on a case involving Mauta, nor smuggling of any kind. He had been tracking certain movements of the London Syndicate, a gang that could only be considered a rival of Mauta. In a way, my encounter had been fortuitous. In their determination not to have Poirot on their track, they had actually given themselves away. Some crime was certainly imminent.

I paused, worried. The gang had told me to pass along their warning. Poirot himself would want me to tell him what had happened that night. But if I did? Surely he would throw himself into the case. He was so confoundedly sure of himself, but what he was up against! I knew that my friend was no coward. He had worked undercover against the Bosch in Belgium and France and had taken a bullet. In the police force, he had once shot a man who was on a murderous rampage. But nowadays, I had a difficult time reconciling that past character with my eccentric, elegantly-dressed

little friend, for whom dust and tight patent leather shoes were about the most galling physical misfortunes he was likely to encounter. The dark man was right: brilliant as he undoubtedly was, Poirot would not last five minutes if taken unaware by a force like Mauta. I'd had a lucky escape myself.

Feeling weary with bruises and mental exhaustion, I looked up to suddenly find myself at our block of flats. I'd reached my decision: Poirot must not be told about the events of this evening. Going after the London Syndicate was one thing, but Mauta... no, that was against all reason and common sense.

I ascended to our floor and quietly unlocked the door of the flat. As I entered, Poirot's voice rang out at once from the sitting room.

'Hastings, my friend, you arrive! Somewhat later than usual, *n'est-ce pas?*'

Avoiding his line of sight, I replied something about my extended visit with friends, and fancying a bath before bed. Then I divested myself of my jacket and slipped quickly into the bathroom. Yes, I looked a dishevelled mess, all right. Insofar as anyone could hide evidence from Poirot, such was my goal. I drew the bath and spent the next twenty minutes scrubbing away all traces of grime and trying to relax my aching body, which was indeed sporting a number of dark purple discolourations. By the time I was in my pajamas and dressing gown, I judged it safe to make an appearance.

Poirot, immaculate in a rather garish dressing gown of his own, was settled serenely in a very square armchair, reading a letter. The empty cup that had held his evening hot chocolate sat on the nearby table. He looked up quickly as I entered and removed his pince-nez. I thought of the cold, dark eyes of the Indian gang leader and how different they were from Poirot's warm, frank ones. Then I imagined what my friend might look like now if he'd been with me on my evening walk. Unable to hide a wince, I saw the small frown gathering between Poirot's eyes in return. He had, in the past, entertained some truly ridiculous notions about what he called my 'speaking countenance,' but on

this occasion, I realised that I had in fact let my guard down for a moment. I hastened to rearrange my features.

‘Lovely night for a stroll,’ I said in what I hoped was a light, airy voice. ‘Good visit with old Hodgkins. You’re up rather late yourself, aren’t you?’

Rising to his feet, Poirot tucked away the pince-nez and smiled. ‘I was hoping for an audience with your good self.’ He tapped the letter in his hand. ‘Japp has sent some communications about our friends the London Syndicate.’

I was suddenly struck by how very small he looked. His overweening self-confidence (not to mention his impressive and luxuriant moustaches) often managed to disguise the fact.

‘Look here, Poirot,’ I said with a sigh. ‘The odd murder case or jewel robbery are one thing. Organised crime on a large scale is rather another, don’t you think?’

My friend’s eyebrows rose. ‘Is this my friend Hastings who speaks? Who is always so eager and willing to go after criminals of every stripe? *Mon Dieu*, but I do not believe it!’

Irritably, I threw myself into the other armchair and said, ‘I’d rather you not get mixed up in criminal gangs, thank you. I don’t fancy attending your funeral just yet.’

‘Ah, that troubles you, my friend? You have the good heart. But this organisation, the London Syndicate, is a local one— and though they are cunning, they are not eager to kill.’

‘I know you’ve been keen on that outfit lately, but I daresay there’s worse out there who wouldn’t stick at murder,’ I muttered morosely, picking up the evening post and tossing it aside again without a glance. ‘Japp ought to deal with crime rings himself.’

Poirot surveyed me cautiously, his letter still in hand.

‘I don’t suppose,’ he said gently, ‘that you yourself have had any recent communications with the London Syndicate?’

That was far too close to the mark. Really, Poirot was a deuce for knowing things!

‘No,’ I said truthfully. ‘But I do think you ought to be more careful.’

Poirot picked up the newspaper I had flung away and neatly laid it on the table. He turned to me where I sat and said kindly, ‘I

see you are not in *l'humeur* for this discussion tonight. It is well, my friend; I say no more. But I did not sign up for the profession of criminal detection to stand on the sidelines while it carries on under my nose, *mon ami!* Mine is not the soft job, though it rests entirely on the ingenuity of little grey cells and not on the brawn.

‘And,’ he added grandiloquently, ‘Beware to the criminal who underestimates the skill of Hercule Poirot.’

I won’t elaborate on most of the following day, which was full of tedious broodings. As much as I didn’t want Poirot involved with whatever Mauta was planning, neither did I want them to have free reign in the neighbourhood. I decided that I didn’t have enough information to give to the police— not the sort that they would take seriously. And so I opted to pay another evening visit to Hodgkins, which would give me an excuse to investigate on the spot again later. Having been warned, I could be safely on my guard.

Or so I thought.

I met no one in the flats until I staggered to our door around midnight. I could not even fumble for my key. I just managed to press the doorbell, and as my friend opened the door and uttered a cry at the sight of me, I collapsed.

The first thing I noticed when I came to was the sound of dripping water and a hum of intense and agonised muttering. My eyes opened to the somewhat unfocused sight of Poirot bent over me, wringing a washcloth in an apparent frenzy of worry.

‘Do not move, *mon ami,*’ came his voice, low and hushed. I felt the washcloth cool against my head. ‘*Sacré tonnerres!* But what has happened, my poor friend? You are injured from head to foot!’

Stirring a little in spite of his command, I realised I was lying on the sitting room couch— how I got there, I know not—

and Poirot was now cautiously dabbing at my forehead. The washcloth showed signs of red when he did so.

‘The doctor will be here with all speed,’ he murmured. ‘But *sapristi, mon cher*, what has happened?’

I took a deep breath and coughed a little. Poirot instantly produced a cup of water (seemingly out of thin air) and held it to my lips. When I had drunk a little, I found my voice.

‘Mauta,’ I croaked. Slowly and painful, I got my story told: the torch-light at the old warehouse yesterday; the sound of a cry for help; the first attack by the Indian hooligans; my decision to keep the details back for fear that Poirot would immerse himself in the case. I also recounted all that I could remember of tonight’s second and worse attack, including the hard punch to the face I’d managed to deliver to one of the gang before I was overwhelmed and pummelled, and the many new and ugly threats they made to Poirot’s person if either of us dared to show our face at that location tomorrow evening.

When I looked at Poirot again, his brow was black with rage. He began to hastily unbutton and roll up my shirt sleeves, my jacket having been discarded previously, and examined my arms. His hands were gentle despite his obvious fury. How much of that fury was directed toward me for foolish conduct, I wondered.

‘You are bruised badly... *nom d’un nom d’un nom*, Hastings,’ (and here his voice rose) ‘you should have told me! You cannot take on a force of this kind single-handedly!’

‘Neither can you,’ I muttered, a little annoyed. ‘And you would have done so. I daresay you will yet.’

Shaking his head sadly, Poirot reached for the basin of water again and wrung the washcloth. Taking my rather swollen and filthy right hand gingerly in his own tiny, immaculately-groomed one, he again uttered some Gallic oath at the state of it as he scrubbed at the purple and brownish marks with considerably more force than was necessary. I winced a little.

‘The doctor will see if anything is broken or sprained,’ said Poirot in an odd sort of voice. I wondered if he was planning to keep me confined to my own rooms indefinitely until he had landed

every member of Mauta in jail. His eyes were alight with that gleam I knew well, and he looked firm and resolute.

‘Tomorrow evening,’ he said, more to himself than to me. ‘Yes, in spite of themselves, they have given away their game.’

‘No,’ I cried, trying feebly to spring forward, only to be firmly pushed down again onto the cushions by Poirot. ‘You can’t. Mauta meets opposition with murder. Ten to one they *meant* for you to come after them, and you’re playing into their hands. You can’t...’

‘Calm yourself, *cher ami*,’ said Poirot soothingly, and patted my shoulder. ‘I will enlist some of Japp’s brave and clever men, and then this gang will have a strong force arrayed against them. I will phone our friend the Chief Inspector yet this evening— after all, I have yet to reply to his correspondence from yesterday.’

He shook a patronising finger at me.

‘The grey cells, they will arrange everything! Do not fear any longer. Here you will stay and recover, and leave these heartless brutes to others.’

‘And you?’ I said, closing my eyes again and suddenly feeling very tired. ‘You’ll stay here tomorrow, too, and not go after them?’

Poirot did not answer. I opened my eyes again with suspicion, and Poirot merely carried on tending to the cuts and bruises on my arms and hands, innocently ignoring my question.

Dash it all, that man is infuriating!!

The next morning I woke early, aching all over and sporting a bandaged hand. On the previous night, Poirot had bound the doctor to secrecy, and I understand that after it was determined that I had miraculously avoided any broken bones, the two of them conferred while I dozed under a strong painkiller.

After I had bathed away a second night of remaining grime, I returned unsteadily to my room to discover a set of casual and comfortable clothing and a dressing gown laid out for me, folded as neatly and crisply as if they’d been cut from paper. This pointed

gesture was clearly Poirot's way of telling me that I wasn't going anywhere today.

Poirot was seated at the table, sipping at a noxious cup of chocolate and scanning the newspaper. At my appearance, he leapt up and escorted me to the table, where he had prepared omelettes. I was relieved to see that he'd also provided a cup of tea.

'Eat, my friend,' he said energetically, pulling out my chair. 'You will need to regain your strength. But today, you shall rest and cast aside worry.' He made a characteristic gesture of supreme confidence. 'All shall be well. I have said it, and *parbleu*, I am never wrong!'

I obliged him, and having eaten I returned to bed, limping a little, and slept off and on most of the day. But my waking hours were, despite Poirot's reassurances, plagued with growing doubt and anxiety. All the facts pointed to a drug-smuggling operation taking place tonight at or near the warehouse. Poirot would surely be on the spot, and Mauta was cunning. They had caught me off-guard not once, but twice! I flushed angrily to think of it. Poirot was out of his depth this time, but his pride and stubbornness were legendary. Worse, he seemed to be taking the attacks on me as a personal insult.

'They think they can threaten me, *hein*, and attack my poor friend *comme ça!* We shall see.' When I tired of watching his pacing and gesticulations, punctuated with much incoherent French, I settled down in my armchair and closed my eyes, trying to decide what to do if Poirot were to leave the flat tonight.

'You will stay, Hastings,' he had insisted in no uncertain terms. 'You will not play the Prodigal Son this evening. Trust Poirot.'

My little friend might be brilliant, but in view of the matter being rather personal, I was not sure I *could* trust his judgment in this.

And so, after dinner that evening, when Poirot made a rather elaborate pretense of going to bed early and insisted that I prepare to do the same, I obediently got myself ready. Poirot extinguished every light in the flat and practically pushed me into my bedroom, shutting the door with a click. I got into bed

reluctantly, and felt a wave of tiredness overwhelm me. No, falling asleep would never do. Rising, I strode back and forth, fumbling silently in the dark for a change of clothes.

I finished dressing properly, and perhaps half an hour had elapsed when I heard Poirot stirring somewhere in the flat. The sound of keys... yes, he was definitely preparing to leave. The moment I heard the front door softly open and close again, I came out into the hallway. Pausing a minute, I then stole out of the door after him.

I arrived on the ground floor as Poirot was exiting the glass doors of Whitehaven Mansions. Taking the utmost care to stay well out of sight, which did involve much stopping and ducking, I reached the front doors myself. Poirot had stopped in front of the building along the street, and was evidently trying to hail a cab. When I thought he was well distracted, I slipped outside through the door without a sound and quickly slid behind a concrete column.

What the devil did he need a taxi for? The warehouse was just a few blocks away. Perhaps he was planning to meet Chief Inspector Japp somewhere nearby first. That sort of thing should have been organised earlier, I thought. No time to dawdle at this hour, when the crime was imminent, perhaps even happening as we stood there!

In a few moments, a cab had pulled up. I leaned out as far as I could to hear Poirot say to the driver, before entering: 'Alloway Park, East End, please, driver.' He got in and away they went, as I stood there with my jaw dropped.

Poirot was headed clear across town! Surely he could not have misunderstood the place where I had told him I was attacked. Had I mistaken his intentions tonight— had he really left Mauta to the police as I'd hoped, and was heading out now on some private outing of his own? That did not seem to agree with his secrecy this evening, nor his usual love of being on the spot to apprehend a criminal. And Alloway Park was a dingy little area on the outskirts of London with virtually nothing around, certainly nothing that would be of any social interest to my friend. I was baffled.

My plan, of course, had been to follow him. I hesitated: should I follow him or head over to the warehouse myself? I came to the edge of the sidewalk and hailed a cab of my own. Hesitating a few moments, I said, "Alloway Park, East End," and got in.

My cab was several minutes behind Poirot's, which was just as well, as I had no wish for him to catch on to the fact of my proximity. The lights of London whirled by, on and on. I was completely nonplussed, but nonetheless relieved that Poirot was heading away from that dangerous Indian gang lurking in our own backyard. Then again, this was Poirot; you can never quite rule out mischief on his end.

Alloway Park covered a large, unkempt, and weedy area which looked sad and forlorn in the darkening dusk. When we stopped, I paid the taxi driver and he pulled off again. The occasional car came and went along the dirt road that featured a shabby news stand (now closed), a little tobacconist, and a few storage sheds. Trees and grassy patches completed the disorganised jumble. I cast my eyes about in the growing darkness for any sign of Poirot. I thought I noticed a few cars parked further down the street, not far from—

An old warehouse!

It could not be coincidence, surely. And, just as surely, Poirot could not have mistaken the place I told him about? But whatever he was up to, there was no doubt that I would find him in that area. I decided to forego the street and cut across a little wooded, grassy area to make more directly for the building, stumbling a little on sore limbs, my breath coming fast.

About halfway there, for the third time in three days, I looked up to see men coming out of the shadows into my path. There were only two this time. I stopped, completely confused and too weary to take the defensive, as they became visible. They were bare-headed and fair, and as I somehow expected, did not look happy to see me. The taller of the two came right up to my face, as the other gripped my arm painfully. I found myself looking into

cold, hateful eyes, feeling a keen and painful *déjà vu*. Good Lord, was every criminal across London intent on attacking me for going about my own business?

‘You are a long way from home, Captain Hastings,’ the man before me sneered, and I started upon hearing my name.

‘I don’t know who you are. You’ve nothing to do with me,’ I stammered. There was no energy in me to fight. ‘I’m looking for a friend of mine.’

The man stiffened, and he gave an uneasy glance at his companion who was holding me. Suddenly I feared that I had given Poirot away, but then a rustle several yards away made us turn our heads, and a familiar voice said, ‘And you have found him, *mon ami*.’

Amazed, we stared at the little man who emerged from the trees. The man who held my arm gripped me a little tighter, and Poirot said sharply: ‘I will thank you to unhand my friend, *s’il vous plaît*. He has incurred sufficient damage as of late and I would prefer that he be spared further blemish.’

The tall man with the cold eyes advanced a step, and Poirot held out his hand out arrestingly.

‘Further violence will not avail you. The area is surrounded. Your friends are, at this very moment, apprehended by the police at your base of operations. Next it will be your turn. There is no escape.’

The man stopped and turned to look at his companion and me, hesitating. More figures appeared, small in the distance, training electric torches in our direction. A thundercloud passed over the man’s face— such a familiar face, furious and desperate— as he aimed a heavy blow against the back of my head. The last thing I saw before I fell was the shocking sight of Poirot, running toward us...

‘Ah! My dear Hastings!’ Poirot ejaculated. ‘The imbecilities you have committed! Oh, but you are a loyal friend. You use your

grey cells not at all, but what a beautiful nature you have.’ And he beamed affectionately on me.

I declined to argue the point, instead shifting the pack of ice I held to my aching head as I reclined on our sitting room couch. ‘But what happened? Why did you go across town? What about—’

‘Slowly, my friend,’ he said. ‘Did I not tell you two days ago that I had received communications from Japp about the London Syndicate? He had received a tip-off that the organisation in question might be attempting, in the near future, to conduct smuggling operations near a certain warehouse on the outskirts of the East End. I simply went there with the police to apprehend our culprits.’

Confusion was writ large on my face. ‘But, Mauta— you’ve let them get away with their crime, right here in our neighbourhood?’

‘No, *mon ami*, you do not understand. Mauta had no crime operations in our neighbourhood. In fact, Mauta has never been here at all.’

I stared. Poirot lit one of his tiny Russian cigarettes, settled more comfortably into his armchair, and resumed his speech.

‘In light of Japp’s tip, it seemed an interesting coincidence that these thugs you’ve been encountering were so eager to draw the gaze of Poirot to a local warehouse in our *own* backyard. It was possible that the smuggling was indeed to happen here, and Japp’s informer was mistaken or lying. But why announce the fact with violent attacks and threats? And they could not seriously think that you were walking home along that route that evening because you suspected anything.’

‘But,’ I stammered, ‘that cry for help that I heard—’

‘—Was merely part of their plan,’ said Poirot gently. ‘To draw you across the street to the warehouse. They have studied your psychology, *mon ami*, and knew that you would rush to the aid of one in distress. They assumed you would tell me what had happened on that Wednesday evening, to interest me in that vicinity and perhaps to help the owner of that mysterious voice calling for help. But never had it occurred to them that you would refuse to tell me anything in order to protect *me!* No, they do not

know your nature as I do. When they saw no trace of me the following day around the warehouse, they correctly guessed that you had *not* told me, but would be back yourself later that Thursday evening. It was imperative that the message be impressed upon me before Friday, in order to draw my attention as far away as possible from the real operation in the East End.'

He made a face of angry disgust. 'They made sure that your injuries would be too serious to be hidden or overlooked this time. *Ma foi*, the animals. But you were quite right when you told me yesterday not to go to our local warehouse tonight, that they meant to draw me there— however, it was not to attack, but to misdirect.'

'Do you mean,' I cried, 'that the gang that attacked me wasn't Mauta, but the London Syndicate, and you knew it?'

'*Précisément*. Your deduction awakens at last.'

'It seems unbelievable,' I mused, bewildered. 'I was sure that those men in the alley were of an Indian family... and the way they spoke, and the insignia...'

'Bah! It is child's play to dress up like members of a small and obscure Indian gang. Head-coverings, accents, little badges. They may fool the eye, but not the mind.' Poirot smiled at me.

A thought struck me. 'Yet— yes, I'm almost sure— tonight, I thought I recognised the man who found me at the Alloway warehouse. But he was fair, not dark.'

'Ah! You come to it. I shall tell you how I came to be sure of the truth of the matter. The other night, I attended to the cuts and bruises on your arms and hands. The bruises on your arms had a distinctive appearance, but your right hand, used to strike one of the gang members in the face, had discolouration that could not be accounted for. You did not seem to have any other marks of that brownish tinge on your face or arms. I pray that you will forgive me for scrubbing those marks on your hand a little more enthusiastically than I otherwise should have done.' The very memory made me cringe. 'But, *voilà*, those brown marks came off at once! They were not traces of dirt or mud, but had more of an oily texture and a distinctive odour. I have seen it before— it was face paint! *Le maquillage*.'

Dumbfounded, I said: ‘That was quite a remarkable guess, at any rate, and a bit of a long shot!’

‘Not at all. For not one moment had I believed that Mauta was anywhere in the vicinity. In addition to their rare public appearances in general, there were other indications. As you have so admirably pointed out, Mauta does not leave those who threaten their interests alive. They would have almost certainly killed you. The attacks you suffered were more in line with the tactics of the London Syndicate— often violent, but seldom deadly.’

Poirot laid down his cigarette and regarded me pityingly over tented fingers.

‘Then there were the obvious warnings and threats that seemed designed to draw attention away from the East End warehouse, as I have mentioned. I deduced that the gang you met could not have been Mauta at all, but must be members of the London Syndicate in disguise. I was not at all surprised to find the brown smudges on your hand, my friend.

‘Ah! But they are clever. They mean to send the police and Poirot to chase the wild goose, their old rival Mauta! They both draw attention away from themselves and commit assault in the guise of their competitors. But they defeat themselves. Once I suspected their plan, I also knew that they had handed me the final piece of the puzzle first presented to Japp— the *time* of the smuggling operations at the East End warehouse. This Friday evening! *Alors*, we go and make our arrests.’

For a moment, words seemed to fail me. Then I said:

‘I wish I’d known about Japp’s message to you on Wednesday about the second warehouse. It might have put me on the right track.’

‘If you recall, I had wanted to tell you, Hastings. Indeed, you are always of the greatest assistance to me! In this matter, too, you nonetheless provided the vital clues. But you were preoccupied with your first encounter with the rogues, and intent on your own little deception. At any rate, there were other indications sufficient to awaken you to the truth if you’d had eyes to see them; though I do not blame you, what with the numerous hits on the head you have sustained. One cannot expect the brain to function at its best

in such a case. Ah, if only you would trust your friend and his grey cells, *cher ami!*'

Sensitive to what must have been a defeated look on my face, Poirot rose and crossed the room to me. His hand rested comfortingly on my shoulder.

'Perhaps, after all, I should have stayed in the flat this evening with you, and left all to Japp,' mused Poirot. 'My enjoyment of my own *dénouement*, it has failed me this time. I did not think you would be so hot-headed as to have my taxi followed. If you went out at all, I expected you to go to our neighbourhood warehouse, where I knew nothing would happen. There, also, I failed in method! And to limp around in the dark with dangerous men about, Hastings!' He shook his head, and his manner softened. 'But you would not let me go out alone, *hein?* No, that would not be like you.'

I looked up at him, and did a double take. So fastidious was Poirot about spotlessness of appearance that at close quarters I noticed, at once, a strange and discoloured streak on his right cheek.

'Poirot,' I exclaimed. 'You're injured.'

He waved his hand airily. '*Ce n'est rien*, a scratch only. Regard my friend Hastings, who is beaten into the ground, shout indignantly about a little cut! It does not hurt. It only ruins the symmetry of the face, which is indeed far more painful to my sensibilities.'

His expression was so distraught over this detail that I was tempted to laugh.

But then something else occurred to me. 'I saw you running,' I said slowly, the memory returning. 'Right before I was hit on the head. You were running toward us.'

Poirot exhaled. 'It is true. I am not in the running habit, I think is what you mean. I am also not in the habit of brandishing my stick, with its heavy knob, at gang members and knocking them senseless. Nonetheless.' He shrugged.

'Poirot,' I cried again, stupefied.

'I lost my temper tonight. It does not happen often. There was a small scuffle. Only once before have I used my walking stick

in such a fashion. A young child, a girl... a daughter... was in imminent peril from a desperate and dangerous assailant.' A wistful, faraway look stole over his countenance.

'Three times, *mon ami*,' he said, looking down at me with sad and pained eyes. 'Three times they dared to assault you! One does not commit such acts against one's fellow men, but against one of such an innocent and trusting nature...' His voice rang with steel. 'Those are the most wicked crimes of all!'

Regaining his composure, he sighed again and added: 'Why does the father run as he does, to reach the prodigal? The son has been in dire straits. The fear is upon the father. He loves his son and wants to bring him home again.'

And with that, he turned and left the room. Moved, I looked after his retreating and deceptively small figure. In truth, I thought, never was there such a force of nature to be reckoned with as Hercule Poirot.

Chapter 3

Absent Without Leave

The unprecedented events which I lay down here are of such a unique nature that Chief Inspector Japp himself (in moments of characteristic offensiveness) will swear to anyone he tells about it that he'd never believe it if he hadn't been there to see it. For certain personal reasons of my own, I've always hesitated to chronicle this extraordinary incident with the London Syndicate, which fortunately was largely kept out of the papers. But by the encouragement of my friend, Hercule Poirot, I shall do so now.

Early July in the town of Bexhill was splendidly warm, with a delicious breeze off the sea. I had come down with Poirot for a holiday, eager to escape the stifling hive of London for a week or two. What we had not anticipated was the overwhelming masses of trippers descending upon our solitude.

'Good Lord, I can't remember it ever being quite this bad,' I remarked over my newspaper, as Poirot and I sat on the patio of the Bluebell Café, watching the mobs shuffle by. A cup of coffee sat before me; Poirot sipped delicately at an aromatic *tisane*. He looked as impeccable as ever in a smart grey suit, garnished with an unusual crimson-and-white orchid in the buttonhole, and panama hat. At my comment, he raised his eyes to the crowds jostling before us, with more coming in on motor-coaches all the time.

‘Americans, I believe,’ he said with complacency, as a Portsmouth coach emptied itself of two dozen teenage boys, perhaps a sports team of some sort.

We had seen the signs and advertisements all over Bexhill about this month’s excursions. Tourists were spending July swarming around all the major English sea resorts from Dover to the Isle of Wight, with the promise of Channel ferries to the continent by the end of the month.

‘The coast, it is agreeable,’ Poirot went on good-humouredly, ‘but for the crowds, the incommodious sand, and the actual travelling about on the water. Never shall I retire to the seaside, my friend. The brief visit is all I require.’

‘You’re not likely to retire at all,’ I laughed. ‘You know you’d only come back again and again for one more case! People for years to come will still see you detecting the great mysteries of the day.’

Poirot caressed his very black moustaches thoughtfully and looked about him at the crowds. A group of school-age children passed us, sporting identical hats of an unbecoming floppiness and chattering loudly about their recent adventures in Brighton.

‘The younger generation, *hein*, they are decidedly lacking in education,’ he said. ‘They know not even of Poirot! And the officers of the law are no better. They think that I am past the prime—in my “second childhood”!’

‘I’ve a suspicion that you’re correct—as to their perceptions,’ I grinned. ‘But I know better. You’re at the height of your abilities.’

‘*Mon ami*, I am honoured by your confidence in me,’ said Poirot. ‘It will serve you well. Ah, it is another busload of Americans.’

We could hear the boisterous conversation of a somewhat unattractive bunch of trippers, these ones having recently arrived from Hastings. More schoolchildren followed them, chased by stern-looking, middle-aged ladies in sunshades. A grey-bearded gent, big and burly but now stooped and leaning on a cane, was escorting a thin, white-haired matron. Finally, a few sour-faced businessmen with expensive valises exited the coach, shading their eyes and complaining about the rates in Dover.

‘I can’t take much more of this,’ I sighed, dropping my paper and feeling rather as though the light of the sun had been blotted out by a swarm of locusts. ‘What do you say to going back to the hotel and lunching in an hour?’

‘A plan of the most sensible,’ said my friend cheerfully, and we rose. Poirot pulled out a turnip pocket watch and consulted it. ‘A little moment, if you please. I would like to send a few telegrams before returning to the hotel. I shall meet you at exactly quarter after twelve in the hotel lobby.’

Our plans made, we parted ways. Poirot touched his hat to me with a smile, then turned and disappeared amidst the crowd.

At ten past twelve, I descended the stairs into the lobby of our hotel, looking around for Poirot. I knew better than to be so much as a minute late and thus upset his timetable. Having no sight of him, I strolled over to the windows, gazing out at the fine day. So lost in thought was I, that when I thought to check my watch again, I was surprised to see that it was twenty past. Hurriedly, I glanced up and swept my eyes across the lobby, but he was nowhere to be seen.

What on earth could have detained him? It certainly wasn’t like him to be late, even by five minutes. My brow furrowed as I walked idly around the lobby, glancing through every door. Suddenly, a splotch of bright colour on the floor near the coatroom arrested my attention. I bent down to look at it, then quickly picked it up.

It was a red-and-white orchid, slightly crushed. A little scrap of paper was curled around it. Opening it, I read the brief, printed text:

With compliments, from the LS.

A thrill of horror came over me, and immediately I dreaded the worst—the London Syndicate. Then I rallied myself and called

for the manager, laying out my concerns. He seemed to think me to be in a ridiculously hysterical state on the basis of such scanty evidence.

‘Your friend’s a few minutes late, what of it?’ he said with maddening coolness. ‘Maybe he just dropped his flower. Or maybe some young lady with the initials of LS meant to return it to him. Why don’t you just calm down and wait a bit.’

Nothing he said accorded with Poirot’s likely behaviour. Angrily, I left him and returned to our hotel room. Poirot was not there. I hastened back to the lobby and waited for another hour. Nothing.

When Poirot had not shown himself by the end of the day, I frantically rang Scotland Yard and demanded to be put through to Chief Inspector Japp. He was slightly more sympathetic than the hotel manager, having known of our past run-ins with the London Syndicate, and soothed me with a promise to be on the lookout, particularly if Poirot had not been found by the following day.

He was not, nor was there any trace of him in London. I returned to our flat in Whitehaven Mansions two days later, out of my mind with worry. The local police had no leads, no ideas. My friend seemed to have vanished into thin air.

The following day, I was lunching moodily at a little place in Westminster when a stranger in black slipped into the chair opposite me at my patio table. I regarded him quizzically, noting his serious blue eyes and square jaw, and then I suddenly knew who he must be...

‘Understand, Captain Hastings,’ he warned, ‘If you move or call out now, your friend’s life will pay. You will let me state my piece and leave unmolested.’

I was silent, fuming inside. ‘Where is he?’ I demanded quietly.

‘For the time being, he is safe in a hiding place of our own devising. He is restrained, and being... kept quiet. In other words, he is in no fit state to stage an escape. We are preparing to move

him to France. He has been sufficiently meddlesome to warrant a banishment by our organisation.'

Several moments of pure shock came and went. Was this man serious? Poirot, incapacitated and in the hands of the London Syndicate, prepared to be shipped off to France? It was incredible... impossible...

'If what you say is true, why tell me?' I retorted disbelievingly. My memory flashed back to Poirot's discovery of the kidnapped Prime Minister, supposed to have been taken to France when he was still in fact in England.

The man laughed. 'You *are* suspicious. I don't mind telling you this because, frankly, there is nothing you can do to thwart our plans. And some of us think it only fair to extend to you an olive branch of sorts. I come to you now to offer a proposition. It would be a terrible shame for us to kill such an adversary; he is a clever little man. But all the same, his life may hang in the balance.'

'What the devil do you mean by that?' I demanded.

'I mean that M. Poirot has his fair share of enemies in France. Primarily, it is they who are willing to pay a tidy sum for his delivery into their hands, dead or alive. I imagine they prefer him alive, but might not leave him that way for long.'

'You... you...' I sputtered wrathfully, leaping up. The man held up a warning hand, and with an effort I relented.

'But they are not the only ones willing to pay,' continued the man placidly. 'We have had some offers from a few contacts of the criminal underground who are willing to keep him alive in order to use his brains and expertise to their benefit— against the Sûreté, with whom he is well-acquainted. And other wealthy patrons in France are actually interested in acquiring him solely for sport. It is astonishing,' he went on conversationally, as my face went white, 'the secrets that the rich hide behind locked doors. They have the most absurd trifles kicking about. Your famous friend is of such a singular appearance—'

'Five seconds to get to your point, before I reach over this table and throttle you,' I growled hoarsely, the red mist coming over me again.

‘I am willing to offer you greater odds for his life to be spared,’ said the hateful man, ‘if you can make up the difference to us in payment. People do not kill one whose genius can be of valuable assistance to them in their line of work. Nor do they kill the expensive novelty that amuses them. I am not keen that his life should be taken— indeed, only one prominent member of our organisation insists on the plan of trafficking at all, against several opposing voices— but business is business, and that member has leverage in this matter. Make up any difference in price there may be between the best offer of his bitter enemies and the best offer of admirers who want to make use of him, and I can at least secure a place for him with the latter.’

I was sick with grief. Even if I could do what he asked, would this subjugation of my friend, with wicked people doing God knows what to him, be so preferable to death?

‘What exactly are you asking for?’ I deigned to ask, dropping into the chair again and fighting to control my temper.

The man’s voice held something strangely approaching sympathy. ‘Various representatives are attending to our hiding place in the coming weeks,’ he said. ‘They want to take stock of the prisoner and meet with Syndicate associates before committing to pay in France. Their appraisal will determine their final offers. We do not expect a difference of more than two thousand pounds.’

Angrily, I spat out: ‘You’re asking me to pay for the privilege of my friend being treated like chattel! You... who hope to profit from his humiliation! I refuse categorically. What’s more, you’ve offered no proof at all that you have him.’

‘Ah.’ The man pulled an envelope from his pocket and held it out to me.

‘This was written to you by M. Poirot at our request. We permitted him to compose it himself as a sign of good faith, including a detail or two from your private conversations as proof of its veracity. The letter confirms such information as we allowed him to convey.’

I tore the envelope away from him and opened it with shaking hands. The handwriting was unmistakably Poirot’s.

Mon cher Hastings,

When you read this, you will have heard of my abduction. It is quite true, and I have been shown sufficient proofs to convince me that my captors indeed have specific plans to take me to France, and will do so once they have decided my fate. I am to relate some of our recent conversation here to prove this letter's authenticity. When we last spoke together at the café in Bexhill, I mentioned to you that some younger officers think me to be in my 'second childhood,' and you said that you had a strong hunch that I was correct as to their perceptions.

Pray do not act rashly in this matter, nor fail to employ the little gray cells. I am regularly drugged and am sustained on low rations as I wait in my captivity, with neither the wits nor the strength to flee. All depends on you.

Hercule Poirot

The beginning of my name was smudged with a spot of water that might conceivably have been a tear. The letter fell to the table and I buried my head in my hands in agony. It was true; there was no reason to doubt any longer. My friend was helpless in the hands of his enemies—sedated with drugs, possibly starving—and I could do nothing. If I was hoping for hints as to his whereabouts, those hopes were now dashed to pieces.

I looked up to see the man watching me closely. He seemed satisfied.

'Well,' he said, 'Do you still reject our offer?'

Numbly, I replied, 'I would not treat with you for all the world. Poirot has given no indication that he would even prefer that I do so.' I could not move, but managed to force out a few more words.

'Get away from here. Out of my sight. I will find my friend in spite of all your cowardice and cruelty. Get away, as you value your own life.'

When the man had departed and I found that I could rouse myself once more, I set off directly to Scotland Yard and recounted, breathlessly, my interview with the unknown member of the London Syndicate to Japp. The dumbfounded look on his face spoke volumes.

‘But why,’ I exclaimed, ‘why actually tell us their plans? They know we’ll be watching every port of exit. It is a blind? A trick?’

Japp shook his head grumpily. ‘Just the sort of joke this outfit deals in. It’s a challenge to us, and one they seem to be pretty comfortable with taking. This fellow mentioned the Syndicate’s plans to you to get a few more quid out of this abduction, if you were willing to pay. Poirot’s a natural target, of course, what with his success rate. But pulling this kind of stunt with someone who’s an old friend of the Yard— to say nothing of the little man’s own personal skill— would normally be the height of lunacy. They must be very, very confident of their chances of getting away with it. Not a good sign.’

‘Don’t you think the authorities will be able to spot someone taking a man across the border?’ I pressed anxiously.

‘There are countless ways that they could go about it,’ sighed Japp, who was now scribbling rapidly on a pad of paper. ‘They could take him to Scotland or Ireland first, and go round about to France. With a few well-placed threats, they could coerce him to pretend to come willingly; use his cleverness against him. They could tranquillise him, pack him into a trunk, and have it shipped over. They could sneak out on a small, private boat and go round through Belgium. No, Captain Hastings, there’s a reason that kidnapping and human trafficking are such big business. Under certain conditions, it’s almost too easy. They’ll probably be expecting us to think that since they nabbed him in Bexhill, they’ll take him straight along to Newhaven and across the Channel. But they seem to be taking their time, and that route would be almost too obvious, anyway. He might be anywhere in England by now.’

Despair writhed within me.

‘But Poirot,’ I said. ‘Surely he’ll be able to outwit them.’

Japp did not look hopeful. ‘By all accounts, the Syndicate is relying heavily on drugs to manage our M. Poirot. His advantage is in nothing but those “little grey cells” of his. If they take that away, what then?’

‘But,’ I argued, still clinging desperately to the hope of my friend’s ingenuity, ‘He can’t be drugged twenty-four hours a day. He did manage to write that letter. And if they threaten him and make him accompany them on his own two feet, well, he wouldn’t be drugged then.’

‘Precisely why I doubt the Syndicate will take that route,’ Japp said glumly. ‘No, he’ll be drugged all right. Poirot’s got a face and build that can be recognised miles away— that fellow you spoke to was right about his ‘singular appearance.’ Practically impossible to disguise. Unless, of course, they cut off his moustache...’

We both shuddered a little (on our friend’s behalf) at this idea.

‘Would they risk sending him over in a trunk?’ I wondered dubiously. ‘Suppose there’s a shipping delay, and the drug wears off and he wakes, shouting for help? Or... he might asphyxiate.’ More cold fear washed over me.

‘I wouldn’t worry about that,’ said Japp with a mirthless smile. ‘They wouldn’t let their golden goose suffocate and die on them. First thing we’ll be looking for at the border are trunks and bags, over a certain weight, that have some unaccountable method of ventilation.’

Japp was marvellous, directing a number of officers this way and that with rapid efficiency, even as we spoke together. I gave a sad little smile as I remembered my friend’s scoffing at a detective who runs to and fro, rather than sitting still and employing the power of the mind.

‘Hastings,’ said Japp, pulling me out of my distraction, ‘I’d like to get Inspector Sims in on this.’ Sims was a longstanding acquaintance of Poirot’s, one who (I recalled with some comfort) was inclined to respect my friend’s methods and talents. Japp reached for the phone and barked some orders into it.

Hanging up again, he said, 'Right. We'll follow up on what we have so far and meet back here next Monday, unless any major developments have gone down before then.'

Japp had sent me home, rather insistently, when I showed no signs of leaving the police alone. Seeing my chagrin, he added with real sympathy: 'You'll do right by the little man by getting home and resting up a bit. Anyway, the Syndicate may try to contact you again, and we need you to be in touch.'

This was too much common sense for me to ignore, so sadly I made my way back to the flat I shared with my friend. It was very quiet, and no message awaited me. Knowing that sleep would be impossible, I sank into an armchair and pulled out Poirot's letter again. It had taken up residence in my pocket, having been copied by the police, analysed, and returned.

Japp had been hesitant to expect much from this letter. With Poirot in a state of chemically-induced lethargy, and possibly threatened to deceive, what assurances could it provide? But I had to trust my friend. There was nothing else for me to go on.

Poirot had encouraged me not to be rash, but rather methodical— to use my brain. The statement gave me a sudden glimmer of hope. Surely, my friend believed that all was not lost, that there was something to be deduced. I pulled out my pocket notebook and a pen, spread the envelope and letter out on my lap, and read it through twice.

In my mind's eye, I saw my friend... tired and unkempt, fighting to clear his sluggish mind from the drugs... pen in hand, perhaps an agent of the Syndicate at his shoulder, watching his every move.

A point struck me. I decided to write it down:

Poirot writes clearly and coherently; therefore, if this letter is an original composition, he would have had the wits to convey some useful information in it. Any clues would have to be obscure enough not to arouse suspicion.

Thus encouraged a little, I looked up and saw my friend's desk. I imagined him composing his note at a desk like this... he begins, carefully: *Mon cher Hastings...* dotted with a smudgy tear.

I stared at the mark. The more I thought about it, the less I could visualise Poirot smudging his neat writing with a fallen tear. I could almost hear him over my shoulder, railing at me with gestures of frustration. *'Hastings, you are incurably sentimental! Ma foi, a tear-stained letter indeed! You read too much of the silly, romantic fictions. Abandon your stupidity, I pray, and arrange your ideas with order and method, mon ami!'*

If Poirot really were overcome with emotion, he would turn away, if only to keep the handwriting neat. I frowned at the little watery smudge on the paper, and wrote in my notebook:

In the letter's address, my name is smudged unaccountably. Tear?

I continued on, a little worried that I was reading all manner of nonexistent subtleties into the letter. Oh well; I had to carry on. Suddenly, I halted again. He says they have *specific* plans to take him to France. Perhaps this means that he knows the plan, and is therefore able to hint accordingly. Duly noted.

I stopped once more at one of Poirot's favourite phrases: 'little gray cells.' *Gray cells* he writes. *Gray*. Not *grey*. Uncommon spelling. I made a note.

What else stands out? I thought, reading and rereading.

He mentions that his food rations are low in captivity. Is there any good reason he would mention that? Drugs alone would incapacitate him. I was certain that since this note was briefly written, every added detail must be of significance. Another scribbled entry was made in my notebook.

Finally, I took a long, hard look at that bit of private conversation that Poirot recorded. He could have chosen any piece of any of our conversations, but he chose that one. It *must* mean something, and something critical. Certainly I remembered this conversation, and I recalled his use of the term 'second childhood.' My overall impression from our exchange that day was the general idea that certain police officers misunderstood or underestimated

Poirot, but I didn't—I 'knew better.' It was not much to go on; I noted it only with a question mark and a sigh.

Weariness stole over me. I don't recall when I fell asleep, but I spent the night sitting in the same armchair, pen in hand. Steel bars and empty corridors drifted through my dreams. I was looking for my keys, and thought I had found them at the water's edge. But as I stood looking out at the sea, the waters rushed up and surrounded me, confusing me, pulling me under. A voice echoed through the crushing waters: *'All depends on you.'*

It was one of the worst nights of my life.

The following Monday, I duly returned to the Yard to compare notes with Japp and Sims. I was beside myself—it had been a week and a half since the disappearance, and I feared we were already too late, despite the man's words about 'weeks' before Poirot would be transported.

As I entered Japp's office, I noticed a fourth man, tall and of military bearing, who Japp introduced as Chief Inspector Stanton of the Home Office. We took our seats around Japp's desk. Inspector Sims, a big man and usually jovial, was solemn and quiet. Japp himself appeared to have hardly slept since I'd last seen him. An absurd thought crossed my mind: Poirot lamenting at the sight of his crooked tie and insisting on straightening it, followed by a lecture on not letting personal anxiety over a friend's kidnapping impede one's dress sense.

'Any news?' I asked fretfully.

'Well, Captain Hastings,' said Japp, thumbing through a file on his desk, 'you could say that... but it doesn't necessarily help us. There are almost too many leads. We've had whispers of the Syndicate from Merseyside to Cornwall and across to Dover. The police in France and Belgium have been informed as well—the Sûreté, of course, has a vested interest in the case for several reasons. And the Belgian police are unleashing an unholy furor over this; by the Lord, they've been hounding me for days, like demons out of hell. Sending a few men over soon, by the sound of it. They'll

be all over their own coast with a tooth-comb until this is sorted out, rest assured.'

Sims leaned forward. 'Do we know that they haven't already left England with him?'

'As I understand,' broke in Stanton, 'the man who spoke to Captain Hastings mentioned keeping M. Poirot in their hiding place in England for some weeks, until it was determined who would get him. He could have been lying, of course, but all the same, it's our belief that if they had him safely in France, they would communicate that fact immediately. It would be in their own interests to draw our eyes abroad.'

For the benefit of the newcomers, I recounted again all that I'd told Japp about our visit to Bexhill, Poirot's disappearance, and my encounter with that terrible man who gave me the letter.

Sims looked incredulous. 'It seems impossible,' he exclaimed. 'Is there any precedence for these French criminals that were spoken of?'

Japp whipped open another folder and extracted some papers. 'Rather,' he said dryly. 'The revenge business, I hardly need to go into; that's a given. As to passing him off to agents who would use his expertise against the police, I've got two examples of events of this precise nature, one in England and one in France, in the past year alone. In France, it was a secret agent who was believed to have been nabbed in Paris for what he knew of the Deuxième Bureau— never found the bloke.'

My stomach gave a frightened lurch.

'In England,' he continued, 'it was a private investigator, name of Marbury, up in the Lake District. A comparatively minor affair, but he wasn't found for five months, all the same.'

'As for these wealthy French patrons were we told of,' Japp continued with distaste, 'that's also not unheard of. Kidnapping a person who's famous— or interesting to them in some other way— and keeping them penned up in their own house as some sort of blinking curio or what have you. People with barrels of money and no moral sense at all— world's full of them. You'll have heard of the cases of Anita Ledger and Lesley Morton. Dozens more out there, most not so famous, who are never found.'

If Japp used the phrase *never found* one more time, I was going to completely lose my head!

The three police inspectors launched into technicalities about border patrol and likely gang hideouts on the English coast. I pulled out my little notebook and the letter from Poirot. In a lull in the conversation, I laid out my observations and thoughts before Japp. He was interested, but cautious.

‘I’ll grant you,’ he said thoughtfully, ‘that Poirot was conscious enough to write normally and coherently. We’ve no definite proof that most of this letter is quite original, on the other hand. But if he was able to convey any clue, then I daresay it would be in his style to do it in the sort of tortuous, roundabout way you’re suggesting.’ I took the observation as a kind of backhanded compliment.

But Japp went on: ‘The name being smudged with a possible tear says nothing conclusive. If he didn’t do it himself, anyone else who handled the letter might have made that mark by accident. They might have even done it on purpose to make you think it was a tear, to give more emotional weight to the letter.’

I conceded ruefully that this was possible.

‘You think the spelling of the word *gray* means something?’ said Sims with interest, peering at the letter. ‘Funny little detail. More common as an American spelling, of course—’

‘American!’ I exclaimed, and the others stared at me. I hastened on: ‘It was that day in Bexhill, when Poirot and I had the conversation that he noted, just before he disappeared. We were observing the large number of American tourists coming off the coaches. They were in the process of travelling all over the southern coast, and were planning on ferrying across the Channel by the month’s end!’

‘Swipe me,’ said Japp slowly, ‘but that is an idea. If our little friend means for us to be looking out for people posing as American tourists, that puts paid to any idea of sending him to France via trunk, *or* some roundabout way. It’s the regular ferry crossings we’ll be after: Dover, Newhaven, Portsmouth, and the like. There will be many crossings of the American tour groups on different times and days, of course, and unfortunately hundreds of people— but it is a

slightly narrower field of search. And if he's going across on the ferry, there's a good chance that they're hoping to coerce him to go on board disguised, after all.'

He made a note of his own. 'Still a long shot, I'm afraid, but we have to search out the possibility.'

'It seems to me,' said Stanton with a frown, 'that anything definite that Poirot would wish to communicate in hints would be found in the choice of which private conversation he relayed. His enemies would not be able to confirm the statements or understand any underlying meanings known only to you. What's all this about police officers believing him to be in his "second childhood"?''

Japp (an officer who had himself used similar phrases in the past to describe our friend's quirky behaviour) pushed his chair back and laced his fingers together.

'Second childhood... that's interesting,' he murmured. 'Very interesting indeed.'

A full fortnight came and went. I was in Japp's office once more, at it was evening. We'd obtained the requisite information about the different tourist groups, including arrivals and departures. Tomorrow, the first of the ferries would be sending the Americans to France via Portsmouth and Newhaven. Japp was still debating which town to personally visit. And he had a theory of his own.

'Mark my words,' he said confidently, 'if he's on one of these ferries, there's only one disguise they'll have for him. What do you think? They can't exactly make him much taller, and they'll have to do away with that moustache. He mentioned a "second childhood" in that letter to you. You can bet that he'll be in one of those herds of kids you've mentioned. He'll have been coerced to go along and keep quiet on the way.'

Ah! Thinking back to those crowds of children in Bexhill—youths comprising sports teams; youths with floppy hats to shade the face; youths shuffled along by severe matrons— I had to admit

that his idea made a lot of sense, and told him so. His satisfied grin gave way to a little grimace, however.

‘It would help immensely,’ he muttered, ‘if we knew which gaggle he’s likely to be in. You don’t remember anything particularly unusual about those young tourists you saw with M. Poirot in Bexhill, do you?’

I closed my eyes, casting my mind back desperately. I saw the mobs of people, young and old, chirpy and sour, hats and valises, souvenirs and canes. Then the last lot of tourists emerged from my memory, a motley bunch including many children, a group pouring out of the motor-coach arriving from...

My eyes flew open and I gasped, ‘Get the tourist bureau—now! The group that arrived in Bexhill, coming from Hastings, the day that Poirot disappeared— we need to know when their Channel ferry is scheduled!’

Japp seemed to understand instantly, and was on the phone while I gathered my wits together.

Poirot had told me, after all! That smudged mark on his letter by my name... *Hastings*... it was among that particular busload of tourists we’d seen that we must find him.

Several minutes later, Japp rung off and turned to me, satisfied. ‘That lot have their ferry scheduled for tomorrow... at Newhaven, headed to Dieppe. Newhaven it is for us, then.’

Tomorrow afternoon found us at the town in question. Japp and I stood a little apart from the massive crowd, inconspicuously, and I peered among them, trying to remember which ones had been on the Hastings motor-coach. Various Scotland Yard men, discreet in plain clothes, were carefully noting the crowds of children, trying to determine if any of them could possibly be our quarry.

In spite of our recent triumph, something, I thought, was wrong. Terribly wrong. Poirot’s words to me, in that last conversation we’d had, floated back once more.

The younger officers thought him to be in his 'second childhood.' This was taken by Japp as a clue to seek him out among the children.

But in our conversation, *those officers had been wrong*. I, Hastings, had known better, and had said so myself. What if Poirot *knew* that Japp would suspect him to be among the children, and wanted to make sure that I realised that this assumption was wrong?

Indeed, it did seem wrong to me. What was it? And then, I had it.

'Look here,' I hissed at Japp urgently. 'I don't believe they'd do it. They wouldn't disguise him as a child by removing his moustache. It's impossible.'

Japp looked at me blankly. 'Well, I admit that I can hardly imagine our friend without his famous whiskers, and no doubt Poirot will never forgive them for such a cold-blooded deed... but I don't see why it's so impossible an idea.'

'Because,' I pressed, 'the Syndicate bargained with the French criminals for his head. He was actually seen and scrutinised for approval. No matter who they turn him over to, those people are going to want him intact. Imagine *you* were paying a huge sum to acquire the famous Hercule Poirot. Would you accept a Poirot without that famous moustache?'

Two thoughts seemed to be struggling for ascendancy in Japp's mind: the realisation that I'd made a considerable point, and the suspicion that I had, in fact, gone quite balmy.

'If you don't think he's to be found as one of these children,' he said at last, 'where on earth do you propose that we find him? I thought you were pretty keen on the idea that he'd be among these American tourists.'

I looked around helplessly at the throng of bustling travellers: the ugly faces... ladies with packs of children... elderly men and women, trying to stay out of their way... businessmen with valises.

That little detail which Poirot had recounted in his letter to me. How he had mentioned his 'second childhood' and how I'd replied that I'd a suspicion...

Only— stay— that wasn't what he wrote!

I'd said, 'I've a suspicion that you're correct...' But he'd written, '*...and you said that you had a strong hunch that I was correct...*'

I stopped as if turned to stone, turning this over rapidly in my mind. It was unbelievable that I should have missed it. Surely, surely, there must be a reason for his change of wording. I'd had a *strong hunch...*

Poirot kept in captivity on low rations...

Once in a lifetime, a blinding bolt of inspiration knocks a person off his feet and, God be thanked, mine came then. I motioned to Japp, and trembling, I quickly pushed through the crowds and approached the burly, stooping grandfather, who was standing by the pier and leaning on his cane.

'You have something, sir,' I said, 'that doesn't belong to you.'

He gave a startled little jump and peered up at me. Then his whole countenance changed, and with surprising swiftness he bolted. Japp, who was watching, was after him in a flash, and in moments we had apprehended him.

'What's this about?' Japp demanded.

'Unbutton your overcoat,' I said forcefully to the no-longer-infirm-looking man.

He didn't bother to protest. When he had finally unbuttoned it, I pushed him to his knees, wrenched at the sleeves of the coat, and whirled it off. Japp swore liberally.

The man we had apprehended was not one man, but two. He wore a tight-fitting harness against his body, and onto his back was securely strapped the small, unconscious figure of Hercule Poirot.

As Japp shouted for his reinforcements and moved the gathering crowd back, I bent over the kneeling man and disengaged the harness as quickly as I possibly could, tearing vigourously. Finally, I was able to free him from the last restraints, and I caught and lifted him carefully. Clad in shirtsleeves,

dishevelled, and flushed from the heat, he seemed thinner than I'd remembered. His very moustaches were as limp as the rest of him. My heart smote me to see him in such a state.

I glowered with severity down at the man who was still kneeling at my feet, now attended by two constables. 'You have no idea how fortunate you are,' I said venomously, 'that my hands are now unable to fasten themselves around your worthless neck!'

Japp was at my elbow, looking down at Poirot in amazement and relief. 'Poor chap's not in a good way,' he said, checking his pulse. 'I've sent for medics, but I'm sure he'll be all right. How in the blazes did you know where to find him?'

'It was the wording of his letter,' I replied, a little dazed. 'He mentioned the phrase *a strong hunch*, but I remembered suddenly that in our conversation, I'd actually said *a suspicion*. There must have been a reason, I thought, for the misquote in his letter. We had both seen this crowd of American trippers those weeks ago when we visited Bexhill, including this idiot' (I aimed a savage kick at him which Japp pretended not to see) 'disguised as an elderly man with a *hunched back*. It was a disguise he adopted from the start. He planned to replace the padding he wore with Poirot's body when it was time for their touring group to cross the Channel to Dieppe at the end of the month.

'That choice of disguise was one reason that the Syndicate kept Poirot in England for those few weeks instead of setting out with him immediately. They also used the extra time to slim him down a little, on small rations, to make him easier and less conspicuous to carry under the coat. Poirot managed to learn that information... and hint at it in his letter to me.'

I stopped, startled, and looked down at the still figure in my arms, feeling oddly as though he had spoken one of his *dénouement* solutions through me vicariously.

Japp regarded me with an expression of awe and newfound respect. 'Blimey,' he exclaimed, suddenly laughing and shaking his head, 'you'll be giving this one a run for his money, like as not! I wouldn't have believed it. Not in a million years...!'

At long last, Japp, Inspector Sims, and a doctor emerged from Poirot's hospital room. My friend had been revived and questioned at some length, and I was allowed in to see him.

He was sitting up, supported by several cushions and garbed in a light hospital gown. He looked sore and exhausted, but at the sight of me he brightened and afforded a weak smile.

'*Mon ami,*' he said, reaching out as I rushed to his side. He took my hand. 'You have succeeded, succeeded to a marvel. Japp has told me all. You read every clue I offered aright— but every last one! Today, you are a detective.'

Blushing, I said quickly: 'How are you feeling, Poirot? You must have been through hell!'

He closed his eyes and shuddered a little. 'It was not my idea of the perfect seaside visit, *c'est vrai*. The ignominy, the impudence! The horrid food— which, at least, there was little of. And no means to properly attend to the moustaches. I was locked into a small room and was assaulted with the hypodermic needle daily. Escape would be impossible. My grey cells, the great weapon which all criminals must fear, were slow... very slow... and I was afraid. It was *chance magnifique* that they allowed me some time of sanity for writing that letter to you. And now, I recover. I survive. That is the great thing.'

'Did they...?' I hesitated. 'Did they tell you what exactly they had decided to do with you?'

'*Oui,*' he said softly, his expression quite inscrutable. 'As you know, they had many ideas, each more sordid and dishonourable than the last. People came to see me in my abasement... they spoke of money, of revenge, of all manner of things unutterable... ah, the gloating eyes, the relish, *l'horreur!* They had indeed chosen my fate before bringing me to Newhaven. Let us not speak of it. Never shall I forget what I might have suffered, but for the astuteness of Hastings.'

'It was your own clues that saved you,' I deflected, pleased but quite unused to this high praise. 'How you managed to find out the information you did while you were captive and frequently drugged flatly astounds me.'

Poirot might have attempted an expression of vanity, but seemed too tired to manage it. He contented himself with a little smile. He knew, none better, the extent of his talent for coaxing, tricking, wheedling, or charming information out of unsuspecting people.

‘Do you know,’ he said reflectively, ‘the man that posed as the elderly American fellow we first saw at Bexhill, who conveyed me about like a rucksack. His name is Robert Griffon. Japp has interrogated him briefly already, and he informs me that it was this very same man who, alone in the Syndicate, insisted upon the plan to send me off to France, awarded to the highest bidder. It was his little mania from the beginning. He is caught, and they will not try a stunt of this kind again. It was not only Poirot he carried on him—the papers he was carrying contain a mine of information, and now Scotland Yard has leads on multiple French gangs, including a human trafficking ring. *Le bon Dieu*, you see, brings good from this great evil. That man will stay in prison for a long time, and when he comes out? The French, they will not forget, *croyez-moi*.

‘I wonder,’ he continued, ‘if my captors— not Griffon, perhaps, but others— allowed me to compose that letter to you in the spirit of *le sport*. I was careful with my hints to you, and made them obscure enough so that you would not give away any recognition in your first read-through. They would have been watching you most carefully to see if I had relayed any clues. *Tout de même*, they did take a risk of personal failure in letting me write it myself. Perhaps failure in this case did not even much matter to some of them. It is interesting, is it not?’ he said, with a hint of a twinkle. ‘This London Syndicate, I do believe they have developed a *tendresse* for Poirot. We annoy each other much, it is true, but I daresay they would miss me if I were gone.’

‘Really, Poirot,’ I cried heatedly, being disagreeably reminded of a certain Russian countess. ‘The sympathetic tone you take toward criminals who might have gotten you tortured or killed! They were conspirators with Griffon. They would have gladly taken money in exchange for your head, and dispatched you to France to— to—’

‘Yes, my friend,’ he said hastily, reaching for my hand again. ‘I comprehend. Do not enrage yourself, *je t’en prie*. I am not myself at the moment. You must forgive my little follies. *En vérité*, I know who are my friends.’ He closed his eyes for a few moments, leaning wearily back on the pillow.

Mollified (and a little ashamed), I said meekly: ‘Solving a case like this, without you there, was a bit of a shock to the system. It made me wonder— well, if you’ve felt that isolated when solving all of your major cases, when so much had depended on you alone. I know I’m not the cleverest chap. Often when we’re on a case, I don’t notice the signs you see, and can’t make sense of the clues you unravel. I hardly know how I managed it this time around. It seems extraordinary.’

‘*Cher ami*,’ said Poirot with feeling. ‘I know I tease you about these things at times. But, as I have told you in the past, I do not wish for you to be another and lesser Poirot, but to remain the matchless Hastings that you are. To me you are *inestimable*. Not only because you can run after criminals, or state the beautifully obvious which might be overlooked, or entertain me with your fanciful imagination— although you do these things also. Perhaps, it is true, you do not have the best working knowledge of crime or the criminal temperament; it does not accord with your honest and beautiful nature. But there is something important that you understand very well, my friend, better than anyone— better even, perhaps, than Hercule Poirot! For that reason, I had every confidence in you. It is with that unique and superior understanding of yours that you have succeeded today.’

‘Really?’ I said, extremely surprised. ‘And what is that?’

He smiled again. ‘For the solving of a crime, it is crucial to have not merely the knowledge of the criminal, but most importantly, of the victim. It is evident why you succeeded. For, *mon ami*, you understand... Hercule Poirot.’

Chapter 4

A Close Shave

Over the next few months following the Bexhill incident, I was loath to let Poirot out of my sight for a minute. When he had sufficiently recovered, he began to protest my persistent hovering over him.

‘My dear Hastings, be reasonable,’ he murmured. ‘One cannot always be prepared for the completely unexpected in life, it is true. All the same, brains and common sense will go far for both prevention and cure. You cannot remain forever the mother chicken.’

We were in the bathroom of our flat, hastily preparing to meet a client who had made an unexpected appointment five minutes ago and was due to arrive shortly. I was at the sink, lathering up to shave; Poirot, who had shaved earlier, was touching up his moustache in front of the other mirror.

‘You know, Poirot,’ I said, ‘it gets my back up something fierce that they never caught that offensive, blue-eyed fellow who delivered your letter to me when you were kidnapped. His name was Ramsey, wasn’t it?’

‘*Oui*, my friend,’ Poirot said. ‘Griffon leaked that particular detail on the very day he was arrested and questioned. Scott Ramsey, though he doubtless has many aliases. He was present when I composed that letter to you.’

‘Rumour has it that he lost a great deal of money on some other deals when Griffon’s papers were discovered,’ I went on, rinsing my razor. ‘No great love for you, I daresay. Every time I see

you fiddling about with your moustache these days, I think of the threats you told me about.'

'Oh, yes,' grunted Poirot in indignant tones, 'he was most impertinently disappointed that he could not relieve me of my moustache before sending me off to France. His idea of a trophy, *ma foi!*'

He laid down his little silver comb and reached for more wax.

'It seems to be a favourite threat of my enemies, *mon ami*—the victory of depriving me of my trademark. Why, even Girauld himself, our old acquaintance from the Sûreté, would have gladly seen Poirot in such a degraded state, if you recall. It is to them the gesture of— what is the word?— emasculation.'

Yes, Poirot would see it like that, I thought, rinsing my face. A loud sniff emanated from Poirot's direction as I returned my razor to its place.

'The safety razor, indeed,' he said contemptuously, curling the tips of his own facial hair with dexterity.

'You might try it sometime, you know,' I said patiently, grabbing a towel. 'I don't know why you still insist on a straight razor; it's extremely inconvenient.'

'*La commodité!* That is all that people care about today! My poor friend, the implements of the *toilette* should be both artistic and of the highest quality!'

I cast my eye over his perfectly-organised grooming supplies, which were currently taking up most of the counter, including his solid silver moustache grooming set. My little friend was certainly a dandy of the first order. Cleopatra herself couldn't have had a *toilette* as meticulous as Hercule Poirot's.

'Anyway,' I added, as we tidied up and prepared to leave the room, 'it's just a razor.'

'Indeed. But as you will see, Hastings, the client who has made an appointment with us this morning is one who appreciates the fine things of life. Pray do not reveal too much of your plebeian preferences during our interview. Alexei Dimitri is one of the greatest concert violinists alive today.'

‘Oh!’ I said. I had heard of Dimitri, who, despite his exotic name and flamboyant tastes, was thoroughly English and owned an expensive and sprawling property in Kent. Although still in his thirties, he was one of England’s great patrons of music.

Minutes later, the young maestro was making an entrance into our flat. He was dark, handsome, well-dressed, and smiling in a distracted sort of way. We exchanged pleasantries.

‘Precisely on time, I gather?’ he said, checking his watch. ‘I do hate tardiness. Forgive me, gentlemen, for the last-minute consultation, but an associate of mine positively insisted that I do something about the Stradivarius. You see,’ he chattered on, ‘this evening at six, I’m holding a bit of a social for a wide range of friends and acquaintances at my estate— it will be quite a crowd. My friend, Lord Conway, insists that I am far too careless with my possessions, and seems to fear that an attempt will be made to steal the violin, which is worth a small fortune. Nonsense, I tell him! But he persisted— spooked by rumours, I suppose— so to ease his mind, I’ve come to ask you to the little gathering this evening. Perhaps you could keep an eye on things?’

Poirot opened his mouth, closed it, and looked at me. ‘Ah, well, M. Dimitri, Captain Hastings and I would certainly be available this evening—’

‘Oh, splendid, splendid,’ gushed our voluble client. ‘I daresay many of my friends would be most delighted to meet you— although, perhaps you’ll want to operate with discretion? Oh, never mind— do as you like. The social winds down around nine, and the guests clear out. Nine is the time I’m having a smaller, private gathering in my house, just half a dozen or so friends over from America. You needn’t stay later than that.’

‘*Bien*, monsieur. Concerning this violin, this Stradivarius, may I ask—’

‘Yes, I’ll have it in the house, nothing for it. I am so *particularly* looking forward to the little gathering later in the evening. These new friends of mine comprise a sort of Appalachian folk band from the southern U.S. They are quite obscure over there, but I happened upon a show of theirs on my most recent

transcontinental visit and oh! what talent! I positively *insisted* on bringing them over.'

Mais oui, bien sûr. Now, this violin—'

'It's a beauty,' beamed Dimitri with pride. 'Which reminds me— oh, dash it, I must be off. I've another engagement, I'm afraid. I'll meet you at the house at six, but I mightn't stay the whole time for the first part of the evening. There will be lots of coming and going, I daresay, so I may or may not see you around terribly much. Name your fee and send me the bill. Till tonight, then!'

And with a nod of his dark head, he took his leave again, a sort of cloud of incoherence in his wake. Poirot and I stared after him.

'Eccentric fellow,' I said at last, crossing my arms and looking at my little friend wryly. 'Appalachian folk, eh? Still convinced that Alexis Dimitri doesn't entertain any "plebeian" fancies?'

Poirot threw me a reproachful glare.

That evening at six, my friend and I arrived at Dimitri's enormous Ashford estate, situated on stunning woodlands. The autumn air was crisp, and the changing leaves seemed to bathe the whole scene in a sea of dusky fire. Poirot, naturally, was muffled up to the ears to keep out the chill.

We entered in the front hall, which was large and already swarming with clusters of well-dressed people. They seemed to complement the opulence of their setting: all around us were luxurious furniture, priceless artworks, hanging tapestries and heavy curtains. Dimitri was no ascetic. As our coats and hats were taken, a middle-aged man with slightly greying temples came over to greet us.

'M. Poirot,' he said enthusiastically, hand outstretched. 'How wonderful to meet you. I am Lord Conway; Dimitri may have mentioned—'

As though he felt a summons, our host himself suddenly emerged from one particular cluster of young women wielding champagne, and hurried over to us.

‘Oh, Andrew, you’ve met M. Poirot and Captain Hastings, splendid. He was awfully keen on your presence here this evening. Seems to think I’m irresponsible!’

I looked around to see several visitors closely examining some enormous Chinese porcelain vessels, while still more knots of people broke away to explore other rooms of the house.

‘Go ahead and take them around,’ said Dimitri encouragingly, finishing off his champagne. ‘I’ll catch up with you later, I’m sure—’

‘*Monsieur*—’ said Poirot with some desperation, but Dimitri had disappeared again.

‘I’m sure we’ll find him again later,’ said Lord Conway apologetically, as he led us into an adjoining room. ‘He’s a bit scatterbrained, though a genius in his own right, of course. He rather likes to show off, I fancy, and sometimes I fear it will make him a target. One hears rumours at times.’

We looked around the room we currently occupied, which was full of African curios, including a good many drums and other instruments. From there, our guide led us through several other palatial rooms—presumably nearly all of the house—some of which had strangers wandering through, examining any number of objects with great interest. Dimitri had entire rooms devoted to music, including two well-furnished studios for recording, a staggering ballroom, and impressive displays of instruments of all kinds.

‘He’s forever renovating,’ said Lord Conway with a shade of a wince, ‘and the way he lets crowds of people wander through everywhere, poking around...’ He shook his head.

‘I try to do what I can for him in terms of security,’ he went on. ‘He is an old friend of mine. You might have noticed the two constables patrolling outside.’ I hadn’t, but Poirot nodded his head comprehendingly.

Our companion checked his watch. ‘If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I’m headed back to the drawing room for a smoke.’

'*Milord*,' said Poirot, 'Captain Hastings and myself are here because of M. Dimitri's Stradivarius. It is feared to be the object of some thief's interest, is it not so? Would you relay to us, please, where it is kept?'

Lord Conway started a little. 'Why, I haven't the foggiest idea where it is right now,' he said. 'Didn't he tell you?'

The look on Poirot's face expressed his attitude only too eloquently. Hastily, I interjected: 'We'll head back ourselves in a few minutes and ask him about it.'

When Lord Conway had gone and Poirot and I were alone in the hall, Poirot gave vent to his annoyance.

'*Sapristi!*' he hissed. 'Our M. Dimitri has absolutely no concept of method! How he expects us to aid him when he cannot be bothered to present the most basic facts of a case...'

'Yes,' I agreed, as we strolled back down the hall and made to round the corner. 'You would think that he'd at least have told us where he kept the Stradivarius.'

I heard Poirot's first sharp intake of breath before I noticed anything else. Then a constricting arm encircled my chest, and I felt something like the tickle of a hair at my neck. Frantically I looked across to Poirot who stood opposite me, and saw my situation in mirror reflection. Poirot, gasping a little, was clutching at an arm drawn tightly across his chest, a razor blade held to his throat.

Three men had sprung the attack, but I could not get good view of any but the short, shaggy-headed one who held Poirot. My friend and I needed no special instruction to keep silent, and we were hurried down the corridor and through several narrow passages and stairs. (The irony of the razor blades did not escape me.) Our captors had clearly worked out an isolated route.

Finally, we stopped before a heavy door, and the tall man who led the way crouched down and began to pick the lock. It quickly gave way, and we were thrust through the door into a sparsely-furnished and untidy room, littered with bottles but

otherwise relatively clean. I was surprised to notice that a second room, in the form of a rather large booth with glass windows, appeared within the larger room. It suggested an atmosphere of sound recording.

Into this room we were taken, where we were tightly bound with cords, but not gagged. The two men who brought us stepped out of the room again and closed the door behind them. I expelled a torrent of abuse at the man who was tightening the knots that leashed Poirot's wrists behind him, and he returned me a withering glare.

Those serious blue eyes, the square jaw... it was none other than Ramsey.

'You!' I shouted. So the London Syndicate was behind this affair. My expletives became more pronounced and strident.

Ignoring me, the man abruptly picked up Poirot and brought him to the far side of the little room, where a couple of large, wooden storage crates were stacked against the wall. He laid him atop this perch and came back to me, unceremoniously dragging me backward, forcing me to sit with my back against a support, and anchoring me to it with another length of cord. Poirot watched this struggle, silent and unmoving where he lay. I was bitterly tormented by my impotence. A useless defence I had been for my friend!

'What are you doing?' I cried, as the Syndicate agent once again approached the place where he had deposited Poirot.

He whipped around. 'First of all,' he said irritably, 'you needn't shout. We brought you here because this inner room is heavily sound-proofed. It is also isolated, well away from the activity of the rest of the house this evening. As for what I'm doing at this moment—'

Ramsey produced another length of rope and climbed up over the stacked crates, finding an exposed rafter above and firmly affixing the rope to it. The other end that hung down, he quickly fashioned into something that looked terrifyingly like a noose.

'Don't lose your mind,' he smirked, observing my expression. 'No one is being murdered today, let us hope. This is

simply an added precaution to keep M. Poirot from wandering about. We seem to have to be quite careful with him.'

And he jerked Poirot to an upright sitting position, his short legs dangling well off the ground from atop the crates. Then the man arranged the loop of rope around Poirot's neck and pulled it snugly under his chin. The objective was plain: if Poirot were to try to descend from the perch— or even lay down again— he would effectively hang himself.

'I'd suggest, M. Poirot, not moving around too much,' added Ramsey unnecessarily, climbing down from the crates again.

The sight of Poirot, apparently seated on his own gallows and a slip away from eternity, was so ghastly and macabre an image that I broke into a cold sweat. My friend was a portrait of remarkable self-control. He still had said no word throughout our ordeal, but glared with a cool dignity at our foe, who was tall enough to be nearly at eye level with Poirot now. Finally he broke his silence.

'You choose an unwise path, monsieur,' he said gravely. 'Have you not yet learned the cost of trifling with myself and my friend? This will be your undoing.'

The man regarded him steadily, but chose not to rise to the bait.

'My friends and I,' he said at last, 'are off to do our search of the house for the Stradivarius, as you are undoubtedly aware.'

Poirot nodded, as he was able. 'And also, you undoubtedly heard that Hastings and myself were not informed of the location of the piece.'

'Yes, that would have simplified things,' he conceded. 'Nevertheless, we will find it. There is plenty of to-and-fro happening so that our presence will not be noticed; Dimitri is not winding the main party down until nine. That gives us over two hours. And when we find it, monsieur...' He took a step closer to Poirot, who continued to gaze coldly at him. 'I will be back to bid you and your friend *adieu*. You will not be killed, no... that is quite unnecessary. But I've a score to settle.'

He pulled a blade from his pocket and held it close to Poirot's face.

‘When you are found,’ he whispered, ‘it will be without your precious moustache. Possibly with slightly less blood, as well.’

And on that sinister note, he spun round and left the room.

‘My friend?’ came Poirot’s voice, sounding far away.

I blinked a little, feeling dizzy. Poirot’s voice, full of concern, came again. ‘You are all right, yes?’

My eyes focussed once more on the little figure opposite me, mounted on the crates in a tangle of lethal-looking rope. He was watching me anxiously and seemed supremely unconcerned at his own paralysation. ‘You have been out for several minutes, my friend.’

I took a deep breath, my face still damp with sweat.

‘I’m terribly sorry, old chap,’ I said, heavy with guilt— a failed soldier. ‘I haven’t been any use at all, I’m afraid. I’d have sooner lost my right arm than to see you mixed up with that loathsome blackguard again...’

‘*Mais non, non, mon ami!* Do not speak like that. And it is not true; always you are of use. Do not derange yourself at what you see before you— they have arranged me like this solely to produce terror in your heart, to weaken your nerve, and in this they have succeeded. But we shall live to see another day, *mon brave*. Perhaps we shall even save the violin from being purloined. With the *bonne chance*, the moustaches may not even be desecrated! Let us hope for better things.’ And my friend, immobilised and inches away from hanging by his neck from the ceiling, smiled reassuringly at me.

His optimism, of course, was patently ludicrous. We were securely bound, in an isolated and largely sound-proof room within another (presumably locked) room. We were powerless to move an inch, much less escape, or pursue our adversaries, or discover the violin’s location. Apparently Poirot fancied himself a magician!

‘If you can get us out of this mess, Poirot,’ I sighed, ‘I’ll eat my hat. In the more idiotic detective stories, the super-sleuth

manages some *deus ex machina* and unrealistically turns the whole story round in the most unsatisfactory manner.'

'Nonsense; only, do not make rash and impious vows about consuming headwear. Have you not with you the greatest detective in the world? An interesting coincidence, that our captors apprehended us using the razor blades, *n'est-ce pas?* To think that we spoke of them, and Ramsey's little grudge, such a short time ago. You might call this a "close shave" that we are experiencing now, my friend.' And to my intense annoyance, he burst into an irrational fit of merriment.

One of the many intolerable things about Poirot is his complete lack of a proper sense of humour and proportion.

'Listen,' I said abruptly, spurred on by the horrible memory of our blade-wielding villains, 'what if they don't find the violin after all? What will they do?'

'I fully expect someone to return to check on us periodically,' Poirot said, calming down a little from his mirth. 'They may yet even enlist our help to find the violin. We shall see. If they do not find what they seek by the end of the party... they will not be pleased. They might be inclined to be vindictive, it is true. Eventually they would leave us here, and we would be missed before too long and the house searched, and we would be found and released. The room is not airtight and we shall not starve. It is far from the worst situation we have faced together yet. Try not to worry, *mon cher*.'

Easy said!

Poirot's initial prognostications were correct. Not five more minutes had passed when one of the gang—the unattractive, mop-haired gent who had brought Poirot along to this room at blade-point—opened the door to the outer room. We watched him through the glass pane, but we could hear nothing of his movements and, presumably, he heard none of ours, either. He stood close to the glass for a few moments, observing us like vaguely interesting zoological specimens, then hurried out of the room again.

I taxed my little friend about his speculations as to where Dimitri had hidden his instrument, but he was vague and

noncommittal, saying only that there were certain observations he'd made when we first entered the main hall that struck him at once. Then he changed the subject.

'These rooms we now occupy, they are also for recording purposes, you think, *mon ami*?'

'Most likely— that explains the microphones,' I said, not very interested, as I looked at a couple specimens of technology here and there in the room. 'Many musicians have their own private studios in their homes these days. Dimitri, who's rolling in money, seems to have a few of them, besides all those other rooms devoted to music, instruments, and performance. He strikes me as rather a monomaniac. This place looks like he could hardly be bothered with it, though.'

'Yes,' said Poirot, carelessly surveying the cheap couch and table in the outer room, its ashtrays and bottles, and its disorganised odds and ends. 'It is not a pleasant place.'

'I say,' I said uncomfortably, looking at the microphones, 'you don't suppose that our friends are somehow recording our conversation here, do you— trying to cotton on to some clue that would lead to the violin?'

Poirot considered a moment. '*Tiens*, but I had not thought of that, my friend. It is better, perhaps, to remain quieter. We do not want them to, how do you say, "cotton on" to the clue of the entrance hall.' And we relapsed into silence.

After a spell, Ramsey returned. His grave blue eyes did not look happy, and came to the point immediately.

'I want to know what ideas you have about the whereabouts of the Stradivarius, monsieur,' he said in a low voice.

Poirot wriggled a bit in his bonds, looking uncomfortable. Unable to suppress myself at the sight of his precarious position, I said, 'For God's sake, don't move, Poirot!' Then a terrible thought struck me.

‘Look, you devil,’ I said, ‘you plan to leave us here after you’ve gone, with or without the violin. We’ll be found, yes, but it might be a day or more. If Poirot falls asleep with that thing around his neck, it’s likely to kill him!’

Poirot shot me a quelling stare, but I thought my point was a salient one. Ramsey stooped down to address me.

‘Quite right, no doubt,’ he said smoothly. ‘And if M. Poirot’s ideas about the location of our quarry bear fruit, we can certainly come to an arrangement on that point. If you help us so that we can leave this house with our object accomplished, I will remove the rope from around your friend’s neck.’

I bit my tongue to suppress a sarcastic rejoinder about how very gracious he was. After all, my friend’s life was on the line, and this could be a chance to save it.

Poirot did not look too inclined to divulge information, but he did look profoundly uncomfortable, as though he had become newly cognizant of the seriousness of his own situation. ‘You... put me in a difficult position, monsieur,’ he said hesitantly. ‘I have promised to preserve the violin for my client...’

‘Poirot,’ I cried in frustration, ‘this is hardly the time for heroics in the line of business dealing. You don’t know, but you suspect.’ He glared at me and opened his mouth to interject, but I cut him off. ‘Poirot told me,’ I said in a rush, ‘that the entrance hall of the house particularly interested him when we first arrived.’

My friend was evidently furious with me, but I figured he’d forgive me later. Ramsey cast an approving smile in my direction.

‘At least one of you has some common sense.’ He moved to the door, glancing at the little clock on the wall of the sound booth. ‘It is a quarter to eight. For your friend’s sake, let us hope his guesses are good ones.’ And he left us.

‘Hastings,’ said Poirot at last, sighing, ‘what shall I do with you? How easily you fell into their trap. The rope around the neck and the lost nerve, and after I had warned you! Sometimes I feel that you could not keep a secret if your life depended on it. The speculations of Poirot are not yours to disclose.’

‘Your life does depend on it,’ I argued. I was grumpy and my limbs had lost feeling some time ago. ‘It was just a hint, anyway. I don’t suppose you really know where the violin is being kept.’

‘I cannot know, it is true, but I can make reasonable inferences.’

‘And if you do fall asleep, like I said? You hadn’t thought of that before. What then?’

Poirot scoffed. ‘Never. Hercule Poirot has the willpower of iron. And he thinks of everything.’

If I’d been able to throw my hands in the air in frustration, I would have done so. Instead I had to be content with the most dramatic rolling of the eyes that I could muster.

It was five minutes to nine. Ramsey returned to us in (I was alarmed to see) a towering rage. His accomplices were with him, and they banged the door of the sound booth behind them. Ramsey stormed over to Poirot, still seated placidly in his bonds.

‘Your little hints have led me nowhere,’ he snarled. ‘This is your last chance. Do you or do you not know where it is hidden?’

Poirot stared back at him coldly. ‘*Parbleu*, it was never told to me where it was hidden! The house is a large one, monsieur. You can hardly blame me for your own failure.’

Ramsey whipped something out of his pocket. Knowing what it was, my heart leapt into my throat.

‘I have not managed the violin— this time,’ he said steadily. ‘But I have incapacitated you and your friend. And I will not leave here without—’

‘—A consolation prize?’ asked Poirot, with a stiffness to match his exquisitely befurled black moustaches. ‘*Le trophée?* It hardly seems to me that, even by your own questionable standards, you have earned it.’

Blast him, what did he hope to gain by antagonising a man who was inches from him with a razor blade?!

‘Supposing, then,’ Ramsey said menacingly, ‘that we were to forgo the plan of shearing that damned arrogant lip of yours, and

instead I just give a few almighty kicks to this stack of crates and let that bit of rope around your neck do its work?’ He moved to one side so that I could see the scene clearly. ‘Captain Hastings here would have a perfect view of—’

My nerve deserted me entirely. I broke down and shamelessly begged for my friend’s life, rambling, stammering, and making a general commotion. I did not know how seriously bent this man was on lethal vengeance, but it was too soon after the Bexhill incident. Too soon, and too much. My carrying on encompassed several pitiful minutes, and by the end my breath came wheezy and hitching.

When I looked up at Poirot again, there were no traces of his previous quelling glances, nor of any frustration or fury. He seemed deeply affected by my display and was looking at me with an expression of great tenderness. Ramsey laughed callously and turned his back on me.

‘Well then,’ he said mockingly to Poirot, coming closer. ‘The razor it is. It would never do for the good captain to have a full-blown seizure. Considering your current neckwear, monsieur, I would advise you to focus on staying very, very still...’

‘There is, I’m afraid,’ said Poirot calmly, as Ramsey’s hands inched forward in a predatory fashion, ‘what you might call “the snag.” You see—’ He nodded infinitesimally to the glass partition. ‘We are not alone.’

Both Ramsey and myself nearly jumped out of our skin at this pronouncement; our eyes flew, together, to the window. Several men were entering the room— we had not heard them— and were stopping dead at the sight of us. One of them, Dimitri himself, immediately dashed to the sound booth and flung open the door, closely followed by his companions.

If this were not sufficiently astonishing, what happened next seemed a positive miracle. Ramsey’s back was now to Poirot, and my little friend, with a sudden and deft movement, shook off all of his entangling ropes, hopped down, and darted over to me!

Ramsey and I (and perhaps one or two of the newcomers, all strongly-built but somewhat shabbily-dressed men) gaped at Poirot

open-mouthed. As Ramsey and his two aides were disarmed and held at bay, with much cursing, Poirot quickly knelt before me.

'*Mon pauvre ami,*' he murmured, 'Thanks in part to you, I do not come unprepared to the fray.' And, out of his sleeve, he extracted and unsheathed... his own straight razor.

It sliced through the cords that bound me like they were butter.

'Do you— do you mean—' I gasped, as Poirot dextrously untangled me and helped me to my feet, 'that you had that razor on you the whole time?'

'*Mais oui,*' he said composedly. 'M. Dimitri, if a few of your friends could escort these intruders out through the front of the house, you will find two constables patrolling outside.' Exit Ramsey, his confederates, and their handlers, staring at Poirot as they went.

I turned to Poirot, still flabbergasted. 'But when did you get a chance to cut your bonds? I never noticed it.'

My friend took on a slightly apologetic tone. 'It was after Ramsey first left us alone, my friend, and you had some minutes of unconsciousness. The razor, I had slipped up my sleeve before we left our flat. The fools who apprehended us with their own razor blades, they did not check to see what we had up the sleeve before binding the wrists! *C'était une erreur, ça.*

'By holding the hands at a certain angle, one can manage a small amount of leeway in the bindings. When we were alone, I shook the razor from my sleeve, opened it behind my back, wedged it upright into the slats of the crate, and cut the ropes on my wrists first. Then I cut the other cords as well, and arranged them to look as though they were yet uncut.'

As he spoke, I felt my relief giving way to anger.

'Dash it all, Poirot,' I roared, 'I've spent the last couple of hours thinking you were teetering on the brink of death! Why didn't you cut my bonds, too, so we could escape?'

Poirot had shrunk slightly behind the bewildered Dimitri in anticipation of my just wrath. ‘*Mon ami,*’ he said piteously, gesturing with an air of helplessness, ‘I had taken on a job to preserve the violin of this monsieur. I could not desert my post.’

‘Your post! What good did you hope to do stuck in here?’

‘Well, I had a little idea, you see...’

Poirot sidled over to the wooden crates where he had been incarcerated, and climbed onto the bottom crate so as to access the top one. He gingerly prised open the lid and reached inside, bringing forth a handsome black case.

‘No,’ I said in disbelief. ‘That’s never... it can’t be.’

Dimitri nodded, taking the case and opening it for us to see. It was the priceless Stradivarius.

My jaw dropped yet again. ‘*You were sitting on it the whole time?*’

I couldn’t stand it...

Poirot and I were alone in the outer room, sitting on the shabby little sofa, while Dimitri and his remaining companions left us to acquire some brandy. The black violin case lay open on the little table before us, the priceless instrument appearing supremely out of place in our dingy environment.

‘So, they brought us here, tied us up in the sound booth, and sat you right on top of the violin, without realising they had just done so.’

‘*Oui.*’

‘And you guessed that you were sitting on it?’

‘*Oui.*’

I shook my head. ‘It’s ridiculous,’ I exclaimed. ‘How could you possibly know?’

Poirot shrugged. ‘I do not say that I *knew* exactly, but it seemed strongly indicated. *Mon cher,* it is strange, yes, but not quite as unlikely nor as complicated as you might think. The Syndicate thought they were very clever by finding an unattractive, unfinished room of the house that was kept locked; there, they

could keep us out of the way while they make their search. It even had a sound-proofed room within. Did it not occur to you at once to ask yourself why this room would be kept locked by the owner, when practically every other room in this house, with all its expensive curios, was left wide open during a house party where a theft might possibly occur?’

‘Well... no, it didn’t. There seemed nothing of interest in here!’

‘Precisely what most people would think, Hastings! And yet, locked it was. What was the reason? Moreover, it was not an abandoned room; it is kept dusted, and the microphones we saw in the inner room were of quite good quality. The bottles and ashtrays in the outer room suggest that some form of entertaining occurs here— but not at all the same manner of entertaining that would occur in *les grandes chambres* of the rest of the house! No, this is a room for the entertaining of those guests who might, perhaps, be uncomfortable with the high-class fancies of Dimitri’s richer and more aristocratic friends. And it is a room of interest to those of the musical profession.

‘M. Dimitri said that he was having, in his house at nine o’clock, a small party for an obscure Appalachian folk ensemble of which he was most fond. Of all the rooms I had seen in this grand house of his, this was precisely the room to which I knew he would take them. And do you really know nothing of the musical temperament, *mon ami*? He was inordinately proud of his Stradivarius. He would want to show them immediately, perhaps even play and record music with them. He locked this room because his prized violin was here, and this was to be both where he would use it and socialise with his American friends. *Enfin*, from my observations, there was only one place of storage in these sparse rooms where the violin could be kept, and there it was. It is really of the most straightforward.’

‘So you just decided to wait here until nine o’clock until they showed up?’

‘*Exactement*. It seemed very much the best way both to keep the Syndicate from finding the violin, as well as to apprehend

our would-be thieves at the last with the helpful assistance of M. Dimitri and his guests.'

'Poirot,' I exclaimed in exasperation, 'I could throttle you myself right now! Supposing you were wrong, and Dimitri and his friends didn't show?'

'I am not in the habit of being wrong in my deductions. At any rate, M. Dimitri is absentminded, but nonetheless values punctuality. Should something have come up to detain them, I planned to stall for a little more time. Fortunately I did not need to do so, as you did an admirable job doing this for me. I refer to your very touching speech of several minutes, petitioning Ramsey to spare my life.'

I growled a little, remembering my antics with great embarrassment and not best pleased with Poirot for deceiving me on that point. This reminded me of something else.

'You told me that you suspected the entrance hall as a clue to the location of the violin,' I said, narrowing my eyes.

Poirot had the good grace to look embarrassed again. 'Er, yes, that was *une blague* as well, *mon ami*. I could not tell you my plans, lest your honest and transparent nature break forth and give the game away to our enemies. I knew that if I gave you a false hint, and then jerked around a bit in my ropes in the presence of Ramsey, that you would break down and convey the false hint to him yourself as a means of bargaining. I feign an upset reaction at this supposed breach of confidence, but in fact my plan has gone ahead *parfaitement*. Your response would be utterly convincing to our enemies, and they would waste much time searching, far away from us.'

I leapt to my feet, livid. 'You have been perfectly abominable to me,' I burst out. 'The torture I've been through this evening, and on your behalf!'

Poirot leapt up too, full of soothing, mollifying gestures. 'I prostrate myself,' he cried. 'I offer a thousand, a million apologies—'

I cut him off savagely. 'Go to the devil, Poirot—I've heard it before! But I'm not one of these susceptible ladies who goes to

puddles when you throw out a few winsome-sounding pretenses of remorse.'

I turned away from him, feeling bitterly wronged. The evening's events seemed to be a mix of silly idiocy and a pain that touched me on the raw. Part of me thought I should shrug it off as nothing; another part wanted me to never forgive Poirot, or perhaps strangle him after all.

My friend was arrested by my bluntness. Several moments of silence followed. Then he drew up beside me and I felt a bracing pressure on my elbow. I passed my hand over my brow, ruthlessly willing away the threat of stronger emotion.

'You have had to face more than your fair share of pain these last months,' he said quietly. 'More than once you feared for the life of a friend, with good reason, and have felt powerless to act. But you have saved me now, *mon ami*, not once but twice. Were it not for the attention you drew to my straight razor earlier today as we prepared the *toilette* before our interview with M. Dimitri, it might not have occurred to me, on a whim, to slip it into my sleeve this evening, should we face such a trial as we did. Your frustration is fully justified. You are an excellent and loyal friend, without whom I might now be utterly disgraced or even dead, and I have treated you shamefully. So concentrated was I on the task of apprehending Ramsey, who had wronged me so deeply, that I had forgotten my friend Hastings, who has these past months not left me out of his sight lest harm befall me.'

My rage wavered and ebbed. I turned to my friend. His eyes held a grave compassion.

'I give you my solemn word, *mon ami*, that I shall not again deceive you concerning my own safety or well-being in order to score points against the London Syndicate. It was a cruelty to you.'

I nodded mutely, and Poirot was undoubtedly on the verge of one of his typically demonstrative embraces when Dimitri suddenly returned with his American friends and a butler, who proffered brandy to Poirot and myself. We received it gratefully.

'You must let us offer you supper before you depart, gentlemen,' said Dimitri cheerfully. 'I suppose you missed yours.'

Well, you have preserved my Stradivarius for me and caught a few thieves as well; neat work for an evening.'

Poirot bowed. '*Merci*, monsieur,' he said, and glanced at me. 'Yes, that is enough for now.'

Chapter 5

The Elusive One

A light snowfall was just visible through the curtains of our flat. Poirot and I were situated around a comfortable fire in the sitting room. My friend was contentedly passing the time by carefully attending to his patent leather boots with a rag and a jar of petroleum jelly—I suspected that this was his own particular act of defiance in the face of the oncoming winter. That evening, we were waiting for Inspector Japp to drop by, as he was wintering in the far south and meant to bid us farewell before catching his train.

I hazarded a thought that had been on my mind lately.

‘What are we going to do, Poirot, about this whole London Syndicate business?’

Poirot looked up at me in surprise. ‘What do you mean? We have had much to do with them. As a result, some of them are behind bars.’

‘But there doesn’t seem to be any letting up,’ I said in exasperation. ‘These aren’t ordinary crimes. It is a full criminal outfit, and one that seems uniquely determined to get you out of their way!’

My friend gave me a knowing glance. ‘I comprehend. It is hard on the nerves for you, is it not?’

‘Well, frankly, it is! And yours, too, I should think. Threats, attacks—I don’t know how much more of this I can take. Shouldn’t we be doing something?’

‘Ah, Hastings, always the man of action! I perceive the thought in your mind. You want to take the whole organisation down from the top, is it not so? Preferably through some elaborate

and melodramatic espionage scheme. Well, my friend, such attempts are both difficult and dangerous, the sort of thing to be attempted only in the rare, fortuitous moment. Meanwhile, we have successfully averted a number of crimes already. We learn more about our adversary along the way. And in the Syndicate's attempts to get me out of the way, they have consistently made little blunders that have upset their plans.'

'One of these times,' I pointed out, 'they're not going to make a blunder.'

'Crime always leaves traces, *chaque fois*,' returned Poirot sagaciously, wiping his fingers daintily on the rag.

'And say what you like in praise of the fact that they frown upon personally murdering their victims—they don't seem to mind if you cop it in the course of things, as long as they're not the ones actually pulling the trigger!'

My little friend made an expressive (and dismissive) gesture. 'Well, what recourse do I have? Do I then go about with the bodyguard?' And he twinkled at me.

It frustrates me to no end when Poirot refuses to take important matters seriously—while lavishing unwarranted care on objects such as patent leather! At any rate, I had always accompanied my friend everywhere on his cases, and realistically, there was little (I thought) that another could do in the realm of protection that I didn't mean to manage already. If Poirot was aware that I occasionally brought my revolver with me while accompanying him on some of our outings, he had never mentioned it to me.

'All I mean,' I said, lighting my pipe and pocketing the brass lighter, 'is that rather than sit around and wait to be attacked so that you can avert a new crime, it would be as well to go on the offensive.'

'You think, do you not, that I have been idle in all this? Oh, *là là*, it is not so! I do not suffer such personal indignities without my own further investigations, believe me. It is not necessary for me to lay out all that I have discovered at this juncture, but there are possibilities there, links in a chain that might be weakened or broken. Alas, crime carries on, *mon ami*, despite all the police and

detectives in the world. Human nature remains the same. Yet perhaps, yes, something can be done. With Japp going away on his holiday, I expect to hear something quite soon from our criminal friends.'

'You think they're that afraid of Japp? Surely not.'

Poirot sighed. 'For all your imagination, Hastings, you have yet to mentally tap into the depths of the creativity of the London Syndicate. There is much that they have not yet tried.'

I judged it best to remain silent, studying the fire in the deepening darkness. Before too long, we heard a familiar knock at the door and rose to admit our friend.

'Ah, it so good of you, my dear Japp,' said Poirot, beaming and wringing his hand. 'You will be away for some time, is it not so?'

'Three months,' grinned Japp, 'in the southern climes. And completely out of touch with civilization! Still, not a bad exchange for winter in England, eh, Poirot?' He accepted a small glass of whisky.

'Indeed! I envy you the experience, though not the sea-journey. A most generous offer by Sir Edwin in light of ten years of service at Scotland Yard.'

'That porter of yours, Mr Johnston, wished me a good journey as I was coming in here. Nice chap— but I have noticed that everyone and his auntie seems to know I'm off on holiday.' Japp made a wry face. 'Mind you, the whole safari end of things hardly suits my taste. Spend enough time in London chasing wild creatures with firearms, I should think! Hunting down exotic and elusive flowers is more in my line. I don't mind telling you I nearly refused until I heard tell that Dr Arthur Stevenson, the famous botanist, would be in our little party. Well, I couldn't pass it up then.'

'They'll manage to get along without you at the Yard, all right?' I queried amiably, pouring out a drink of my own.

Japp paused, casting an awkward glance at Poirot.

'Inspector Morett,' said Japp at last, 'will be at the helm in the interim.'

I choked into my whisky and soda. Morett was the single most obnoxious officer I had ever encountered at the Yard, with a face like a rat and an intolerable smugness of attitude. Whereas Poirot was conceited and charming, Morett was conceited and abominably rude. He didn't seem to mind me too much for some reason, though he had a most unflattering estimation of my mental capacities (quite unfairly). But he clearly loathed Poirot and had insulted him personally on more than one occasion.

'I say,' I gasped, and Poirot clapped me on the back several times. Japp gave an understanding nod. 'Years of service in espionage,' he said by means of explanation, 'have given him a bee in his bonnet about foreigners. Mind you, the hard line he's taken has sometimes paid off, especially in the political climate these days. But he's not what you'd call well-mannered.'

'No indeed,' said Poirot impassively. 'Well, let us hope that our interactions may be civil...' He turned away from Japp and murmured, just loud enough for me to hear: '...and minimal.'

The following week, Poirot received a private invitation to dine with his friend, Harley Street specialist Dr Hawker. On my own for the evening, I betook myself to a favourite pub, not far from our street, for an early supper, followed by a stroll before it became wholly dark. The air had turned unusually warm for December—not that this had deterred Poirot from his two mufflers when he had left our flat for his visit this evening!

There was a little wooded parkland not far from the pub, and I decided to take a turn in it along a well-lit path. Apparently, the idea had occurred to another.

I saw, seated on a low park bench amid the trees, a young woman of about twenty-five. She had the appearance of one who was endeavouring to bear up under a stressful state of mind, and not quite managing. On her lap was a large envelope and a stack of papers, and she was wringing her hands and frowning perplexedly.

Hesitating, I slowly approached, wondering if I should offer any assistance. Suddenly she looked up with a start. She was

extremely attractive, with chestnut hair and vivid blue eyes—which seemed, at the moment, to be tearing up.

‘Oh,’ I stammered, ‘Hello. Can I—?’

She rose to her feet with a sharp intake of breath, clutching her papers. She stared and stared at me, her pretty mouth trembling a little as though she knew not what to say. Finally, with a sudden flush of red, she managed to speak.

‘I beg your pardon sir, but I... well... it’s just...’ A slender hand just touched the corner of her eye. Hastily I produced a handkerchief and offered it to her, which she accepted gratefully.

‘I do apologise. I’m in a spot of trouble, and I don’t know who can help me. You see, my father had entrusted me to hand-deliver some of his business papers to a residence around here tonight... a little bungalow... and, well, I’m *afraid*, that’s all. It’s terribly awkward to explain... I’m worried, sir, that the bungalow might house people with some connection to a criminal organisation.’

She sat down on her bench again and looked up at me, blushing again and trembling a little in the cool of the evening. I took a seat beside her, intrigued, and encouraged her to go on.

‘Oh, I have no proof. It’s not a matter for the police at this point, nor any kind of investigator. And I *know*,’ she added firmly, ‘that my father is not conducting any illegal operations of any kind. He would never do so. This is all he gave me to deliver.’

Impulsively, she thrust the stack of papers at me, and I looked at them closely. They were, in fact, ordinary-looking, if somewhat dull, papers and receipts of business. I handed them back, and she placed them in the envelope and sealed it carefully.

‘You’ll think I’m terribly silly,’ she said ruefully, her eyes downcast, ‘but I’m terrified of going out to that house. But I promised faithfully that father’s papers would be sent. Perhaps a note... could I trouble you for a piece of plain paper?’

I extracted my pocket notebook and detached a sheet from it, handing it to her. She thanked me and retrieved a pen of her own from her bag. No sooner had she done so than her face flushed even more, and she seemed to abandon the idea of writing.

‘No, this will never do— he was most particular, and they must go this evening— I do apologise, sir; I suppose I’m not making a great deal of sense.’ She dabbed at her lovely eyes again. They were like forget-me-nots, the pupils ringed with gold amidst the blue.

Pulling myself together, I endeavoured to clarify matters. ‘You say you’re concerned that the location you’ve been directed to tonight has criminal connections? What makes you think so?’

‘Well... I’ve been hearing rumours about it lately. Queer things! I work for a typing firm in the neighbourhood, Colgrims, and all the girls have been talking lately about it— funny stories attached to the place. And something about goings-on that even Scotland Yard won’t be able to manage.’

My mind lingered over Japp’s recent departure, and I wondered eagerly if this might be the sort of thing Poirot was thinking of when he said he expected to hear from the Syndicate once Japp left.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘If there’s a chance that this residence is a centre for criminal activity, you really mustn’t go there tonight. If these papers really need to be given to someone, I will take them. I’ll be able to get a look at the place.’

She hesitated, looking worried, as she extracted a cigarette. I lighted it for her and she sat in silence for a moment, her eyes flickering over me uncertainly, as if she did not know whether to trust me. Finally, she gave me a little smile.

‘I’ve been terribly rude,’ she said. ‘You’ve been kind enough to try to help me, and I haven’t even introduced myself. My name is Rose Whittaker.’

‘Arthur Hastings,’ I said, offering my hand.

She took it, her eyes widening. ‘Not... Captain Hastings, the associate of the detective, Hercule Poirot?’

‘Yes, the very same.’

Miss Whittaker blushed even more, and her voice shook. ‘And... and you will help me? But I do not want the police involved yet, nor any detective, really... my father... he might not realise who he’s dealing with, if there *are* criminals there. And it’s all just

hearsay at this point!’ The troubled voice of a daughter, seeking to protect her father’s good name.

‘Oh, you needn’t worry,’ I insisted. ‘My friend is quite discreet, but this isn’t a matter for Poirot, at least not yet.’

She nodded. She seemed to be thinking hard.

‘I was instructed,’ she said, ‘to just deposit these papers through the mail slot at Fallston Cottage. I daresay someone will be looking out for my arrival. If you are really willing to go there in my stead, I’d be no end grateful. Mail deliveries in the dark, to that strange place!’ She shivered again. ‘But perhaps you should write a note to leave with it, just so they would know that I’ve given you leave to make the delivery for me. After all, your name would carry weight. Something like...’

Rose Whittaker handed me back the little piece of paper from my notebook, and I prepared to write on it. “...I, Captain Hastings, associate of Hercule Poirot, have been empowered to deliver this parcel by my contact.” She nodded firmly. ‘This way, if there are any criminals there, they will know that my father is not to be trifled with!’

I smiled a little at her simple confidence. She handed me the sealed package with her father’s receipts, and I took it with the note and prepared to depart. It was already dark, and I wished to hurry on my errand.

‘Captain Hastings,’ she said, rising. She hesitated, and said softly, ‘Thank you. And please... will you wait, until I have spoken to my father tomorrow, before making this known? You can call on me at Colgrim’s in the evening around six— I’m working late. We can decide which steps to take then, perhaps, if I think that this is a matter to lay before an investigator— or the police?’

I was fully halfway to the cottage before I seriously began to have second thoughts about the strange, suspicious delivery I was making. Of one thing I was absolutely certain— Miss Whittaker was truly upset and conflicted. She had turned to me in genuine difficulty. For my part, I was less concerned with her genuineness than I was with the prospect of the nature of my delivery. How did she *know* that her father was not actually a criminal? Or perhaps he was involved with some criminal matter, but unknowingly. What if

I was, in fact, aiding the London Syndicate by this delivery? I had looked over the papers thoroughly, and they were innocent enough. But could they be in code, containing secret information? That seemed rather farfetched. Or was the whole crime angle a mare's nest, just local rumours, compounded by a young woman's fear of delivering mail in the dark? Was that not far likelier?

Anyway, it was too late to do anything other than what I had promised. I reached the cottage's gravel drive and hesitated. Although it was dark, the lane was well-lit, and a portly domestic lingered outside, collecting stray branches, a final task before bed. Striding directly up the path, I slipped the package with the note through the mail slot, and turned quickly to leave again.

We would sort out matters later tomorrow. After all, until then, I thought, what was the worst that could happen?

What with one thing and another, I did not encounter Poirot again until lunchtime the following day, as we had our own respective errands on this morning. We had agreed previously to meet for lunch at the West Lodge Café in Soho, a newer place we had not yet tried. After soup and sandwiches, my eyes came to rest on my little friend, now attacking a brioche with obvious enjoyment. It bothered me slightly to have kept news of my nightly errand from Poirot for even this long, and the lady had not precisely asked me *not* to tell Poirot. She had merely preferred to speak with her father first, before troubling any authorities with what might be a trivial matter. I cleared my throat conspicuously.

'Poirot,' I began, 'I had a rather interesting night yesterday.'

'Indeed?' He looked up at me, his egg-shaped head a little on one side, as he dabbed at his moustache.

'You see, old boy, there's just the slightest chance that I... well... I may have possibly ended up delivering some papers to members of the London Syndicate.'

Poirot's brioche dropped to his plate, forgotten. He stared at me incredulously. *'Comment?'*

Feeling slightly foolish, I relayed to Poirot everything that had passed the previous evening between myself and Rose Whittaker.

Poirot nodded his head slowly. Several expressions had passed over his face in rapid succession; I could see the brain working away furiously behind the eyes.

‘That is odd, decidedly odd,’ he muttered. ‘Hastings, were you not afraid to comply with such a request? From a complete stranger?’

‘Oh, you weren’t there, Poirot. I tell you, there could be no mistaking the anxiety in that girl’s manner. I’d swear to it.’

Hastily, he replied, ‘No, I agree absolutely. I see in my mind’s eye all that you have described to me so thoroughly. She had turned to you in great distress; of that I have not the slightest doubt. Decidedly, she is in need of assistance. Tell me, Hastings—did you happen to loan a pen, or light a cigarette, while you were out on your stroll last evening?’

‘What? Well, yes, I lit a cigarette for Miss Whittaker, as a matter of fact. I didn’t loan a pen, but used my own pen to write the note. What on earth are you getting at? What could that have to do with anything?’

When Poirot showed no indication of a reply, I went on stubbornly: ‘I took a good look at those papers and would swear they were harmless.’

‘Again, I agree with you, *mon ami*— they probably were.’

‘And I couldn’t just let her go off on a night delivery to a suspicious house by herself. She was very upset.’

Poirot didn’t answer. After a moment’s further pause, he suddenly became brisk and businesslike. He glanced quickly around us, and he then lowered his voice and leaned forward.

‘*Eh bien*, my friend, we must be on our way. You are to return to our flat, *immédiatement*. I have other matters to attend to at the present.’

I looked at him uncertainly. ‘Something’s up. If so, I’d rather not leave you alone. Come back to the flat with me.’

‘I cannot. You shall understand presently. But you must go, Hastings. And you must remember not to concern yourself about

me. I take the precautions and I shall be perfectly all right... but only if we go our separate ways now.'

This alarmed me greatly, but I obeyed. We rose from our seats and proceeded to our respective destinations.

As I neared Whitehaven Mansions, I noticed three police cars out front. My mind whirled with speculation. Had someone broken into the flat? Was there a lunatic on the loose?

I hurried upstairs without delay. Sure enough, the door to the flat was open, and I hurried inside. Several officers were swarming over the place, along with Mr Johnston, the porter, looking terribly distressed.

'What on earth's happened?' I exclaimed.

None other than the odious Inspector Morett strode forward briskly with a kind of solemn triumph. He held up something in his hand.

'This is a warrant,' he announced, 'for the arrest of Hercule Poirot.'

Time stood still as I gaped stupidly. He had known. Somehow, Poirot had expected this!

'Where is he?' Morett pressed.

Finding my voice again, I said (honestly enough): 'I don't know. But what is all this? What is your charge?'

'He is wanted for counterfeiting,' Morett replied loftily.

'I've never heard such rot,' I exclaimed, my anger and indignance surging. Morett was looking at me with all the smugness his rat-like face could muster. I remembered his extreme disdain for Poirot, and an awful thought passed through my mind... suppose the Syndicate had infiltrated even the police? The other officers had stopped to stare at us, looking uncomfortably bewildered.

'We have all the evidence we need to convict,' Morett went on. 'And once we've cornered your little friend, he'll be deported before you can say *Vive les Belges*. Belgium's not in the best way at the moment. Mark my words, the Germans will be flooding back in any day now. Rather dreadful for M. Poirot, a former head of police

and famous investigator, to be caught there in those circumstances, don't you think?'

I stared at him. Memories of war with Germany interrupted my thoughts with the force of shrapnel. The Somme. Ypres. The brutal treatment of the Germans to Belgian resistance. The execution of Gabrielle Petit. And the waves of Belgian refugees, landing in England, beginning new lives...

The horrible confidence on Morett's face snapped me back to the present. 'Counterfeiting, did you say?' I retorted. 'You seriously mean to accuse one of the most trusted detective agents in England of such a thing?' *Control yourself*, I told myself severely. *You can't lash out against the police... it will make things worse...*

'Evidently, he has pulled the wool over many eyes,' returned Morett, striding back and forth. 'I always knew that interfering little foreigner was a mountebank, a charlatan! I believe he's even taken you in.' He turned shrewd eyes in my direction.

This proved too much for our porter, Mr Johnston. 'By all that's decent,' he exclaimed, 'you can't think that Captain Hastings himself has been planning crime?'

'No, I don't,' snapped Morett. 'It seems clear enough to me that he's just as shocked as anyone. Nonetheless, I believe that Poirot has been using him, taking advantage of his ignorance to—'

I cut him off in mid-insult.

'What, may I ask, is your evidence that Hercule Poirot has been involved with counterfeiting operations?'

'I'll humour you. Do you deny delivering this envelope to Fallston Cottage last night, at about nine o'clock?' He held up a bulky envelope, cut neatly at the top.

I froze.

'Obviously you don't deny it. Which is just as well, since you were seen delivering it.' Morett strode over to the dining room table and inverted the package casually. To my shock, out of it poured a river of notes... monetary notes... and a few other pieces of typed correspondence.

'That,' I exclaimed hotly, 'is not what I delivered. This is a frame-up.'

‘Oh? We have evidence from a domestic, a most reliable witness, who collected the parcel moments after you were seen delivering it. She believed the deliverer, and her master (who has since disappeared), to be acting most suspiciously, and felt compelled to come to us with it. We opened it at the station this morning. And this additional note was with it. I suppose you don’t deny that you wrote it?’ He extended it in my direction.

I, Captain Hastings, associate of Hercule Poirot, have been empowered to deliver this parcel by my contact.

‘You have as good as left a written confession, Captain Hastings, that you delivered these forged notes by Poirot’s orders.’

My mouth had gone dry. I stammered, ‘No—no—you have this wrong, from start to finish!’

I would amend this. I would appeal to Japp immediately. I would—

No. Japp was on another continent and completely out of touch.

Good God, what had I done?

Morett’s repellent voice droned on, but I was tuning him out. That note I had written had been dictated by Rose Whittaker. The entire scene had been set by her. The Syndicate, they would seize the chance offered by Japp’s absence to... Rose Whittaker must have... but no. Poirot himself had said that her anxiety and conflict were real, and that her papers for delivery were quite innocent. Certainly, she was a pawn in this game as well. Perhaps her father, working in concert with the Syndicate, put her up to something. Perhaps, when she spoke to him earlier today as she said she would about our meeting, he saw the possibilities and arranged for the packages to be switched. The domestic would, naturally, be an accomplice. Or... even the police themselves...

Trembling, I lowered myself into a chair, and heard Morett say: 'I understand this would come as rather a shock for you. This was a man that you trusted, after all—'

I glared at him malevolently.

'—and I know that you will see the sense of cooperating with the police. We intend to have officers stationed in this flat until Poirot returns, assuming he will in fact try to do so, and I would be obliged if you would remain here for the time being, as well.'

There was nothing I could do but to endure what seemed like endless, senseless questioning. Hours seemed to pass. Desperately, I hoped that Poirot would continue to foresee the moves of the police and would not return to the flat, though how he had done so thus far was a great mystery to me. I said nothing of meeting Poirot for lunch or the conversation we had shared, lest I somehow betray his position. Haltingly, I attempted to explain the full events of last night and described Miss Whittaker, who worked at Colgrims, but my story sounded weak and contrived, even to my own ears. My great hope was that they would contact Miss Whittaker immediately so that she could confirm my story, Poirot would be cleared, and we could begin to get to the truth of this matter.

Morett did indeed phone to Colgrims, exchanged a few words, and hung up again. He turned to me with an unpleasant smile.

'Even now, you try to protect your friend, who has abandoned you to the police? Relaying false information to us is a serious offense, Captain Hastings. Colgrims has no record of ever having employed a Rose Whittaker.'

Hope died in me. So she was in it, after all. Poirot had been wrong, and if he was wrong, he was likely to be in terrible danger at this moment. Or perhaps he wasn't wrong... perhaps she had innocently given me a false name to remain anonymous in her trouble? I was dreadfully confused.

Just then, the telephone suddenly rang. My heart gave a jolt and I reached for it, but Morett was before me.

‘Hercule Poirot’s residence. Oh, it’s you, Officer Bailey. Any news?... *What?* Are you certain?’ He listened attentively, his face steadily growing redder and redder. After several minutes, he hung up the receiver, appearing utterly astonished. He gave me a quick glance, and with a single gesture he summoned every remaining officer to him. To my surprise, he filed them all out immediately, and shut the door behind them with a bang, leaving me alone.

I was sure that they had found Poirot and were off to apprehend him. And I had not been given leave to go. But they had no right to keep me here! Several agonised minutes passed as I paced, uncertain of a course of action. My thoughts were interrupted by the unexpected turning of the doorknob. I rushed forward angrily.

But through the door walked... Hercule Poirot.

‘Ah, my good Has—’ he began pleasantly, unaware of my stricken face. The next moment I had grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him forward into the flat, slamming and locking the door.

Amid protests, I pulled him into the sitting room and said breathlessly, ‘They’re looking for you! You can’t stay here, Morett and the rest might be back any time, and if the porter noticed you—’

‘Hastings! Calm yourself, I pray you!’ My little friend detached himself and removed his hat, coat, and mufflers carefully. ‘I am not going anywhere now. All is well, and even that loathsome Inspector Morett has accepted the truth. I have had a little chat with your mendacious friend, Mlle Rose Whittaker, and her ruse has failed.’

‘You found her?’ I gasped.

‘No, my friend, I allowed her to find me,’ said Poirot with an enigmatic smile.

‘I thought you believed her to be innocent.’

‘*En vérité?* I do not think I said so. I said that she had turned to you in great distress, and agreed that she was in a true

state of anxiety. I also said that the papers she showed you were innocent, and they were. But you did not notice when she exchanged those innocent papers for a duplicate parcel, extracted from her bag, which she then handed to you.'

I breathed heavily, feeling an utter fool. 'Did you really think something like this would happen, Poirot? You were terribly quick on the uptake.'

'You speak as though such celerity of mind were unusual for me, Hastings! I am very nearly offended. No matter. Yes, when I first heard that the good Japp would be *incommunicado* for some months, and the unsympathetic Inspector Morett would be in his place, it crossed my mind that the Syndicate might try to use this state of affairs to their own benefit. There are others at Scotland Yard who would speak in my defence, but they do not rank so highly. Morett had the power to make life difficult for me. If the Syndicate could get a serious accusation of crime against me, perhaps! Morett would work quickly to deport me and— imbecile that he is— would not ask too many questions. The political situation is tense now, my friend, and the system can be unyielding to *les étrangers*. It is just possible he might have succeeded, an unwitting tool of the London Syndicate, and long before Japp would have ever found out to intervene.'

The words 'unwitting tool' struck a painful chord as I remembered my own role in the scheme. 'He never— he wouldn't have— succeeded, surely!'

Poirot looked at me and clasped his hands behind his back.

'It is difficult to say,' he said at last. 'It offends the grey cells to think that Inspector Morett could be so infernally stupid, but alas, *c'est comme ça*. Had he applied enough pressure, even slight evidence might have been deemed sufficient. But the note written in your own hand, *hein*, that carried weight. A stroke of genius by our adversaries. No, do not blame yourself unduly, *mon cher*. You fell into their trap, but you also, without realising it, aided in the resolution of our problem.

'*Au fait*, before I left the lady, I retrieved this from her.'

Poirot held out a little white bundle, which I unfolded. It was my lighter, wrapped in my white handkerchief. I looked at them forlornly, and it struck me: *the trophy*.

‘It was why I asked you, Hastings, if you had lit a cigarette or loaned a pen while you were out. You comprehend, I did not think you were carrying much of value, but if it were the Syndicate, they would have been looking for something, anything, to collect from you.’

‘How did you know it was her?’ I asked. ‘I only suspected as much after Inspector Morett showed me that note she dictated to me. Even then I wasn’t absolutely sure. You seemed to know ever since my description of our meeting.’

‘Ah, she made a mistake at once, but at once! I am surprised that you did not notice. Mademoiselle gave the impression that she did not know who you were. Yet before you revealed your identity, she asked for a sheet of paper on which to write a note. Not every gentleman carries a notebook about with him, Hastings! You picked the habit up from me because we work in criminal detection. Yet she assumed, without question, that you had such a thing on your person. That struck me as a little suspicious.’

I groaned.

‘And also, it seemed too much of a coincidence to me that she mentioned the fact that she did not want an investigator, or the police, brought into the matter, before she knew that you yourself were a colleague of an investigator *très célèbre*. Furthermore, she seemed usually quick to trust you to handle and examine her father’s private business papers. The smell of the fish was all over the account you relayed.’

‘So you made her give these back when you apprehended her,’ I said, clutching my handkerchief and lighter— implements of kind courtesy and gentility— with disgust.

‘No, my friend, I did not make her. I did not mention anything of the sort. She surrendered these things herself. You do not understand?’ He looked serious, but kindly. I could not comprehend the way that he was regarding me.

‘She used me to try to ruin you,’ I said testily. ‘She nearly succeeded. No, I can’t say why she would return her “trophy,” unless she just thinks she didn’t earn it because she failed.’

‘*Mon cher ami*,’ said Poirot, ‘she is in love with you.’

I had not heard him correctly. Surely, I could not have. But he looked perfectly in earnest.

At last, I replied woodenly: ‘Did she tell you that?’

‘No. I knew even before I met her. It was confirmed when I spoke with her, but no, she did not tell me.’

I didn’t ask. ‘Anyone who loves me,’ I said stiffly, ‘would not try to destroy your life and send you out of the country.’

There was a twitch of Poirot’s moustache. ‘She did not quite see it that way— at least, not at first. Her original goal had been simple. She planted herself in the park she saw you enter. She did not know you. If she had succeeded in her operation, Poirot would be exiled from England, which would benefit the Syndicate— and they would not even receive the blame. But when the plan was formulated, she did not know what awaited her. She met you and, *c’est vrai*, fell in love. Undoubtedly an additional benefit appeared before her. By sending me away, you would be shaken, perhaps disillusioned with criminal detection altogether... not to mention completely unattached. You would turn to her. She would find some way to clear her name from the crime and to convince you of my true guilt.’

‘Really, Poirot, I...’

Suddenly I felt myself blushing to the ears, scandalised. I wouldn’t have, never. Or... would I have? Unknowingly turned to the woman responsible for framing and exiling my dearest friend? It was a heinous thought.

‘Ah, *mon ami*, that was how I knew,’ said Poirot with affection, gesturing to my burning face. ‘When you spoke of the way she blushed, I was sure even then. She was a criminal, I realised, with the Syndicate, seeking to frame me in Japp’s absence. Only they have ever tried to exile me from England. She must have been high-ranking, too, for such an important mission. Such a one does not fluster in such a way when carrying out the role like that. The way you described her, and her manner of speech, convinced

me— as you too were convinced— that she was labouring under a genuine conflict of mind. Now, what could account for it, the blushing Rose? She was conflicted about *you*, yes! Your account of the exchange left me no doubt.’

‘Good Lord, Poirot, you’re being completely fanciful. All that doesn’t mean—’

‘There is more, my friend. Allow me to recount my actions from the time we parted earlier. After our lunch, I sent you back to our flat so that you would not get into trouble. Had you stayed out, they would be hunting us both down and would have viewed you with greater suspicion— and two are more difficult to hide. As it is, they had little suspicion of you as a willing, informed accomplice. *Parbleu*, I could not come with you and face the annoying farce of an arrest and any subsequent unpleasantness. It was my job to find this girl and, if possible, persuade her to lay the truth before the authorities. I knew she would be shadowing us, and that she would be alarmed to see you return to the flat, and the police, without me. This would not suit her! Such an action was unexpected, and she had no contingency plan. Mlle Whittaker expected you to keep your night delivery a secret from me until that evening, by which time the police would have found me. And so, her plans upset at lunch, she was forced to follow me, lest I escape altogether.

‘But as I promised you, I took the precautions. Before I left the area, I spotted a friend of mine, Sgt Landsdow, finishing his coffee at a nearby table. I approached him and exchanged what would have looked to anyone like a simple, friendly greeting, but in reality, I told him I was being shadowed and asked for his assistance. He was to also follow me, remaining at a fair distance, in case this young woman had an accomplice or attempted violence. He agreed without question. Like you, *mon ami*, he is the man of action!

‘I concealed the moustaches, and most of my face, in my mufflers, and walked several blocks until I reached a secluded street. She stood there, at the far end, and buried herself behind a newspaper. I approached her briskly and greeted her, which caused her to jump. But she did not run as I explained to her that I knew what she had done.

‘I told her more, *mon ami*... I spoke of our meeting in Belgium, and my arrival at Styles St. Mary, and of our first investigations together. I told her of your unfailing loyalty to myself, how you have risked your life on my behalf. She listened as if turned to stone.

‘I could have added more, but time was pressing. That same hour, the two of us were walking toward the nearest police station. I introduced her to Sgt Landsdow and asked him to kindly escort her to the door (lest some imbecile of a policeman apprehend me instead), at which point he was free to leave us both. As it happened, things progressed much as I assumed they would. She went in, laid out her confession, and before they could take it in properly, gave them the slip again. But it was enough.’

‘You permitted her to escape,’ I said slowly.

‘*Oui*. She has righted her wrong.’

I turned all this over in my mind. It did not seem entirely satisfactory to me. ‘Did she think that Landsdow was a plain clothes officer? Is that why she went to the station to confess?’

Poirot threw his hands into the air. ‘*Mille tonnerres!* I told you why she confessed! She had been in a great state of anxiety and confusion since your meeting with her the other day. She wished to succeed, but already felt the guilt of betraying you. Truly, there was something cold-blooded in the plan of using you as an innocent instrument to destroy my reputation and send me away. By the time I found her in the street, I was well exercised as to her state of mind, and decided to try to appeal to her better nature. It is why I spoke to her of you and of our friendship. Never, *never* will you pay heed to the psychology, Hastings! Ah, if you could have seen her eyes then. You would be left in no doubt.’

He twinkled at me even more. ‘A simple way to avert a crime, *n’est-ce pas?* If only we could introduce you to all the ladies of the criminal underground; they could fall in love with you and turn from their devious paths.’

I was not amused. Indeed, Poirot’s attempt at humour seemed to me to be in the poorest taste. The whole affair was deeply unsettling, and the solution to the mystery was (to me) unsatisfying.

‘Not much of a crime for you to resolve,’ I shot back, a little sulkily. ‘An emotional hiccup on the part of the criminal and she falls to pieces.’

Poirot raised his eyebrows. ‘*Pas du tout,*’ he said with dignity. ‘Suppose I had not realised the nature of the danger. What then? You would still have an admirer, but I would have gone straight back to our flat and into the lion’s den. I would have had no chance to speak with her, and she most likely would not have had the resolve to confess. I am quite satisfied with what I accomplished, *merci beaucoup.*’

Guiltily, I recalled again my part in this affair and what might have been, and held my peace. Poirot went on.

‘My friend, listen— this affair has not gone without tremendous benefit to us. One part of it, you know now. A highly-ranking member of the London Syndicate has, shall we say, a certain sympathetic disposition towards you. No one knows this but we three! The Syndicate does not know the precise circumstances under which her confession took place. She will probably tell them that I compelled her to come to the station with the help of a plain-clothes officer, and that she escaped against our will. I suspect that she will lay low for a little while, having botched this particular job, but this is not the last we have heard of her— no, I think not.

‘And she is conflicted, *mon ami, mais oui.* For her ties to the Syndicate run deep.’

His voice grew warmer as he uttered a most unexpected phrase: ‘Do you recall her eyes?’

Her eyes. Beautiful, blue forget-me-not eyes, flecked with gold.

Poirot nodded. ‘I have seen those eyes before, I believe... in the face of Harold Whitcombe.’

‘Whitcombe? Of the Battersea Scandal? What do you mean?’

‘Yes indeed, the very same gentleman who was double-crossed by certain players in the Syndicate and gave us the first information we received about the organisation. I have no doubt that Rose Whittaker is, in fact, a *Whitcombe*. I would stake my reputation on it— she is a near relation of his. The resemblance was

unmistakable. Perhaps, my friend, when she spoke of her father with such feeling, she was indeed thinking of him. A man who is now in jail because of trouble within the London Syndicate.'

Poirot's eyes were shining green. 'And there we see a chance. A great chance for us, against this organisation. A weakness in the chain. This development may prove most interesting.'

I thought sadly, and with a great deal of bewilderment, of the lovely girl with the chestnut hair, arrayed on the side of our enemies. As if reading my mind, Poirot added: 'No, we shall leave her be, *mon cher*. Ours is not to hunt down the elusive one, the flower, as the good Japp does in his expeditions abroad. No, these chances, the wild ones of the jungle— they come to us, to the London doorstep. Let us stand at the ready to meet them!'

Chapter 6

The Fatal Mistake

As it happened, Japp returned from his trip abroad a full month early, owing to half of the travel party being struck down with illness. The Scotland Yard man himself was well and unscathed, but when Poirot and I met him at the station and relayed our most recent adventures with Inspector Morett, he turned an unpleasant shade of purple. Eventually, rumour went round of a fabulous telling-off at the Yard that week, and a suspension levelled at Morett.

This cheery news was compounded by another stroke of good fortune. In early February, Poirot and I braved a heavy snowfall to be in attendance at an exhibition of valuable jewels and artifacts from a certain reigning house. The display, situated at the Carlton, coincided with a royal visit, and was to be shown in two separate exhibitions on different dates. In light of a tip that a robbery attempt might be made by the London Syndicate, Poirot was invited by Japp to work with local police with the aim of prevention. Sure enough, the first exhibition on the third of the month involved an assault and attempted robbery, and Poirot, through an amazing display of deduction, managed to foil the attempt and retrieve the property.

Perhaps it was this elevated sense of euphoria that precipitated inevitable disaster. For the London Syndicate was about to make a fatal mistake. In some respects, the coming blow would be the darkest moment we had yet known.

Although the would-be thieves had managed to escape the Carlton and were currently evading the police, this did not dim the public outpouring of gratitude for my little friend. Lavish tokens of admiration poured into our flat over the next two days, coming from scullery maids to grand dukes alike. Mr Johnston, the porter, was kept busy hauling parcels and ostentatious floral displays up to our flat, while I collected reams of post and amused Poirot by reading letters to him.

It seems dreadful silliness to me, but nothing brings admirers out of the woodwork like connections with a high-profile case involving royalty. Such a zealous public reaction was indeed a testament to my friend, but I was inclined to find it rather overdone and a trifle embarrassing. My sentiments were, I need hardly say, wholly lost on Poirot. With a bourgeois attitude toward the aristocracy and a limitless capacity for feeding his ego, he was positively bursting with self-satisfaction and delight.

Poirot, seated at his desk, was just opening another parcel as I instructed the porter to add the newest bunch of calla lilies to the already over-full vase on the hall table.

‘Tell me,’ I said, handing Poirot one of his twin silver paper knives, ‘do the police expect another attempted theft at the next exhibition?’

‘Well, my friend, that would not surprise me.’ He plucked delicately at the brown paper with the knife. ‘Japp has invited me to the second exhibition in case I may be of additional assistance, although I do not think so. I have given to him a full description of the miscreants, but the London Syndicate would be fools indeed to send the same thieves again for the second attempt.’

He laid down his paper knife and examined the now-liberated gift box, from which he extracted a white monogrammed handkerchief. Laying it aside, he proceeded methodically to the next parcel in the stack.

‘And this one is— ah, the chocolates, once again.’ I looked up from the purple prose of the letter I was currently reading to see

my friend gingerly lift the lid of this particular box, only to wince in disappointment.

‘The untidy cocoa powder, it gets everywhere,’ he grumbled, pushing them away.

Collecting the box, I extracted one of the chocolates and popped it into my mouth. They were liqueurs and not, I thought, particularly good. Unwanted sweets, particularly those of the ‘untidy’ variety, went into a little dish which was placed in the entrance hall, to be passed off to unsuspecting callers and guests with less-fine sensibilities. Poirot’s sense of Flemish thrift was strongly averse to throwing things away.

In the hallway, I began to lay out the remaining chocolates on the empty dish as the porter gave a last, desperate shove to a stubborn floral stem. He gave up with a sigh, and proceeded to exit the flat again.

‘By the bye, sir,’ he said suddenly, turning a little on his way out the door, ‘there’s a gentleman wanting to see M. Poirot, down in the lobby. I think he’s press. Thought you might like a warning.’

Now Poirot was not the sort to shun press coverage of his clever exploits, but a few moments later I realised why the warning had been offered. Minutes later, through our door blustered a burly, red-faced creature, clad in shabby charcoal tweeds and armed with a large camera.

‘A word, Mister Pwarrit?’ he wheezed, marching straight into our sitting room and wielding his camera before him. Poirot (who had been in the process of opening another parcel) was visibly annoyed at this intrusion of our privacy. The subsequent barrage of somewhat inappropriate questions, none of which seemed to relate to Poirot’s role in the recent exhibition, resulted in my apprehension of the trespasser, whom I firmly escorted back down the hallway and out the door again.

‘Good heavens,’ I exclaimed in annoyance as I rejoined my friend, who had liberated from the most recent gift box something that resembled a horrible handmade paperweight, ‘this last adventure of yours has brought all the rabble out. The awful weather doesn’t even seem to stop them.’

My friend gave his moustache a self-conscious twirl and murmured, 'The main roads are clear enough. Much of the diligence on that front is due to the royal visit and exhibition, *bien sûr*. I should not like to be out in the country in this much snow, nor even off on the side roads— assuredly not!' He held up his paperweight, or whatever the unsightly object was, and studied it with a critical eye.

'So do you mean to attend the second exhibition or not, then?'

Poirot shook his head and straightened the stack of mail on his desk with tidy efficiency.

'I think not, my friend. As I said before, I believe it would be quite unnecessary. And I have earned some repose. A warm home, a good *tisane*, and perhaps some peace and quiet at last.'

Peace and quiet were yet to come, however. About twenty minutes later, there was a knock at the door. I vacated the sitting room to answer it just as the phone rang behind me. Poirot reached for the phone and nodded me toward the door.

I opened the door to find a grubby-looking adolescent female on our doorstep. She was about thirteen years old, with stringy blonde hair and spectacles, and was clad in an unbecoming overcoat, muffler, and a brimmed hat with a yellow insignia that marked her as a Girl Guide. What was the expression I had just used— 'the rabble'? Yes, it suited this young creature exactly.

Before either of us could speak, Poirot had approached and touched my arm. 'The telephone is for you, Hastings,' he said, and I gratefully retreated to leave Poirot to deal with our new visitor, who was holding a collection box and looked particularly determined.

Indeed, a swarm of petty annoyances seemed to have descended upon our flat that afternoon. The telephone call concerned some unimportant matter from a solicitor's office, which demanded attention while simultaneously insisting on putting me

on hold. My attention drifted to Poirot and the Girl Guide at the door, who were just visible from where I stood by the desk.

The girl was launching into an uninspired monologue. ‘Martha Bauers,’ she mumbled, lifting her hand in a salute expressive of half-hearted brand loyalty. ‘We’re goin’ round collecting for our sister Guides in India, or someplace like that where there’s no food. I been at it *all morning*.’ She glared at Poirot as if this state of affairs were his own fault. He waited politely.

‘Had nothing to eat *all day* either. Left before breakfast and Aunt Clara forgot to give me my lunch. M’supposed to meet her after this round out in Hensley. I’ll probably *starve* before then.’

She was in the process of describing the unfortunate conditions of the Guides in India when her bored eyes suddenly fixated on the candy dish on the hall table before her. Poirot took the hint and proffered the dish to her, no doubt relieved to be rid of another untidy chocolate. She took one immediately and made a face as she ate it. I couldn’t blame her, I thought.

‘Well?’ she garbled rudely, her mouth full of chocolate, as she indicated her collection box.

Poirot hastily searched his pocket for a coin, probably with the aim of speeding our visitor on her way. When the solicitor’s office secretary came over the line again, I suggested that they call back at a more convenient time, and rang off at last. I’d had enough of intruders for one day.

We were just finishing our breakfast the following morning when a loud rap at the door startled us. I leapt up to answer it, and found Mr Johnston, wide-eyed and stammering.

‘I do beg your pardon, but— the strangest thing,’ he said uncertainly. ‘A woman was down in the lobby just now, shrieking and raising a fuss, something about a death. I tried to calm her down, and asked if she’d come here to see M. Poirot. I thought it might be some case she wanted him to take on.’

Poirot himself appeared in the hall. The porter continued the narrative.

‘And she gasped out, “Poirot? No, I know no one by that name. But she was *here*, in this building, here right before she came out to meet me.” And then she started crying, and said: “I just wanted to see if there was an eating establishment in this building. She must have eaten *something!* It looked like food poisoning!” Or something to that effect, sir.’

Poirot was at my side now. He looked very pale, and spoke quietly. ‘Did she give you a name?’

‘Yes, sir, I ascertained that her own was Mrs Clara Bauers. And she kept wailing out about *Martha*.’

Never before, nor since, have I seen the ghastly change that came over Poirot’s countenance. We stared at each other in shock. Then our eyes went together to the dish of chocolates on the hall table.

Finally, Poirot said in hoarse whisper: ‘Bring her here.’
The doorman beat a hasty retreat.

I had only just managed to steer my friend into a chair in the sitting room when Mr Johnston returned.

‘She wouldn’t come up, sir,’ he said apologetically. ‘She didn’t seem to understand why you should want to see her. Her concern was for a niece of hers who seems to have died suddenly out in the country the other day. Nothing to do with the residents here.’

Poirot uttered a moan. The doorman continued. ‘You seemed to be interested in her story, monsieur, so I pressed her for a little more. The lady told me that she’d been concerned that this girl hadn’t eaten all day, but that after her canvassing of this block of flats, she’d be taking a bus out to Hensley to meet the aunt, and they’d have a meal. Well, they met all right... and the girl began cold sweats and retching. Apparently died that evening at home. Mrs Bauers was out here this morning and came to see if there was a restaurant near these flats where she might have somehow obtained some food.’

‘Perhaps the girl did just that,’ I said hastily. ‘Perhaps before catching her bus, she found a spot nearby to get something to eat...’

Poirot shook his head, the picture of misery.

‘The lady seemed in a mortal hurry to leave again,’ added the porter, ‘but I did manage to convince her to leave her phone number first.’ He reached into his pocket and offered a slip of paper to me. ‘Seeing as M. Poirot seemed so keen on this affair. Is something funny going on?’

‘Thank you, Mr Johnston,’ I said, looking down at the paper in my hand. ‘We will take it from here.’ Sensing the dismissal, he tactfully made his exit.

There was a long silence.

‘You are convinced, then,’ I said at last, pacing through sitting room, ‘that someone tampered with those chocolates... that someone sent them to poison you.’

‘*Oui, bien sûr.* How could I have been so criminally foolish, Hastings. The London Syndicate, they send the chocolates to me in spite, because of my recent success against them— or, more likely, to prevent my attendance at the second exhibit tomorrow. And as it happens, I was not planning to attend! Needless— how they have misfired! But it is I who bear the blame.’

‘You attribute the sending of the chocolates to the London Syndicate? Murdering you with poison hardly seems to be their style.’

Poirot looked at me mournfully. ‘Undoubtably they meant to poison, but not fatally. That is very much their style. If the poison were in only one or two of the chocolates, it may have been a dose that would incapacitate an adult, but kill a...’ He broke off with a tremor.

‘You mustn’t blame yourself,’ I insisted, but Poirot merely waved an exasperated hand. I tried a different tack.

‘We shall have to get the rest of those chocolates analysed, of course. We know nothing for certain as yet.’

‘That would probably be wise, my friend. Do as you like.’

I was utterly beside myself. Never had I seen Poirot react like this to a likely crime occurring under his nose. He looked

downcast and crushed, leaning forward in his chair as though studying the floor. Finally he spoke again.

‘But I do not understand.’ He looked at me. ‘You ate one of the chocolates, did you not? You suffer no ill effects?’

‘No, none at all. But you said yourself that it was most likely that only one or two of them would be poisoned.’

‘Yes... and that is what I do not comprehend.’

I wasn’t following this line at all. ‘But—’

‘Hastings.’ He was suddenly harsh. ‘Go on your errand. I shall not be able to process the grey cells until you do.’

Snubbed, I proceeded to collect the chocolates and once again reached for the telephone.

Poirot has many useful friends for whom he has performed a number of favours over the years. This included a chemist, Dr Martin Lansing-Hayes, who resided a few blocks down from our flat. I rang him up and asked him if he would be willing to run some tests on our chocolates. Fortunately, he was free that afternoon and I was able to come round. His tests were swift and conclusive. Of the ten remaining chocolates, nine were normal. One had been filled with a dangerous dose of cocaine.

Although the news was expected, it was still a tremendous blow. The chocolates I left in the keeping of Dr Lansing-Hayes for the present, until the police were informed. Good Lord, the police. No blame would be attached to Poirot, of course, but he would have a great deal of difficulty forgiving himself.

I returned to our flat with a heavy heart and broke the news to Poirot. He merely closed his eyes.

‘This wasn’t your fault,’ I insisted again. ‘How could you have possibly known?’

‘Of course I should have known! What manner of triple imbecile receives edibles in the mail, shortly after thwarting a dangerous criminal gang, and passes them off to a child! *Mille tonnerres!* I am abased. I am a murderer!’

‘Now, don’t dramatise,’ I said in some alarm. ‘We need to keep our wits about us. The police must be phoned. It seems fairly certain that it was the London Syndicate who were involved in the attempt to poison you. We have a contact number for Mrs Bauers. And there’s the postmark on the parcel...’

‘My friend,’ interjected Poirot, ‘you must have the order and method for both of us. My brain has deserted me entirely. I... I must try to get control of myself, to do what must be done. You have witnessed everything that has passed in this affair, and I leave the police to you. There are some things that I cannot face today.’

And rising unsteadily from the chair, he retired to his bedroom.

When I phoned the police to explain the situation, they seemed perplexed but agreed to send someone round. Fifteen minutes later, I was opening our front door to a Constable Derek Allender, a gangly young fellow with dark hair and eyes and a thoroughly intimidated attitude. He did not look promising. I explained that Poirot was indisposed, and proceeded to reiterate the facts of the case to him.

‘Very curious, sir,’ he said in his high, thin voice as he scribbled in his little notebook. ‘We shall need to track down this Mrs Bauers, then. They told me at headquarters that they’d not received a call from her.’

‘Well, why would they have?’ I returned. ‘She would have no reason at this point to think anything criminal has occurred. Very likely she rang for a doctor, that’s all.’

‘Yes,’ said the constable, looking abashed. ‘And have you tried telephoning her?’

I was losing patience. ‘Yes, but she was not in yet. If she came up to town from the country this morning, she might stay for a short while before returning home, particularly if there were any arrangements to make for a funeral, that sort of thing.’

‘One wouldn’t want to trek around any more than necessary in this weather,’ Allender said, sapiently stating the obvious. I suppressed an peevish sigh. This was the best that our local police could do?

‘Of course,’ I said, ‘we shall keep trying. She is bound to be in this evening at least. In the meantime, I thought we’d better make a run out to Hensley and see what can be seen.’

Allender seemed amazed at this suggestion, but he acquiesced.

To be brief, our investigations were singularly disappointing. Although Allender had obtained an address for the phone number I had, the roads were barely passable with the snow and we got lost more than once. At about six o’clock in the evening, I was finally able to get through to Mrs Clara Bauers on the telephone from a nearby village. The line crackled and our conversation was short and incomplete; I ascertained only that she had indeed been to Whitehaven Mansions that morning to try to determine where her niece may have last eaten, and that a doctor had been to their place and had presumed food poisoning.

In the end, we were cut off and Allender and I were forced to return to town without having made a personal visit. I put through a quick call to Poirot to relay the lack of progress, and speculated a return to the flat in about an hour’s time.

When I finally returned home that evening and parked across the street from the flats, I disembarked to find, to my surprise, that Japp himself had also just arrived on the scene. We greeted each other and, as we entered the building, I poured out the whole frustrating story to him, including my recent failures.

‘It never rains but it pours, eh?’ he said, pausing in the lobby to take it all in. ‘Or snowstorms. Trust me, Hastings, it’s perfectly normal for investigations to take extra time in these weather conditions. Country folk are a hardy lot, and they deal with their own personal problems well enough without us. But we’ll get through soon enough, never fear—patience and spadework. I was thinking of having a quick word with Poirot on the way back to the Yard tonight. Royal visits and fancy to-dos are an operational nightmare for the police, and I can’t direct much attention elsewhere myself until it’s all wrapped up tomorrow night. All the same, these events might share some point in common—the interests of the London Syndicate, in particular. By all accounts, you know, Moosior’s been acting dashed odd today.’

‘It all seems suspicious to me,’ I grumbled, my mind still on my fruitless efforts of earlier. ‘Maybe the old lady poisoned her niece herself, and the chocolates have nothing to do with it.’

‘Lord, Captain, with what motive? No,’ he said, giving me a bracing clap on the back as we entered the lift together, ‘that doesn’t fit in at all. There are enough simple ways to poison a family member at home without all this rigmarole; anyway, she wouldn’t know the girl would have the conversation she did with Poirot and that the chocolates would be right there for the taking. And the chocolates *were* poisoned; we know that. That’s cause and effect right enough, I’m afraid.’

Grudgingly I was forced to agree.

As Japp and I approached the flat I noticed, to my amazement, that the door was cracked open. If a poisoner was about, I thought uneasily, breaking into the flat might signal another attempt at mischief.

Japp was obviously thinking the same. Putting a finger to his lips, he tipped the door open a little more, and we entered the flat. It was dark, but the kitchen light was on. We went in and looked around.

‘Hello, what’s this?’ inquired Japp. He picked up a small container from the table. I leaned closer to see.

‘Veronal,’ he said. ‘Mostly empty. This yours, Captain Hastings?’

‘No,’ I said blankly. ‘And Poirot doesn’t take veronal.’

We exchanged looks of alarm. In a flash, we vacated the kitchen, racing to Poirot’s bedchamber.

I had half expected to see my friend’s lifeless form, fatally poisoned by the mysterious intruder, but to my relief he was sitting on the side of his bed. A full glass of water stood on his bedside table, and a little prayer book lay open in one hand. He was staring ahead and did not seem to see us.

Japp stood in the doorway as I approached the bed. Poirot’s other hand clenched a little in his lap.

‘Poirot?’ I said. His eyes flickered, but did not meet my eye.

Then the truth was plain. Reaching down, I opened Poirot’s clenched fist with a swift movement. There were in the palm no fewer than two dozen tablets of veronal.

I heard Japp’s astonished intake of breath behind me, and as he moved toward us I took advantage of the slight distraction to transfer the tablets into my own hand. There was no resistance.

Japp stood facing him and leaned down, placing his hand on Poirot’s shoulder. He spoke in a completely unfamiliar tone of voice. ‘Come on,’ he said quietly. ‘You’ve had a shock today. Hastings will pack you a bag.’

I looked at Japp in surprise.

‘He can’t stay here,’ Japp told me, looking about as bewildered as I’ve ever seen him. But he remained business-like. ‘There’s a nursing home on Wimpole Street. You pack, I’ll telephone.’

As Japp briskly dialed the bedside telephone, I took a long look at Poirot. He was breathing slowly and blinking a little, looking weary.

‘Have you taken any yet?’ I asked, full of anxiety. He shook his head. I pocketed the tablets and hoped he was telling the truth.

‘Come on, old chap,’ I said, helping him to his feet. ‘We’ll get a few things and be on our way.’

I went in a flurry through the room, grabbing some essentials and throwing them haphazardly into a small valise. Poirot watched with an amazing detachment. He has deceived me many times over the years in the course of an investigation, but the despair that he radiated at this moment was palpable. The very fact that he wasn’t chiding me for not folding each item with proper care frightened me almost as much as the sight of the veronal.

The nursing staff were getting Poirot situated in his room when Japp pulled me aside.

‘I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to stay here for the present, Captain Hastings,’ he said under his breath, ‘and absolutely on your

guard— at least for the first twenty-four hours. There must be hundreds of ways for a man to do away with himself, and I don't doubt that Poirot knows every single blinking one. He has to be most carefully watched. The nurses here will, of course, do their duty. But you and I know this fellow and what he's capable of.'

I nodded. 'Of course. That was just my intention. Here, you'd better take these away.' And I transferred my pocketful of veronal to him.

'He's not going to want to stay here,' said Japp. 'You mark my words. In half an hour he'll have changed his tune and be demanding to leave. Nothing doing. He's here for three days at least, and that's final. He leaves when I sign him out myself.'

Japp crossed his arms and looked uncomfortable. 'Bloody hell. As if we didn't have enough problems on our hands to sort through, and now this. I can hardly believe it. It's not like Poirot to just give up. He should have been throwing himself into the case, tracking down the Syndicate or whoever it was as poisoned his chocolates, if he wants to avenge that girl.'

'Poirot is very particular about murder,' I reminded him. 'When we first received proof that the chocolates had been poisoned, he berated himself as criminally liable, the one who ultimately brought about the girl's death. He thinks he should have seen it coming and been more on guard.'

'I should think that suicide was against his principles.'

'All but one. In his own mind, he is a murderer. If the law won't charge him, he will charge himself. I'm afraid that in his own past cases, there is a good deal of precedence for a guilty party being given the chance to take this way out.'

Japp stared at me, then shook his head. 'Blimey. No, prevention alone won't cut it. He needs someone who might eventually get through to him with some sense.'

He peered through the door leading into Poirot's room, then turned to me again with a little cough. 'Now, don't take this the wrong way, but there isn't any chance that Poirot could be... putting us on? Could this be some method of his own to set a trap or such like? Well, you know the stunts he's pulled in the past to bring in a criminal. I wouldn't put it past him.'

I shook my head decisively. The words my friend had spoken to me some months ago, in the house of Alexei Dimitri, came into my mind: *'I give you my solemn word, mon ami, that I shall not again deceive you concerning my own safety or well-being in order to score points against the London Syndicate.'* No, this danger was unmistakably real.

It didn't take even the half hour that Japp had predicted before Poirot began angling to leave. I had been alone with him for about ten minutes before he started.

'It was a mistake,' he muttered from the depths of a comfortable-looking bed. 'It was the mere moment of melodrama. I am recovered.'

'You are incorrigible,' I replied, undaunted. 'And you're here to rest. A bit of extra quiet after a shock like that will do no harm.'

'The second showing of the exhibition,' he began half-heartedly.

'Don't be absurd. You said yourself that you wouldn't attend. Japp and the rest will get on perfectly fine tomorrow evening without you.'

The thought of Japp getting on perfectly fine without him seemed to depress him even more.

'Perhaps,' I mused, 'I might be able to go myself on your behalf, if it would make you feel better.' For some reason, this elicited a muffled groan.

'That is quite unnecessary, Hastings.' With some effort, Poirot raised himself up on his elbows and peered across the room where I stood standing by the window. 'You are returning to the flat tonight, are you not? This late hour is hardly the time for visitors.'

'Japp used some of his professional pull to make an exception,' I explained.

'Ah. I comprehend.' He fell back on the pillows. 'Perhaps I should be flattered that you both still have faith in my ingenuity.'

I did not reply.

‘But no—it is gone, *mon cher*. I cannot think. I am not even sure that I want to. There is a great fog about me. Do not tax yourself for my sake, my friend. I am very tired, more tired than I have ever been in my life. Right now, I would very much like to forget.’

He closed his eyes and was fast asleep within minutes. I seated myself in the chair by the window and drew a deep breath. After some time had passed, I permitted myself to doze.

As I anticipated, there was a good deal of coming and going from the room by the nursing staff overnight. They were extremely quiet and never remained long, engaging in a variety of insignificant tasks, but discreetly keeping an eye on things. My own sleep was fitful.

Morning came and went on, but Poirot still slept soundly. Concern rose in me that he had managed to ingest some veronal after all, but the nurses who had examined him assured me that it was mere exhaustion. Nonetheless, I was relieved when my friend finally roused himself in the early afternoon.

He tried, unsuccessfully, to wave away lunch.

‘And what news, my friend?’ he inquired solemnly, picking at his food. ‘Has the good Japp been running to and fro on his investigations? Or is he much occupied with preparations for the exhibition?’

‘I haven’t heard from Japp,’ I replied, leafing idly through a magazine. ‘Seeing as no messages have come, I take it he has received no news of note to share.’

Poirot shrugged. ‘The snow, the blocked roads, even the lines that are down, it makes the running to and fro *très difficile, n’est-ce pas?* This is why it is better to be still and think.’ He rubbed his temples as if attempting to relieve a dreadful headache. ‘It is so very hard.’

‘Perhaps it’s not the time for straining the grey cells just yet,’ I advised. ‘There’s no shame in leaving this to others for now. After tonight’s events are over and done with, Japp will be able to focus

on this poisoning affair himself. The last thing he wants you to do right now is brood. Rest is what you need.'

My friend did not look convinced. 'If only I could brood—if I could think! But all I see is insanity. This poisoning, it is not only tragic, it is reckless and unintelligent, and makes not the common sense.'

'Accidents like these never seem to accord with common sense,' I said firmly. 'Put it from your mind.'

Poirot sighed and gave up. Pushing his lunch away, he lay back down on the bed dejectedly and closed his eyes. I could not tell whether he was awake or asleep.

That evening, supper was brought and I began to think of heading back to the flat for the night. My friend was sitting up again, still melancholic, when the nurse entered. On the tray of food, which was set down on the little table by the bed, was a yellow rosebud in a vase, and a folded bit of paper. Poirot looked at them inquiringly.

'Those came from a visitor, sir,' said the smiling nurse, and she took her leave.

With a curious frown, Poirot reached for the paper, unfolded it and read it. He blinked, and then his face transformed.

'Can it be?' he whispered. A light crept over his eyes. '*Mon Dieu*, can it be?' I hastened over to him when he began to tremble.

'Hastings...' He was now sitting bolt upright, his eyes flashing. Excitement seemed to be giving way to spasms of anger. He threw off the bed coverings and leapt to his feet, but he had misjudged his stamina. I grabbed him before he could fall and tried to get him to sit down again. He swatted at me irritably.

'I must go, Hastings— I must dress and depart *immédiatement!*'

'You can't, Poirot,' I insisted. 'You're not well.'

'I am perfectly all right!'

'I promised Japp faithfully that I'd keep an eye on you. What will he think when you've disappeared, after the state you've been in lately?'

Poirot briefly closed his eyes in deep frustration. ‘*Sacré!* Accompany me if you please, and keep two eyes on me if you must, but I leave now!’

Looking unaccountably fey, Poirot proceeded to dart through the room with fanatical rage, grabbing clothes, throwing them on, or into his valise. I was frankly worried about what sort of action he was planning to take. And why this change?

My friend stopped suddenly, as if struck by a thought. ‘They will be watching. *Mon Dieu*, Hastings, this is horrible. I need your assistance, *mon ami*, if I am to depart. You must create some small diversion.’

I hesitated. I had been carefully instructed against leaving Poirot alone, and would be most fervently reprimanded for helping him to vacate the premises. More importantly, I might actually be placing him in danger.

‘The staff here,’ I began haltingly, ‘are only trying to ensure your own safety.’

He flared at me immediately. ‘Do you refuse to assist?’ He looked to the window of his room. ‘Then I break the window and descend by means of the tree outside.’

‘Poirot!’

He turned such ferocious eyes on me that I actually recoiled a little. Then he grabbed the valise and lunged for the door directly behind me.

‘Remove yourself, Hastings.’

His hand shot past me to reach the door, and I seized his arm.

‘You are going to explain to me, this very minute, what’s going on. If you don’t, you have no chance of leaving.’

Poirot stayed perfectly still, staring at me. His keen intellect seemed to be once more asserting itself out of the fit of blind rage I had just beheld. Taking a deep breath, he took a step back, and I relinquished his arm. He felt it gingerly, wincing.

‘*Eh bien*,’ he said at last. ‘You wish to be sure that it is safe. This is why it is safe, Hastings, and imperative that we depart, if we are not already too late.’ He snatched the paper from the little table by the bed and thrust it at me.

I scrutinised the bit of paper that had sent my friend into such mad paroxysms. It had just a few enigmatic words scrawled on it.

Only just found out. They did not want you to recognise him.

‘Who would have sent this to you?’ I asked sharply. Surely Poirot’s presence at the institution was a secret to all but a very few close friends. And, perhaps... an enemy? I felt a dawning comprehension.

‘Someone found out you were here and sent this, meaning to taunt you. Is that what sparks your indignation and inspires you to rush off and avenge this girl’s death with a fury, after all?’

Poirot made a noise of exasperation that sounded remarkably like a cat sneezing. Reaching for the flower in the vase on the little table, he extracted it and thrust it toward me with the note. I took them, uncomprehending.

‘It is a message from your friend, Hastings,’ he said quietly. ‘We are needed at the exhibition.’ He pushed his hastily-packed valise towards me as well; I nearly dropped it in my astonishment. ‘There is no need to fear for my state of mind, my friend. I am not responsible for the death of Martha Bauers.’

To this day, it stuns me to think how those few sentences convinced me, instantly, to go along with Poirot’s instructions. I did not understand any of it. But if Poirot was convinced from this mysterious message that he bore no guilt for the child’s death, I was not inclined to contradict him now. As long as he believed that, he was in no danger to himself. And if he posed no danger to himself, I was not in the habit of standing in the way of even his most outlandish methods of investigation. My impression was that he believed that he would be able to locate the deadly poisoner at the Carlton exhibition. Trying not to think of what Japp would say to me when he found out what we were doing, I recklessly followed Poirot’s lead.

It was not easy to sneak out of the ward and vacate the premises, but we managed it in the end with a ruse of distraction on

my part. As we drove through the snowy lanes as quickly as could well be managed, I assayed to get further details from Poirot, who seemed lost in a distraction of mutterings.

‘So I take it that Clara Bauers didn’t murder her niece...’ I began.

‘Of course not, *quelle idée!*’

‘Can you at least explain what we’re looking for at the Carlton? The poisoner responsible for the girl’s death?’

‘We seek for a thief, Hastings, *bien entendu*— not the poisoner of Martha Bauers.’

I was incredulous. ‘Poirot, the security at the exhibition has been doubled. It has been well established, even by yourself, that you are *not* needed there to prevent a second robbery, should one be attempted. The police have things covered on that front. If the would-be thief and the poisoner are two different members of the London Syndicate, then surely finding the poisoner is our greater priority!’

‘There I disagree with you. Figure to yourself: if someone attempts a poisoning with the likely goal of keeping me away from the Carlton tonight, something very interesting is bound to take place there. Something, perhaps,’ he added with a touch of characteristic vanity, ‘that I could accomplish but a whole army of policemen could not.’

‘Hang it all,’ I groused. ‘You are impossible to reason with when you fall into one of these moods.’

Ignoring me, my friend extracted a little mirror and a minute brush from his coat pocket and began to touch up his neglected moustache with a concerned air. In spite of myself I could not help but be cheered by this renewal of familiar behaviour.

‘We are not, I fear, properly attired for the event,’ said Poirot regretfully. ‘You yourself are in a deplorably unkempt state. But if we keep buttoned up the overcoats, perhaps we may remain less conspicuous for a time.’

‘And in what guise do you hope to find this thief?’ I inquired, passing over the thankless comment about my appearance.

‘I should think,’ replied Poirot, ‘that we might be on the lookout for a man disguised as a journalist— perhaps with a large camera to shield his face when it suits him. What more natural to find at an event of this kind than many unremarkable and faceless men of the press? The brightness of the flashing bulbs, eh, what a simple way to temporarily blind several people at once. And the mechanisms of a camera, what a clever way to conceal the necessary tools.’

A light dawned in my mind. A man with a camera— !

Before I could say anything, Poirot pointed to the imposing structure looming ahead on the corner. ‘Ah! We arrive. *Vite*, Hastings, there is no time to be lost!’

We left the car and my friend briefly pulled me aside in front of the doors of the grand hotel.

‘Inside, we split up,’ he said quickly. ‘I will go directly to the palm court where the jewels are on display. *Tout de même*, I think we are bound to be spotted eventually. But even that, I pray, will be sufficient for prevention.’

And with that, he charged inside and I followed. Four uniformed officers approached us as we entered but fell back in astonishment upon recognising Poirot. The front hall, warm and elegantly lighted, was packed with people, and I watched my friend slip through the crowds inconspicuously and disappear through the doors into the large atrium where the exhibition was situated.

I lingered outside the doors, unsure of my next move. At least a dozen men holding large cameras were moving to and fro in the lobby, and I eyed them suspiciously. Inwardly I seethed at Poirot for not giving me more explicit instructions. There was nothing to do, it seemed, but wait for a sign of some kind.

A sign. Looking down, I suddenly realised that I still had the rosebud and the little note in my hand, and had done since Poirot first pressed them upon me. On the drive I hadn’t even noticed that they were still clenched in my fist, and now they were quite crushed. ‘A message from your friend,’ Poirot had said to me.

Surely, he didn't mean Miss Whittaker (or Whitcombe), that rogue agent of the London Syndicate. But who else could he have meant?

I tossed the crumpled items into the empty wastepaper basket outside the doors of the atrium, and cautiously entered the room myself. Despite the crowds, the glittering room felt spacious and airy. I did not see Poirot anywhere, but I did observe quite a lot of policemen— and press. Several minutes later I had meandered down to the far end of the palm court, where I gave a sudden start at a hand falling on my shoulder.

'Captain Hastings?' intoned a familiar voice. I turned with a jerk to find myself face-to-face with a slightly suspicious-looking Chief Inspector Japp. 'I wasn't expecting to find you here.'

Guilt was evidently shouting from my face, because Japp's eyes narrowed with acute comprehension. He spun round, his eyes darting through the large and bustling room until they lighted on a small figure by the display cases near the French windows. A single word roared across the atrium.

'POIROT!'

At that moment, there was a shattering sound in the lobby outside the atrium, and the scuffling of a man running. Poirot hurried over to Japp and myself, interrupting the Chief Inspector's outrage with a swift gesture of the hand.

'I advise you to give chase to that man at once,' he said firmly, 'though I fear his escape has been well and truly made. At any rate, I have prevented the second robbery attempt.'

The order was given to the nearest constables, who took off at a run. The three of us filed out of the atrium and into the lobby. On the floor there lay the remains of a dropped and shattered camera.

How Poirot managed to placate Japp I know not, but after a swift and secret conference there in the lobby, the Scotland Yard man appeared mollified and subsequently spoke nothing of the nursing home. Instead, we were given a police escort back to Whitehaven Mansions.

Back in our flat, I watched in helplessness as Poirot robustly kicked the furniture.

‘You... prevented the robbery, you say?’ I said timidly.

‘Of course,’ he grunted. ‘When Japp shouted my name, it startled the would-be thief immensely. It was the thing he feared; his plans were undone. Crash went his camera, and he fled. Of all this sordid affair we have been dealing with over the last few days, I now know everything.’

‘You know who meant to poison you with the cocaine, then? The same man who fled the exhibition tonight?’

‘No one meant to poison me at all, Hastings.’

For a moment I thought I had misheard. ‘But— do you mean that *I* was intended to be the recipient of the poisoned chocolate all along?’ I asked in bewilderment.

‘No, no, *mon ami*. Indeed, they were counting on both of us *not* to eat the chocolates.’

Seeing the hopeless confusion on my face, he hastened on. ‘Let me be more specific. From the very beginning, I could not understand their method of poisoning. They could not send a whole boxful of poison; that would be too dangerous. But if only one or two chocolates were poisoned, as we first suspected, how would they determine that I, and not you, would receive the dose? You ate one of the chocolates yourself. Even if I lived alone in the flat, a laced chocolate might not be eaten for many days, well after the exhibition. Compounding the confusion, they were utterly unpalatable, these chocolates; no one could be tempted to eat any more of them once tasted! It made no sense. But I was in a fog— a fog of confusion and grief and misplaced guilt! My grey cells were functioning wretchedly, and indeed, the London Syndicate were banking on that! They never intended to poison my body by this method— how could they be sure of success? No, they determined to poison— my mind. And, *ma foi*, that was very nearly the deadliest move they made.’ And he crossed himself vigorously.

‘Are you saying,’ I replied, aghast, ‘that they somehow meant for you to attempt suicide?’

‘That I cannot say, Hastings, but perhaps it is not so. I hope not; I should repent of all the words I ever said in praise of the

sportsmanship of these criminals. This affair of theirs was a most dastardly one, regardless— the work of a mind twisted and perverse.

‘In light of their plans to rob the exhibition, I believe that it was their goal to create in me a deep and paralysing remorse, a heavy blow to my professional self-regard, far more effective than any bout of poisoning. *They fabricated the crime, Hastings, and allowed me to believe myself responsible.* It is like a mirror-reflection of the stunt they attempted to pull with Morett; why did I not see it coming? I do not, at this juncture, really believe that they thought I would take my own life as a result. A temporary mental paralysis, *certainement.* Being taken to the nursing home was probably an unforeseen advantage from their standpoint, as there was added security, reinforced by my closest friends. But regardless of their ultimate intent... I would be out of their way.’

My mounting fury gave way to sudden puzzlement. ‘But the girl who died...’

‘There was no death, Hastings. *Jamais de la vie!* What hard evidence had we of a death? A girl of their own family is selected to come to our door, ostensibly as a Girl Guide. They have already planted the chocolates in the post, and they know that the dish of sweets is in the hall by the front door. *Alors,* the girl comes to the door at the appointed time, and it is made certain that *I* am the one who is there to offer her a chocolate— recall that you receive a telephone call to distract you at the very moment of her arrival. She is particular to explain that she has not eaten today and will not eat until after meeting with her aunt— ah, how conveniently thorough is her speech!— so that we should be properly suspicious of that chocolate she received from us. Later, her name is simply given as the girl who has died. The heavy snow, it covers all traces and buys sufficient time. The illusion could not be maintained for long, but it only had to be maintained until the second exhibition. *Voilà,* the plan.’

My jaw fell. ‘So Clara Bauers, or whoever she really is, and this girl— they were behind this, together?’

‘Not only they, Hastings. The driving force behind it all, you have left out of your calculations. Who had access to our flat that

day? Who might know of that dish of sweets and its location? Who would know *avec certitude* that the chocolates were received and placed in position by the time the Girl Guide arrived?

‘Of course, the man from the press, who burst in here with his camera to—’

Poirot cut me off with superabundant gesticulations.

‘No, no, no, Hastings. *Mon Dieu*, but the answer is as clear as the noonday sun. *None of the chocolates in that parcel I received were poisoned.* Have I not demonstrated that this must be so? The girl calling herself Martha Bauers was in on the plot and in no danger of being poisoned by my offer to her. The chocolates, also, were meant to be distasteful to both of us, so that after you sampled one they would go straight onto the hall table. Someone has studied our habits carefully. But none were poisoned.’

‘But I brought the lot to Lansing-Hayes for analysis, and they—’

‘—included one that was poisoned. Therefore, a poisoned chocolate was substituted *after* the Girl Guide visited us. Very shortly, in fact, before you took them to be analysed. Only one person could have done it.’

I gave a gasp. ‘Not... Mr Johnston! The porter?’

‘*Oui. C’est ça.* And I should have known. Would the London Syndicate have constructed such a charade simply to spite me for foiling the first robbery attempt? No, they must have had a plan for their second attempt, and poisoning me did not, strangely enough, seem to be their intended goal. So, what was the actual outcome of this series of events? I am out of their way for the second showing of the exhibition, sequestered in a nursing home that was nothing but a temporary prison. I think to myself, what if something of that nature was their very intention?’

‘Ah, *sacré!*’ And he gave the dining table one more enraged kick for good measure. ‘Johnston was set to be the thief for the second robbery attempt at the exhibition, the only one considered able to pull it off in the face of all the security measures. It was assumed, wrongly, that I was likely to be in attendance again. I must be kept away at all costs, lest the keen eyes of Hercule Poirot recognise his own porter, even in disguise.’

I was silent. I thought of the London Syndicate, carrying out this plan merely to keep Poirot away— needlessly. Of my friend, who might have overdosed on veronal— even more needlessly!

Finally, I stammered out: ‘That’s not on.’

Poirot turned to look at me. Then he unexpectedly burst out into a long laugh.

‘*Not on!* Oh, Hastings, you are wonderful.’

Sometimes I think I shall never understand my strange little friend. He was wiping tears from his eyes and gasping ‘*Not on!* O-ho-ho!’ when I interrupted him to collect my whirling thoughts.

‘Johnston has been working here for only four months or so. He’s been into our flat several times— so he was in a position to know what was kept on the hall table, and to make deliveries without attracting suspicion.’

‘*Oui, d’accord.*’

‘He had known that Japp was leaving on holiday this past December, and probably had a hand in that affair as well!’

‘*Vraiment.*’

‘And that is why the police escorted us back to Whitehaven Mansions— they wanted to keep an eye out here for him tonight.’

‘You lay it all out with a most admirable succinctness, *mon ami.*’

I gazed around the sitting room, taking in all the tokens of admiration that came to our flat after Poirot’s successful prevention of robbery at the first exhibition. What if most of those gifts had actually come from the Syndicate itself in order to provide additional access for Mr Johnston to our flat? Indeed, perhaps the first robbery was intentionally faked in favour of Poirot, affording not only the excuse to make several deliveries, but also to boost his pride to set him up for a greater fall...

Stunned by this revelation, I opened my mouth to voice it when I noticed Poirot glaring at me. Two bright spots of pink had appeared in his cheeks, and I had the uncomfortable feeling that he had been reading my mind. Tactfully, I closed my mouth again, judging it to be the safest course. There was no point in wounding his feelings further.

‘I owe a great deal,’ said Poirot with sudden feeling as he reposed himself at his desk, ‘to your Mlle Whitcombe.’

‘She’s not *my* Mlle Whitcombe. And for all you know, she helped plan this fiasco.’

‘*Pardon*, my friend. But I do not think so. She sent her message to me for a reason. The rose indicates her identity. She said in her note that she “only just found out” what happened, and I believe her. She was not privy to the plans of Johnston until the initial damage had been done. Johnston had my movements watched after he informed me of the “death” of the girl, and discovered that I was taken to a nursing home, undoubtedly guessing the reason and reporting to the rest of the Syndicate. The young lady was alarmed and feared that I would do myself harm after all. She decided to tell me the truth about why the Syndicate sought specially to keep me from the second exhibition: *They did not want you to recognise him*. It was all I needed to put two and two together.’

I dismissed Miss Whitcombe from my mind. Mr Johnston, with the London Syndicate. The mild-mannered, middle-aged, unremarkable porter. It seemed incredible. The position of doorman was one of high trust, and I could scarce imagine how he had managed to land the job.

‘He could have broken in here anytime!’ I exclaimed. ‘Has he stolen anything, do you think?’

‘The porters do not have a pass key— although doubtless he would be able to obtain one dishonestly, had he desired to do so. I do not think that would suit his purpose, which was to remain safely undercover until the proper moment. He is wiser than our friend Carrington with his paper knife foolishness. I would know if anything went missing in the flat, and I do not leave important papers lying about for even a burglar to find easily.’

My friend glanced around him, and added, ‘Speaking of which, Hastings, what have you done with the rose and the note I gave to you?’

‘Oh— I threw them into an empty wastepaper basket at the Carlton.’

Poirot's reaction was electric. He jumped up and stared at me, wide-eyed. 'That was a foolishness, a great foolishness! Which wastepaper basket?'

'Er, the one directly outside the atrium from the lobby, but—'

My friend had already grabbed the telephone on the desk. He demanded to be put through to the Carlton and had a rushed conversation with the management. He then slammed down the receiver, flew out of the room and down the hallway, and I heard the clicking of our door being bolted.

'My dear fellow,' I said weakly, 'what in heaven's name is the matter now?'

Poirot came back into the sitting room. His face was very grave.

'Sit down, *mon ami*,' he said.

I sat down. He took the armchair facing me.

'No cleaning personnel have been through the main floor of the Carlton to empty the wastepaper baskets since we were there, Hastings. But the basket you described to me, it was empty.' He watched me as if expecting some sign of understanding, but I merely stared blankly at him. He took a deep breath.

'It would be a terrible turn of fate if, by that one small gesture, you have placed your own life in mortal danger. But that is exactly what I now fear.'

'Not more mortal danger,' I groaned.

'Do not jest, *mon ami*! As far as the London Syndicate is concerned, the games are over. The possibility of murder is now real. It is time, I believe, to recount to you again, and in greater detail, the story of the Battersea Scandal, and perhaps you will begin to understand why.'

Chapter 7

The Battersea Scandal

Hercule Poirot was in deadly earnest. Perhaps he noticed my pallor, because he said suddenly:
‘But before I begin, *mon ami*, I owe you this courtesy.’

Nimbly he hopped up again and went to pour out a drink. He returned and handed me an unusually large brandy. ‘You may need this, I think.’

It was not exactly an encouraging beginning.

‘Throwing away a crumpled rose and a bit of paper has changed everything?’ I said skeptically as I took the glass. ‘You’re pulling my leg.’

‘You do not see it, Hastings? You were observed throwing the items away in the lobby of the Carlton, and that is why they were retrieved, in curiosity, by Johnston. Who else would do such a thing? He did not know that I was with you in the building at that point, so he had not yet fled. That paper is an admission of the double-crossing of Rose Whitcombe! She too could be in grave danger at this moment from the London Syndicate.’

The weight of my folly crashed down on me. Of course, Poirot was right. I couldn’t like the woman, but she *had* apparently tried to aid us in all good faith. Shivering, I took a gulp of my drink.

‘And you say that my life is in danger as well, for this reason? Are you supposing that the London Syndicate lifts its rule against murder when their adversaries begin conspiring with their own agents?’

‘That is not entirely what I meant, Hastings, but you are not so far from the mark. Ah, my good friend, see you, I have just suffered most grievously the belief that I had directly caused the death of a young innocent. If your death were to truly lie at my door, what then should I do? No— I shall not allow it to happen, *jamais!* And so I must warn you now, and take no chances.

‘I know that you are very tired from your services of the previous night.’ How very true; and I tried unsuccessfully to suppress a yawn. ‘But I beg of you to hear me out before you rest tonight. As I said, I shall recount to you the affair of the Battersea Scandal, which has been illuminated somewhat by visits to Harold Whitcombe in prison and my own inquiries at Scotland Yard. I also wish to tell you of that man himself, for his influence in the Syndicate has a direct bearing on the story and our present trouble.’

‘You’ve piqued my curiosity, old boy, I must say,’ I said, taking another fortifying swig of brandy.

Now— (continued Poirot) to the Battersea Scandal.

You, *mon ami*, were away in the north of England those many months ago, when the news broke from Battersea. In black and screaming headlines! Two prominent government officials of that region had been publicly disgraced. One was revealed to have been an embezzler of funds; the other had been carrying on multiple affairs at the office. How stupendously great was the public outcry!

I was just reviewing the account from the morning newspaper when a caller interrupted my quiet. She was an honest, efficient-looking type, between thirty-five and forty years of age, with a well-made black dress and hat that tempered a mop of auburn hair.

‘M. Poirot,’ she said, ‘I am in urgent need of your services.’ She glanced down at my paper and nodded in a resigned manner. ‘You have, I see, become acquainted with the news from Battersea.’

‘Indeed, madame— seat yourself, I pray you.’

The lady reposed herself in the nearest armchair and turned determined grey eyes on me. ‘My name,’ she said, ‘is Mrs Amanda Richwood. Xavier Richwood is my husband— we also happen to reside in Battersea. The local scandal is not precisely what I wish to consult you about, however. My concern is for my own husband, who is being blackmailed.’

I raised my eyebrows, and the lady continued in her matter-of-fact way.

‘I came on behalf of my husband to see if you would be willing to take on the case. We were not sure if it is the sort of thing quite in your line. Possibly our trouble is no more than a silly prank by some young people who took advantage of some... slight indiscretions of my husband’s at a recent party he attended.’

The lady went on to explain. Richwood had been in conversation at the party with an acquaintance, a M. St Vincent, and over drinks the talk had turned to the subject of the daughter of Richwood’s senior business colleague: Mlle Seagram, a notorious flirt. She was present at the party and in quite high spirits. St Vincent made a few smarmy comments and supplied Richwood with another glass or two of champagne. Apparently many young rogues there were egging him on. And someone had taken photographs.

‘Alas, madame, this must be most painful for you to recount,’ I said, when she had finished.

‘Nonsense,’ she said firmly, and a little to my surprise. ‘It’s not my feelings you need to be concerned about in this case. I’m well aware that my husband is not terribly bright. He’s literal-minded at all times, predictable as clockwork, and quite suggestible. As for Xavier, when he received the blackmail demands, he came to me straightaway to explain— perhaps the one thing his enemy didn’t count on. He’s not a secretive, conniving man, just a foolish and transparent one. And in spite of everything, M. Poirot, I am fond of him. It’s the possibility of a *scandal* that worries me; it will do no good for either of us.’

‘But you said, did you not, that your husband thought it was not serious, but more of *une blague juvénile*?’

‘That is what’s so curious about it all! Real blackmailers demand money, and lots of it, don’t they? Their threats are heavy—they will go to loved ones, to the employer, to the press. But it wasn’t quite like that in this case. The request came in the form of a crude and absurd note and copies of some photographs, and the note threatened only to tell me, his wife. And what they wanted—oh, it seemed so trivial, one could scarcely think to take it seriously. Three pounds sixpence, to be delivered himself personally at exactly 11:20 tomorrow morning, at a location in a town called Navenlies! At first, Xavier thought to just give them what they wanted and be done with the silly thing. But it worried me, and I thought it best to seek your advice before complying.’

‘I see, I see—it has the appearance of a prank of no importance. But today you see the headlines of the Battersea Scandal, and the possibilities frighten you, eh?’

‘Just so, M. Poirot. And although the blackmailer does not mention going to the press with the photos, the coincidence of our location in the same neighbourhood might put ideas into his mind, especially if he is eager to make a big splash with his joke. Whether we comply or not, he might decide he wants the publicity.’

I could see, Hastings, that I was dealing with a woman of intelligence. The problem intrigued me, and I procured a few more details and assured the lady that I would call on her husband within the next hour or two. M. Richwood was a store manager in Battersea, and it was of interest to me to see his place of business.

Alors, at precisely a quarter to noon I arrived at Seagram General, a neat and respectable establishment that, as I was soon to discover, reflected well the personality of the man working there. Consider, my friend—some men are like myself, with order and method that are a reflection of a robust and vivid intellect. There are other men, however, who keep their lives neat and regular because if they did not, their vague insipidity would cause them to practically disintegrate. M. Richwood was of this type.

The store was quiet and still, and indeed it bore witness to the personality of its manager. I passed through a little entrance corridor where a coat rack bore a somewhat shabby hat, a light sweater, and a few other personal belongings. Neat rows of car pictures decorated the corridor. It was a pleasant spring day, and the windows had been opened to let in the fresh air of which the English are so inordinately fond.

It was in this orderly environment I made the acquaintance of the poor, shrinking man. At the mention of my errand, he grew nervous and fidgety, but did not even seem to have enough blood in him to blush. A very different type from you! It is just as well that you were not with me, as you would have disliked the man very much. The auburn-haired Mme Richwood, on the other hand—ah, that is an unpleasant face you make at me!— I will not tease, then.

After an exchange of introductions, I said: ‘I will investigate this matter for you, monsieur. It may be, it is true, a foolish trick of the most juvenile. But I must ask your opinion straightaway— do you feel that there could be some connection between this predicament of yours and this “Battersea Scandal,” as the papers call it?’

He looked astonished. ‘I should hardly think so, sir! I may have met the men in question once or twice, but by all accounts they had serious goings-on. An embezzler and a serial adulterer! There was plenty of proof and they admitted the charges. And I don’t recall that there was any question of blackmail. What happened with me at that party was just— just a stupid— ’ He trailed off awkwardly, then began again. ‘It looks like a prank, sir, and a clear set-up to boot. I guess I might have complied without question— the joker’s not asking much— but somehow I didn’t like them to have it all their own way. And if I don’t do what they want, well, they can’t surprise my wife, but they might go to the press or someone else.’

‘I comprehend perfectly, monsieur. Well, we shall see. Now, since you are not busy with other customers in this establishment at the present time—’

‘You just missed the morning rush,’ he interrupted, apparently insulted that I would suggest that business was slow. I continued.

‘—I would like you to tell me all that you can remember about this party, the people you spoke to, all that occurred.’

With a great deal more fidgeting, he told me. The gathering had been a week previous, and was an informal one at the local pavilion. Several members of the community with interests in Battersea had been present, and there was a fair bit of ‘talking shop.’ Richwood had fallen into conversation with a certain Mr St Vincent, a curious man who clutched a file folder and presented himself to Richwood as being quite the man of the world. And when Miss Seagram, the outgoing daughter of old Mr Seagram appeared in their midst, St Vincent became increasingly *vulgaire* and pressed champagne on the other man.

‘I hardly know how it happened,’ mumbled Richwood. ‘But I’m sure now that Mr St Vincent was a bad lot, and instigated the whole thing as an odious hoax. The way he went on about his own personal experiences with “wooing the boss’s daughter” and what a feather in the cap it would be for me to do the same. I didn’t take it seriously. But still, things happened...’

‘And later, you receive the letter and some photographs? You still have them, I presume?’

At that, Richwood finally managed a flush of pink. He reached into his coat pocket.

‘I suppose you must see them,’ he sighed, passing over a large envelope. ‘I wasn’t about to leave this lot lying about. They’ve been on my person since I got them yesterday morning. You can see,’ he added in desperation as I extracted the envelope’s contents, ‘how silly it all is.’

I understood his meaning. The pictures were more awkward and foolish than salacious. (Drink your brandy, *mon cher* Hastings; it will cure you of those unkind faces you continue to direct at me! One must at least look at the evidence.) I could see why Mme Richwood would be more concerned about the prospect of publicity than of a genuine affair on her husband’s part. Monsieur would certainly be uncomfortably placed if indiscreet photographs

of that sort were to make the rounds to other individuals, perhaps accompanied by a well-spun rumour or two.

The clock struck the hour, and the highly-strung man jumped nervously. Mumbling something about lunch, he retreated to the corridor to collect his lunch satchel and brought it back to the front counter. Unabashed, he spread the contents out lavishly and began eating as I continued looking through the envelope contents.

The letter of demand was also foolish. Coarsely printed, it commanded Xavier Richwood to arrive alone in Navenlies the next day. At 11:20 sharp, he was to put a white envelope containing three pounds sixpence into the hollow of a certain tree behind the telegraph office. He was then to wait in that spot for a full twenty minutes. After that, his obligations were at an end. The money would be collected at a later date, and the original photographic proofs returned. He was not to go to the police. If he did not comply exactly, the photos would go to his wife.

I returned the items to the envelope and handed it back to Richwood, who hastily returned it to his pocket.

‘C’est incroyable!’ I exclaimed. ‘What a ridiculous proposition. It does indeed have the appearance of a crude hoax.’

Richwood nodded vigorously. ‘Just what I thought. And what would be the point of it?’ He scowled over his sandwich. ‘Blast that wretched St Vincent! The two of us had even chatted about Navenlies in the course of our conversation and what a pleasant town it was— there’s a really splendid little park in it, and some top-notch motors about as well. The man is some sort of confidence trickster or maniac.’

I asked for a description of his acquaintance, but Richwood was vague. St Vincent seemed to be of average height and build, brown-haired, perhaps around forty, with no distinguishing marks.

‘The only really noticeable thing about him, as far as I could tell, was the file he carried,’ shrugged Richwood as he tapped a boiled egg. ‘Mind you, a few gentlemen at that gathering were passing papers and discussing various issues, but St Vincent didn’t seem interested in that sort of thing. I only managed to get a quick glance at the label once when his head was turned.’

My attention was caught. ‘Yes, monsieur? What did it say?’ Richwood looked up from his lunch placidly. ‘B-Battersea,’ he stammered.

‘*Pardon?* It said “Battersea”?’

And again, Richwood stammered: ‘B-Battersea.’

I stared at him. There was something in his voice that puzzled me. He had not sounded frightened or uncertain. He had turned his attention back to his food. And an idea, a peculiar and almost preposterous idea, began to form in my mind.

To Richwood I said, in more forceful tones: ‘It seems certain to me, monsieur, that this is indeed a hoax, and I shall advise you. Follow carefully the instructions that have been given to you in the note. You shall go, alone and un-followed, to the town in question at the appointed time. You shall deposit the money in the hollow tree in question and wait the twenty minutes. We shall wait the few days until you receive back the evidence photographic, for I have no doubt that it will be duly delivered. At that point, and only then, will we begin the search for the culprit. You need have no fear of your task tomorrow. It would not do for us to jeopardise your reputation for a pittance, but I do believe that I can help you nonetheless.’

M. Richwood looked relieved, but it seemed that a hint of suspicion lingered in his eyes.

For my part, Hastings, I had some more desultory conversation with the man before bidding him good day and promising to be in touch. At this point, I returned to the flat and placed two telephone calls: the first, to the Chief Inspector Japp, and the second to Mme Richwood.

The small town of Navenlies is more than an hour outside of London, situated among rolling hills. I would not have found it especially remarkable, except that its park, the one commented upon by Richwood, really is a place of uncommon beauty in the springtime. It is orderly and symmetrical, with a large and vigorous old-world fountain, a spacious green lawn, much

shrubbery and flora, appropriate benches and arrangements for picnickers. *Quel endroit pittoresque*. I know all this, *bien sûr*, because I was up with the bird the following morning, long before Richwood was due to arrive, to have a look about. Of course, I had been most artistically lying when I told him that he would not be followed that day, what else?

The atmosphere was quite still at that hour, but I still had no wish to be specially observed. It is not, I admit, very easy for me to go incognito as a rule. You English do not rightly uphold the venerable tradition of *la belle moustache*, and as a result, every really well-groomed foreigner in your midst is regarded as an extreme oddity! However, I saw what I wished to see, and then made my way to the local inn to order coffee and toast. The rest of the morning was spent avoiding my fellow men behind a large newspaper in the corner of the lounge.

It was a few minutes after eleven that I rose, exited the establishment, and made my little arrangements. Then I made my way cautiously down to the town park, now occupied by several people, and found a convenient patch of shrubs in which to conceal myself. From there I could see a few open park benches. The main road came close to this particular corner of the park.

M. Richwood came strolling along into the vicinity at about ten minutes to twelve. Apparently he had dropped off his envelope in a timely fashion, waited by the tree as instructed, and was now at leisure. He walked to and fro for awhile, looking about him. Occasionally he glanced at his watch. Finally he came nearer to where I was concealed, selected an empty bench, and dropped his satchel down next to him. From it he extracted a number of luncheon accoutrements, laid them out, selected a sandwich, and began to eat.

A few minutes later, I heard what I was expecting: the sound of a car pulling up a little way down the road. Then, the rapid approach of a man, entering the parkland around the hedges. I caught my first look of him as he came on: he was a well-dressed gentleman of nearly sixty, with greying hair and rather wonderful blue eyes. He stooped slightly and sounded out of breath as he came up to Richwood.

‘Pardon me, sir,’ he said to the seated man in a deep, apologetic voice, ‘you don’t know anything about cars, do you? I’ve never had the transmission on my Rolls act up before. Sounds funny to me. I don’t suppose there’s a garage nearby?’

Richwood was on his feet at once. ‘Oh no— not for some miles. I can take a quick look for you, if you like; I do know something about transmissions.’ And the two men disappeared rapidly around the hedges.

I heard the newcomer indicate the position of his car further down the road, suddenly adding: ‘You go ahead; I’ll just see if there’s someone else back here who might ring up a garage for me.’

The stranger reappeared in the park. He quickly approached the recently-vacated bench and reached for the empty lunch satchel. Only, he did not seem to think it was empty! No, he felt about and found a small side-pocket, opened it, and extracted an item. He was turning to leave again when I stepped out of my place and directly into his path.

‘*Bonjour*, monsieur,’ I said. ‘A beautiful day for a drive and for a picnic— but it does not do to rifle in the lunch sacks of strangers.’

He stood as though rooted to the spot. Then he found his voice.

‘I know who you are,’ he said slowly.

‘I am gratified,’ I replied. ‘Several criminals do, in fact. And I fancy, monsieur, that you are intimately acquainted with several criminals. St Vincent is one of them, of course. But the network that you work with must be impressive indeed.’

The shock on his face! How wide his eyes opened then! His hand was going for his pocket when a voice cried out: ‘Hands up!’

It was then that the three officers who I had strategically planted nearby emerged from their places. As the stranger raised his hands, one of the officers relieved him of the object that had been taken from Richwood’s bag. I indicated that it should be given to me. It was a tiny bundle of brown paper. Carefully unfolding it, I extracted a key with a large label affixed to it— and on the label was a name.

‘M. Harold Whitcombe,’ I said to the astonished man, holding up the key, ‘when training your associates in the fine arts of blackmail and smuggling, it would be well to avoid some of these elementary errors. The first two scandals out of Battersea you had under control. But this little ruse was a step too far.’

He took a deep breath and gave me a long, appraising look. ‘How, M. Poirot, did you know?’

Hercule Poirot, that *raconteur*, looked pleased with himself as he leaned back in his chair.

‘How did I know? *Alors, naturellement*, it was suspicious at once that a blackmailing case from Battersea, even a minor one, should be brought to my attention directly after the eruption of the Battersea Scandal. Two publicly disgraced men, embezzlement for one, a string of affairs for another? That alone had all the appearance of men who had not complied with blackmail and had been exposed as a result. Richwood had told me that there had been no mention of blackmail from the statements of either men or in the press, and he was quite right. But that did not remove the possibility. In some cases, Hastings, if a blackmailer discovers that his threats will not work and his victim is of no use to him, he will retaliate by exposing those secrets he has been holding, and then doubling down on his threats in order to cover up his blackmailing activities. Those men of Battersea had been exposed, but they would not expose their blackmailers. Doing so would not undo their guilt or restore their reputations—and if the blackmailers, perhaps, threatened the welfare of their families? No, the men would suffer their disgrace in silence. Admission to the police would be too risky.

‘In such a scenario, the blackmailers would not gain money, but notoriety and fear, which can be quite valuable assets in themselves. You see, what I suspected, *mon ami*, was the possibility of a local gang, perhaps concentrated in the region of Battersea. When Mme Richwood first came to my office with her strange tale, I admit that it sounded too bizarre to be believed. The demands of

the letter seemed nonsensical. Richwood was not a particularly wealthy man that he should be extorted for a large sum, and no large sum was demanded. It might, indeed, have been a boyish prank. But there was another possibility— a blackmail attempt carefully constructed to look like a boyish prank. It was a fine line to walk, as the threat must be sufficient to be taken seriously and complied with, but not seriously enough to seem to warrant private investigation or a connection with the other scandals.

‘*Oui*,’ said my friend dreamily, ‘Richwood’s problem took a shape in my mind as a sort of template’ (his hands gestured with dramatic eloquence)— ‘the way that one might try to go about blackmailing a common, everyday man. It had an experimental quality, an artist feeling his way...’

‘And you accuse *me*,’ I broke in, ‘of romantic notions!’ Poirot has the most asinine ideas of what constitutes artistry.

As usual, he paid no heed to my outburst, but carried on in his complacent and expository fashion. ‘It is not merely for money that gangs blackmail. From a bland, law-abiding man they may desire information, or for the other to be in a place at a specific time, or merely to assert dominance and authority in a vicinity. If Richwood were truly being blackmailed, it was not for that paltry three pounds sixpence in a white envelope. That, I was sure, was a mere distraction to cover true intent. Perhaps, I speculated, this was one of a series of scandals in Battersea, and I had stumbled across a minor one, even a “test run” of sorts.’

‘Through which you might hope to catch a bigger fish.’

‘Exactly, my friend, and what a fish it turned out to be, *n’est-ce pas?*’ But first, I sought additional evidence for my theory of a gang. There was the file folder, carried so closely and secretly by our unscrupulous M. St Vincent, in a Battersea setting which was full of news of local interests. That was suggestive. Remember how guarded Richwood had been, carrying his incriminating envelope of photographs when I spoke to him! But when he told me what the label on St Vincent’s file said— *mon Dieu*, that startled me!’

‘I still don’t really understand,’ I said, ‘why the man’s stammering about the file folder gave you ideas on what was

happening or how to stop it. Nor, really, what this tale really has to do with our present problem.’

‘A little minute of patience, Hastings. When asked what the label said, Richwood replied *B-Battersea*. But this was not an accidental stammer brought on by nerves. He said it twice, quite deliberately. Then I understood that the very literal-minded Richwood—for so his wife had called him—was telling me that the label actually had the letter *B*, then a hyphen followed by the word *Battersea*. The label itself read like a stammer to Richwood’s mind. But it spoke volumes to me. The file was one of a series. Somewhere, there were other letters of the alphabet for other files of other neighbourhoods and vicinities. What was happening in Battersea, both in the news and with Richwood, was part of a much larger collection of threats, blackmail, secret documents, and the like. This was no little gang, but an organisation that might conceivably cover the entire city of London!

‘A fantastic thought occurred to me like the thunderbolt. St Vincent is being trained in the art of blackmail by his superior. Richwood is a test case. The careful timing of the demand suggests a pick-up of which Richwood will be the unknowing carrier. The victim was being sent to a place far from London, away from suspicious policemen; a place with which Richwood was familiar and would be known to behave in a certain way. Because the man is, as we know, “predictable as clockwork,” he will eat his lunch at exactly noon in that beautiful park he admires, for it will be 11:40 when the demands release him and there will not be sufficient time to return to his store. He will have his lunch satchel, which is kept in the store corridor and with which anyone might tamper, unobserved in the chaos of the morning rush, shortly before he leaves for Navenlies.’

‘And you guessed all this?’

Poirot threw me his most withering look. ‘It is the *deduction*, Hastings! It is a little profession of mine.’

‘Well, if you figured that St Vincent would tamper with the lunch satchel that morning before Richwood left, why didn’t you just stop him then?’

Poirot sighed and spread out his hands. ‘I could have done so, but I was convinced that there was, as you have said, the “bigger fish” to catch. St Vincent could, perhaps, have been caught that morning at Seagram General planting the key, in which case he would have been charged with a tasteless prank and gotten off lightly. Or more likely, he would have sent another gang member to plant the key, and that person would have had no connection with the Battersea Scandal or any clear criminal motive at all. No, I am certain even now that my approach yielded the best results.

‘If I were correct about the gang angle, I could expect to find Richwood lurching in the park, soon to be interrupted and called away from that lunch by something that would eagerly divert his attention— like an impressive motor breaking down a little further down the street. A man would come, search the bag quickly, and extract some small item. I had a strong suspicion, also, that along with the object to be passed, the photographic evidence might have been hidden right in Richwood’s lunch satchel the morning of the pickup. Richwood would eventually find it, thus neatly rounding off all obligations and reinforcing the idea that it had all been a mere joke! That was, indeed, exactly what we found hidden in the lining of the satchel— very fortunate for Richwood, too. And fortunate for the police, as it beautifully tied Harold Whitcombe to the Battersea Scandal. It all seemed... a little too fortunate, *peut-être?*’

Poirot’s brows contracted, and he steepled his fingers meditatively as he stared past me.

‘It was the large label on the key, with the name of St Vincent’s superior, that particularly interested the Chief Inspector Japp when the matter was placed before him. It was clumsy, he said, and he was quite right. The key identified Whitcombe, and that along with the hidden photographic evidence were bound to get him into enormous trouble in the event that anything went wrong.’

‘Unless St Vincent meant for things to go wrong for Whitcombe,’ I suggested.

‘It did seem possible to me that Whitcombe might have been double-crossed. The windows of the general store where my interview with Richwood had taken place had been left open. St Vincent could have been listening. In the event that someone *was* listening, I had raised my voice slightly to announce that Richwood should comply with the blackmail demands, and I mendaciously claimed that he would not be followed to Navenlies the following day. St Vincent *may* have known I was on the case, *may* have heard the conversation, and *may* have had his suspicions about my truthfulness. This was all conjecture. I spoke more with the Chief Inspector Japp about the matter, and he told me with complete confidence that St Vincent must have made his preparations with the satchel in such a way that Whitcombe would take a major fall if plans went wrong. I agreed with his analysis. Neither of us could prove anything, however, and we never suggested to Whitcombe that he had been deliberately betrayed by St Vincent.

‘All that was left to do, then, was to question Whitcombe with Japp, and see what the two of us could learn. This took place two days later when you had just returned to London. Now Whitcombe assumed from my earlier manner that I knew a good deal about his London Syndicate already, and he let slip some important facts before his reticence took over— namely, an impression of the sheer scale of the organisation. Far more extensive than we had conceived! Never did we discover the nature of the key that St Vincent passed to Whitcombe; it was an ordinary door key and has been in the keeping of Scotland Yard ever since. It is likely that Whitcombe had no fixed address at the time and did not want the key passed openly, but was in telephonic communications with St Vincent by which they arranged the plot. Along the way, by Whitcombe’s guidance, his *protégé* would learn the delicate art of blackmail that is so crucial to the power of crime syndicates and which frightens entire populations into compliance. But they did not reckon on the skill of Hercule Poirot— and they greatly underestimated Mme Richwood’s perspicacity!

‘By the end of that fateful first interview, Whitcombe was sullen and irritable. “If you knew, M. Poirot, just what my colleagues thought of you, you’d be down on your knees to thank me that they lay off murder these days. You’ve interfered with other jobs in the past, but now they’ll know you’re wise to the Syndicate. I’d watch my step if I were you.” These were his words to me.’

I could not help an ironical smile. ‘That very day you came home and burst into the kitchen to express how delighted you were to be so soundly hated by this prestigious organisation.’

‘*Eh bien*, it is gratifying to have one’s own colossal talents recognised by other skilled individuals. I was glad, too, that they at least eschewed murder. That requires explanation to you, *mon ami*, because of this new crisis. Permit me to recount some of the information that Japp and I ascertained from Whitcombe about himself and his methods, and various details we have gleaned since then from a number of sources. It will tell you all you need to know about the present danger.’

Poirot’s voice changed and became wistful. I had the impression of someone sifting through pictures from the past, forming a narrative from faded fragments of memory.

‘Harold Whitcombe had been a somewhat unscrupulous man all his life. He was an adventurer, and several poor investments he made started him on the path of petty crime, particularly theft. Nonetheless, he was thoroughly devoted to his wife and family and placed a high premium on loyalty. A turning point in his life was the death of his wife, the victim of a hit-and-run.

‘*Les affaires tragiques*, they take different people different ways. Bereft of the more stabilising influence of his wife, and in more difficult financial straits than ever before, he threw himself wholly into the criminal underground, where his influence and status steadily grew. Yet in honour of his wife who was killed, he developed a defining maxim for himself: in crime, murder was to be avoided at all costs. Cleverness, artistry, and strength were to be

prized, and murder discouraged. It proved to be good business sense as well, and he drew a good many supporters to himself and his methods. This was the genesis of the organisation we know today.

‘His dislike of murder led him to develop the practice among his associates of a systematic taking of trophies from victims—’

‘I had thought previously,’ I interrupted, ‘that that sort of thing was only done by the most deranged criminal psychopaths.’

Poirot looked amused. *Pas du tout*. It is done by the greedy child of six, the spiteful girl of sixteen, the disgruntled man of middle age. These things align neatly with simple avarice or even mere habit, besides serving as symbols of power and mastery. It is universally done, I assure you.’

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ I said with a sigh. Dwelling on such sordid criminal habits was only increasing my sense of exhaustion.

‘My good Hastings— so innocent, so upright! As I was saying, Whitcombe laid stress on the taking of trophies as a replacement principle for the impulse to murder. The London Syndicate, as it came to be known, consolidated around himself as the head, and two other men: Heath Riggs and John St Vincent. Riggs specialised in smuggling and kidnapping, quite a ruthless streak in him. But that was nothing to St Vincent. That man was dangerous in the extreme! He had pulled off more than one major bank robbery, being unparalleled among the crooks of London for thwarting surveillance, and had no compunctions about murder. And yet, in spite of this, he found himself drawn to Whitcombe, his methods, and his many devotees... such as his daughter.’

I looked up sharply at this. ‘His daughter?’

‘Oh, yes. Rose Whitcombe, as we know her now, *bien entendu*. It was discovered in the weeks following the Battersea Scandal that St Vincent had been affianced to a daughter of Harold Whitcombe. Recall again, if you will, the words of St Vincent to Richwood about his own experiences in “wooing the boss’s daughter.”’ He was devoted to her, but he may have betrayed her

father to further his own ascendancy in the Syndicate. I daresay she has never known the truth.'

'I say!'

'This alliance was instrumental in keeping St Vincent's deadliest criminal instincts at bay, for she herself was loyal to her father's own maxims. The authorities did not know who she really was even after that incident with Inspector Morett, nor that her personal interests were beginning to lie elsewhere— only we did.

'And you see where that leaves us, *mon cher*.' My friend looked at me with the utmost gravity. 'Tonight, everything has changed. John St Vincent of the Battersea Scandal— he is one of the highest-ranking forces of the London Syndicate, the most expert security-breaker, the thief, and the cut-throat. With the credentials he carries, and even the similarity of name, I fear that he can be no other than our late doorman, Mr Johnston.'

I felt the blood drain from my face.

'Johnston retrieved that note and rose from the Carlton. He knew that handwriting and took the items away as evidence. As of tonight, he knows his fiancée has betrayed him to aid Poirot. And I have no doubt whatsoever,' said the little man carefully, as I gripped the arms of my chair, 'that he has guessed— by that flower you held, the failure of her last mission, and perhaps her own distance from him of late— that she entertains affections for you. It had been his ties to the daughter that had reined in his murderous tendencies. But now...?'

The darkened room seemed to have become several degrees colder. In some desperation I went back to the glass of brandy, but I had finished it some time ago. Poirot leapt up and refilled my glass for me.

'It is a dire situation,' Poirot added sympathetically as I snatched the refilled glass from him and swallowed.

'That's putting it rather mildly, don't you think?' I sputtered.

'But do not give up hope, *cher ami*. It is not the time to panic.'

'Not the time to panic!' I croaked out. 'You've just told me that a murderous criminal, high up in a crime syndicate, may think

I've stolen his fiancée and will be bent on seeking revenge. Is that about right?

'Yes, yes, that is so... but Hastings, you have at your disposal your friend, who also happens to be the greatest detective in the world. Is that not a tremendous stroke of luck?'

I wasn't feeling so lucky. Observing my palpable distress, Poirot removed the glass from my hand and pulled me out of the chair to which I had been clinging.

'You are exhausted. It has been a great deal to take in— you must go immediately to bed and rest as you are able. Johnston will not be back tonight. Against any other complications, not only the police but I too will be on watch. Tomorrow we will relocate temporarily, and I will employ my little grey cells. You will leave everything to me. In this I shall not fail. And, Hastings—'

'Yes?'

He paused. 'That excellent revolver— which you have been carrying about with you from time to time over the past few months— I suggest we bring that with us when we leave tomorrow.'

Chapter 8

Sgt Landsdow

After that evening's series of bombshells, it seemed a miracle that I was not assaulted by night terrors and insomnia. But aided by the combination of brandy and exhaustion, I did drop off almost immediately into a dreamless slumber.

Before long, I felt a hand shaking my shoulder. My eyes snapped open and I sat up, startled. Poirot stood beside my bed, bright-eyed and fully dressed. The light from the window marked the time as not long after dawn.

'It is only I, *cher ami*,' he reassured. 'There is no cause for alarm. It is time for you to wake. We shall be leaving within half an hour.'

As I rose in haste and looked about me, I noticed at once a small stack of valises set squarely on top of the chest of drawers. Poirot followed my gaze and said: 'I have already taken the liberty of packing the essentials for us both. You may wish to take away with you any important papers or personal items as well.'

I read this last as a reminder that the flat itself would not be safe, and duly noted the warning.

'What is the plan of campaign?' I asked as I fumbled with shirt buttons.

'*Ce pauvre* Japp is putting in extra hours, I fear, but we have discussed all, and this is considered a matter of some urgency. A few of his most trusted men are aiding us to depart in secrecy this morning. You and I shall be staying with Sgt Landsdow at his house outside London for the foreseeable future.'

Landsdow! ‘But why?’ I demanded.

‘*Parbleu*, Hastings, is it not obvious to you?’

‘I daresay everything is obvious to the great Hercule Poirot,’ I grunted, in no mood for games. ‘But for us lesser beings—’

‘*Pardon*, my friend. Your remarks are just and sensible.’ (That had *not* been my intention!) ‘There are three reasons for Landsdow. The most immediate reason is that we know that we can trust him.’

For a moment I was silent as I finished dressing and began searching for other items to pack. We had thought we could trust our own porter, too. Poirot interpreted my silence correctly.

‘It is not like that, Hastings.’ He watched as I slipped my revolver into my pocket. ‘If Landsdow had anything whatsoever to do with the Syndicate, he would not have aided us in the Inspector Morett affair, and the subsequent events with Mlle Whitcombe would not have commenced. No. He is a good friend and an honest man. And it is better, when in hiding from criminals, to stay with a friend than at a hotel with many strangers.’

With a sigh, I closed my valises again and brought them into the hallway before proceeding to the kitchen in search of tea.

My head was still spinning with unanswered questions. We couldn’t hide from Johnston forever. Did Poirot have any clear direction in mind at all? And what of Rose Whitcombe— had Johnston already found and questioned her?

A loud rap on the front door startled me as I was finishing my tea. Poirot, unperturbed, went to answer it.

It was Japp, flanked by two other officers. They looked stiff and solemn.

‘Poirot.’ Japp strode forward and caught a glimpse of me in the kitchen. He stopped to address my friend and I together. ‘You’ll be interested to know that we believe we’ve tracked Johnston as far as Richmond Park. But we lost him in the early hours. Now is a good time to leave, if you really think it necessary—’

‘Yes, it is necessary,’ interrupted Poirot. ‘I have laid out my reasons before you.’

Japp looked at me dubiously. Had the situation not been so serious, he would without doubt be needling me mercilessly about

Poirot's theories concerning Rose Whitcombe. But I had a fancy that at the moment, he was too preoccupied with his own past failure to identify the Whitehaven Mansions doorman as a wanted criminal.

'As you say, Moosior. The Yard will be in touch with the address you've given me. All the same, it still seems to me that you'd be of more use joining us on the hunt, especially since your personal identification was what he was most afraid of. Hiding yourself away—'

Poirot gave a firm shake of his egg-shaped head. '*Non*. It is not my place to go running about all over the city. To be still and employ the little grey cells, to seek the clues from within—'

'All right, all right. If I've heard it once, I've heard it a hundred times. I just hope this plan of yours works. These criminal types aren't to be trifled about with, you know.'

Japp and his men turned back to the door, accompanied by Poirot. Concealing my annoyance, I grabbed the valises and followed them, pausing to lock the door behind us.

We were taking ordinary cars out of the city. The driver, an officer who had not been introduced to us, maintained a stony silence throughout the journey.

'Poirot,' I said at last, turning to him with injured countenance, 'what exactly is this plan of yours? And why Landsdow's place when we could just as easily hide out alone somewhere? You've told Japp. Haven't I the right to know?'

My friend turned his cat's eyes on me.

'Japp did not have all the facts, and so I informed him of everything on the telephone. You do have all the facts and should be able to draw the conclusions. But I will explain, *mon ami*,' he said hastily, seeing the irritation gathering on my face. 'It is quite simple. We need to make contact with Rose Whitcombe.'

I looked at him blankly. 'Well, of course... now that we know about Johnston, the information she could give us would be

valuable. But if we're in hiding, she won't be able to contact us. Do you plan to launch your own expeditions to find her?'

'But of course not, Hastings! Just as before, I shall allow her to find *me*. Ah, but still you do not see. We had to escape Johnston, but we also need Mlle Whitcombe. This is the second reason why we are going to stay with Landsdow. He is the one point of connection between the three of us that is certain to have remained unknown to the rest of the Syndicate. She knows his name, as I introduced the two of them. Therefore, if she suspects that your life is in danger and wishes to seek us out, she has only to look up Landsdow and pay a visit.'

Admittedly, that did make sense. But I was not yet convinced of the success of such a scheme.

'That's all very well,' I argued, 'if she's even capable of paying a visit. If she knows we're in hiding, she'll also have discovered why. Chances are that Johnston will be to see her and read her the riot act, or worse. He wouldn't just let her go wandering off to warn us again. Even supposing she is able to find us, she is likely to be followed.'

'I have taken these possibilities into consideration, *mon ami*. I am not quite as reckless as you make out. There is danger, *oui*, of a high degree. You must brace yourself for it. But I have a good opinion of the brains of Miss Whitcombe and the discretion—and daring—of Sgt Landsdow. And as always, you will be invaluable to me.'

He flashed a sudden smile. 'You should be pleased, my friend. Have you not been biting at the bit to try to take down the London Syndicate from the top with some outrageous and dangerous scheme? The opportunity to do just that may be opening before us.'

Having admirably pulled through the slush and the snow, the cars pulled up at last to an attractive brick residence outside London. Japp had been riding with the other officer in the second car, and when everyone had alighted and we had satisfied ourselves

that we had not been followed, we all tramped up the neat walking-path to the door.

‘You ought to like Sgt Landsdow, *mon ami*,’ said Poirot cheerfully as Japp plied the door-knocker. ‘He is very much your type, I think.’ But his words did little to alleviate the inexplicable anxiety I was already feeling about Landsdow.

A small, reverential butler appeared at the door and ushered us in without further ado.

Sgt Marcus Landsdow was younger than I expected— he could not have been much past forty, and his clean-shaven face and thick brown hair may have contributed to the impression of youthfulness. When the police had made the necessary arrangements with us and departed, our host led us into a handsome sitting room with comfortable high-back chairs and invited us to make ourselves at home. After a few minutes’ desultory conversation, Landsdow readjusted his tall, lanky frame in his chair and extracted a pipe from the recesses of his high-buttoned jacket. He lighted it and looked with dog-like avidity at Poirot.

‘I’ve heard of some of your exploits with the London Syndicate, of course— but you could have knocked me down with a feather when I got your call about this porter of yours! Johnston, you say? Never could abide porters— never know where you are with them! My fellow there, Creaney, is as sound a servant as you could find anywhere and discreet as a cold coffin. Trust him with my life. Anyway, happy to help in any way I can, of course. What a thrill to be called in suddenly on that Morett business, what? Old ass deserved that suspension. But tell me— where does it all go from here?’

Poirot had retrieved one of his own tiny Russian cigarettes and was now dabbing it thoughtfully into his own ashtray. He brought the cigarette to his lips and exhaled again before he spoke.

Eh bien, we three together— first we discuss our doings with the London Syndicate with order and method. There are

connecting threads between our various adventures that I wish to bring to your attention. For your benefit, monsieur' (this to Landsdown) '—I will commence with the entire narrative as I see it so far.

'It began with the Battersea Scandal and the arrest of Harold Whitcombe. In that event, I was able to deduce the existence of a large-scale crime ring and to glean a few details about this organisation from its founder. The other two major forces in the Syndicate still at large, I knew to be John St Vincent and Heath Riggs. St Vincent was a bank robber, a security-breaker *par excellence*, and most likely had committed or had been accessory to murder in the past. Heath Riggs did a ruthless trade in smuggling and kidnapping, as I mentioned to Hastings just last night.

'When Brian Westhelm and Matthew Carrington came to me about their aunt's jewels, Carrington thought that he would try his luck at— how do you say— "pulling one over" on the great detective who had put his boss in jail only days previous. That, of course, did not go too well for him!

'The next incident we encountered, the drug-smuggling deal at the East End warehouse, was undoubtedly organised and run by Riggs, although he himself chose to stay in the background. Disguises and false trails are tools he utilises often in his profession. He recognised Poirot's interfering disposition concerning the recent doings of the London Syndicate, and determined to misdirect us by implicating the wrong crime ring. This, too, backfired.

'The result was an almighty rage from our Heath Riggs. With the breakup of that smuggling operation, *mes amis*, he had lost substantial profits and a good many of his agents. It was the last straw. He decided that I must be gotten rid of once and for all, while making up his lost profits in another way. That is when he planned and carried out the Bexhill kidnapping last July.'

'What?' I cried. 'Heath Riggs?'

'But yes, Hastings— Heath Riggs, or as he is truly called, *Robert Griffon!* He and Scott Ramsey, his lieutenant, were the main players in that little affair, *c'est vrai*. Once again, the man relies on his scheme of costume and theatricals to fool the authorities.

Criminals are nothing if not creatures of habit. And do you not recall Ramsey telling you that day in Westminster that although the kidnapping idea was not especially favoured by the rest of the Syndicate, the member who insisted upon the plan had a good deal of influence and pull?

‘Well, yes,’ I said, bewildered, ‘but I never dreamt that the man I caught at Newhaven was one of the three major powers in the Syndicate!’

Poirot smiled at me affectionately. ‘It was a fine moment for you, my friend. But to carry on— once more, Griffon’s affairs were in disarray and Ramsey, as second-in-command, was also faced with heavy losses of profit. It was not an insubstantial sum that the French had offered to pay for my successful transport, and other business papers were confiscated as well. Ramsey’s plan to steal the Stradivarius was meant, assuredly, to cover many of those losses. Perhaps, with a bit of spying, he had heard of Lord Conway’s insistence that Dimitri call me in to the party that evening to observe, and he laid his plans to keep us out of the way and to exact his own private revenge. But again— he underestimated Poirot!’

As always, the little man was obviously enjoying his recapitulations and the sound of his own voice. Landsdow was leaning forward with a sort of eager, glassy awe that I found just a bit repellent. Once more, I had the sensation that there was something irksome about the man, something I could not quite pinpoint...

‘By Jove!’ said Landsdow, ‘that’s one common factor. The Syndicate often seeks to divert attention elsewhere, but by bringing you into it, they undermine their own plans.’

‘*Bon!* You put that very well. Now— Griffon and Ramsey, like Harold Whitcombe, had failed. John St Vincent, the remaining power, decided to take matters into his own hands. Under his own name of Gregory Johnston, he took the position of doorman at Whitehaven Mansions the following month. His extensive knowledge and background in security had given him excellent credentials for the job. He is a patient man, willing to bide his time. Soon he heard of Japp’s upcoming trip and Morett’s position. *Quelle bonne chance!* He saw there an idea for a new plan of

retribution, one of unique cruelty, to dispose of the meddling Belgian. He would send me back where I came from, disgraced as a criminal— perhaps, even, in real danger from encroaching political powers. And worst of all, he would use my good, my dear and unsuspecting Hastings, as a tool to do it. But Johnston never imagined just how the tables would turn on him!

‘Johnston enlisted his fiancée for the task— Whitcombe’s daughter, Rose. She would work on Hastings’ sympathy, getting him to do a very small favour for her. But when the time came, she hesitated! The full force of what she was doing fell upon her. She has inherited a strong sense of loyalty from her father. She was setting out to ruin Poirot by means of his most faithful friend, and it overwhelmed her with sudden sympathy and self-doubt. Nevertheless, she made her attempt. But Hastings told me of his meeting with her, and I— who had already suspected a plan of this very nature— acted at once.’

‘You got me in on it,’ said Landsdow with pride. ‘By Jove, what a thrill. And somehow you managed to get her to confess! I wonder how you did it. Plucky girl, that.’

Poirot shot a knowing glance my way, and I reddened slightly, relieved to no end that he had chosen to remain discreet about his other theories concerning Rose Whitcombe’s motives.

‘*Enfin*, in a last attempt for a big *coup*, Johnston made a bid for theft on a large scale. In what he deemed a necessary corollary to the theft, he hatched a most devilish plot to crush my spirit and render me powerless. He came very close to succeeding. But with a clue from mademoiselle, the spell broke, and we were just in time to prevent his robbery. This is disastrous for him— a fortune had slipped from his fingers. His cover as doorman was no more, and his true identity was known. And to add to the shame, he realised that his fiancée must have aided Poirot! His anger is very great— he is on the run, and bears a particularly strong grudge against the good Hastings.’

‘And that,’ I interjected, before Landsdow could ask any curious questions, ‘is where we now stand.’

I had not previously considered that the events in which we had found ourselves had unfolded in such a meaningful pattern,

and inwardly congratulated Poirot on fitting in the major players of the Syndicate in their proper places.

Landsdow knocked his pipe against the little table at his elbow.

‘Right,’ he said abruptly. ‘And now you’re here to lay low, puzzle out how to catch Johnston, and untangle some of the mess, correct?’

‘I think,’ said Poirot, his head a little to one side, ‘that Rose Whitcombe will come looking for us.’

Having put his property at our disposal in every way, Landsdow left late that morning to conduct some business in town. Creeney, that stolid manservant, made himself conveniently invisible except at judicious intervals where he suddenly appeared to offer sandwiches, tea, and the like.

Poirot severely forbade me to leave the house and spent most of the afternoon seated in the drawing room at a little table, where he solemnly built card houses. If Creeney found this peculiar, he (stolid manservant that he was) made no comment. Probably he had been warned of Poirot’s eccentricities by his master in advance of our arrival.

‘Do you really think,’ I said, as I strode to and fro on the handsome Turkish carpet and gazed about the mahogany-panelled room, ‘that Miss Whitcombe will simply turn up at any moment?’

‘Ah, no, *mon ami*, hardly that. I would give her a few days at least. Our enemy is patient, and we can afford to be patient as well.’ As if to illustrate, he balanced the edges of two cards together with exaggerated slowness.

‘And our host really doesn’t mind that we make an indefinite stay at his lodgings?’

Poirot kept his eyes fixed on his card masterpiece. It was nearly as tall as he was. ‘That ex-Army bachelor was only too delighted. He knows there is danger, and welcomes the chance to play some little role in our adventure. Besides, he is seldom at home. That is, I suppose, yet another advantage to this location.’

My memory was stirred. ‘Hang on— you said there were three reasons for Landsdow. The first was that you were convinced he was trustworthy. The second is that Miss Whitcombe would be able to locate us through him. What was the third reason?’

Poirot smiled one of his damnably enigmatic smiles. ‘You must allow me to keep that to myself for the present, *mon ami*.’

Then, looking up sharply at the annoyed huff I could not keep from escaping, he added: ‘But I notice that you speak as though you yourself were not convinced of his trustworthiness? As I said this morning, you *ought* to like him.’

It was true— he was the kind of man I usually did like, with a candid, good-fellow attitude which had always suggested dependability and honesty to me. Yet there was something about Landsdow that did not quite commend itself to me. Poirot’s cryptic manner was annoying, so I attempted to change the subject.

‘I suppose I hardly trust anyone, really. In particular, I don’t have the confidence in Rose Whitcombe that you seem to have.’

‘Ah! Rose Whitcombe. But I did not say that I had the confidence in her, *mon cher*.’

I stared at him. ‘I thought you were hoping to get information out of her.’

‘Yes, yes, that is the case. That she will find us, I have no doubt. Whether she comes to us with the truth or whether she comes with lies, she will not be able to avoid giving me information.’

This rather surprised me. Poirot shook a finger in my direction.

‘Still you think that I am not careful, *hein*, that I am too trusting? No, my friend, it is *you* who are so very trusting. I am well aware that the situation with Mlle Whitcombe is a delicate and precarious one. Like her father, she has some scruples, some aversion to cruelty, yes. But like her father, she also has the great loyalty. An infatuation with your good self— is that enough to move her to deliver Johnston to the authorities, or to unravel the organisation that her father has built? It is much to ask from the lady.’

These somewhat discouraging remarks led to a new idea. ‘Poirot— why not go straight to Harold Whitcombe himself for information? He’s already in jail, and you say you’re certain that Johnston betrayed him. In that case, mightn’t he tell us what we want to know? Especially now that his own daughter is in danger—’

Poirot headed me off with a peremptory wave of his hand.

‘You do not appreciate the psychology, Hastings. Whitcombe already knows nearly everything we know about Johnston’s involvement with the Battersea Scandal, including the fact of the labelled key. Evidently, being a man of fidelity himself, he does not believe that Johnston gave him away deliberately, and it would be exceptionally difficult to prove it to him. Likewise, whatever we may suspect, we have no clear proof that his daughter is actually in danger from her fiancé. You cannot make a man like Whitcombe talk by throwing suspicions about like that. No, it is the daughter to whom we must speak.’

He rose from the table and studied his card house. ‘And when we do meet with her, Hastings, I must impress upon you to guard your tongue most carefully. Let bygones be bygones, as they say. That young lady is dangerous and we cannot afford to antagonise her. One false step, one thoughtless word, and—’

With the slightest touch of his finger, the impressive edifice melted and fluttered away before our eyes.

I stood by my friend, looking down at the ruins thoughtfully.

‘The labelled key,’ I said vaguely, putting my hands in my pockets. ‘I wonder what it was for.’

Poirot’s hand stole to his own pocket. To my amazement, he extracted a key with a large label. He held it up, smiling.

‘This key, do you mean, *mon ami*? *Alors*, that is just one of the things I would like to find out!’

The next morning, Sgt Landsdow breakfasted with us in the spacious and elegantly-furnished dining room. He looked in excellent humour as he applied marmalade liberally to his toast and chattered away, punctuating his comments with the occasional ‘by

Jove' and appearing perfectly at ease. A feeling of irritability was weighing upon me. My desire for action had significantly ebbed.

Hercule Poirot was politely listening to this flow of words while trimming his toast into a neat square grid. His neatly-pressed grey suit and waistcoat of sage-coloured silk faille made an almost comical contrast to the hardy tweeds of the tall man seated opposite.

When more coffee appeared, supplied by the small and discreet butler, the conversation turned to Landsdown's home.

'It's a nice little place, yes,' he admitted in response to the courteous praise of Poirot. 'All the same, what I'd really like more than anything is to head back East. That was the life, if you like! They don't know what sun is in this country.'

Poirot made to reply, but a ring of the telephone interrupted him. He paused alertly and opted for silence as he finished off a cup of some pungent herbal concoction brewed by the efficient Creoney. (I had vociferously negatived the offer when Poirot attempted to persuade me to take a cup of my own for 'the health and improvement of the grey cells'.)

Creoney himself appeared at once in the doorway. 'The telephone for M. Poirot— Scotland Yard,' he said with promptitude, and withdrew.

My friend shot me a glance, pulled off the slip of white linen that was protecting his shirt front, and rose at once. I followed him to the front hall, where he took hold of the receiver.

'Who is this, please?... Chief Inspector, is that you? This is Hercule Poirot speaking... *Un moment, s'il vous plaît*... I do not comprehend— what is a "gumtree" and why are you "up it"?... Oh, *mon Dieu... mon Dieu.*'

Poirot almost dropped the receiver. His face was the colour of chalk. I could hear Japp thinly barking through the line from where I stood beside my friend. Impulsively I grabbed the drooping receiver away and held it to my own ear.

'Japp? Hastings. What's happened?'

'*Happened?*' Japp boomed, as I quickly moved the receiver a little further from my ear. 'Robert Griffon has only just escaped from prison, *that's what's bloody well happened!*'

I believe I was more stunned than Poirot. He had recovered enough to snatch the receiver back from me and converse hurriedly with Japp. Meanwhile, Landsdow had entered the hall, and after I had repeated the news, the two of us lingered anxiously while Poirot spoke.

Finally he rang off and turned to us with a dejected sigh.

‘The security guards,’ he said sadly, ‘were found bludgeoned nearly to death. Death was probably the intention of the perpetrator. All indications are that it was not the work of Griffon, but of the one who broke in to free him.’

‘But,’ said Landsdow, ‘how could this happen?’

‘I am an imbecile,’ Poirot whispered. ‘An imbecile supreme, thirty-six times over! I should have seen it coming— should have warned Japp—’

Interrupting, I said: ‘Now you’re taking the blame for this as well? In heaven’s name, why?’

‘Hastings, we knew that Johnston is an expert in matters pertaining to security and surveillance. Griffon has a bitter grudge against you, for ultimately foiling his kidnapping plot and sending him to prison, and against myself, whom he failed to send to France. What more valuable ally could Johnston have than Robert Griffon if he wishes to track us down and have his revenge? Johnston had arranged bank break-ins; he may have been planning Griffon’s escape for some months now. But when Johnston’s identity was discovered, he had to act at once, because Poirot, he might warn the police...’

My friend sank into a nearby chair and brought a clenched fist down with a bang on the arm rest. ‘Why, why did I not see it sooner? They are together now. They will both want to settle the score.’

If my interest in action had been ebbing since the previous day, it flowed back with a fresh tide of vigour now. The initial dismay I felt at the escape of the one criminal I had ever committed to prison was melting into a white-hot realisation of just what Robert Griffon’s freedom meant. I remembered Poirot’s assurance,

those many months ago, that the man would be in prison for ‘a long time.’ Never could we have foreseen then where we now stood.

Poirot looked up at me. ‘It is your life for which I fear,’ he said grimly. ‘Johnston was always the primary threat— we now have a definite indication that his murderous instincts have reappeared. Griffon will no doubt seek only to carry out his original plan with me, but this time there will be no room for leeway, and no mercy.’

‘And you had said that the Syndicate wouldn’t try—’

‘With Griffon *in prison*, no, they would not try that stunt again,’ he interjected impatiently. ‘It was his particular project. All has changed now. The man is a monomaniac.’

‘This can’t go on, Poirot,’ I said.

‘No— and it is not “going on.” *Ne vous inquiétez pas à ce sujet*. It is coming to a head, my friend, one way or the other.’

Landsdow had been watching and listening to the two of us with intense interest. We were all so preoccupied with our thoughts that we jumped when Creoney appeared as if by magic at Poirot’s elbow, impassive as ever, to offer him a second *tisane*. He accepted it gratefully and took a sip.

‘But we must not give into despair,’ he said suddenly. ‘We must marshal all the grey cells. We know much about these people. I, Poirot, cannot fail against them at last.’

‘What can I do?’ I asked helplessly.

Poirot rose again with his cup and neatly straightened the chair with his free hand. ‘You can keep a low profile, *mon ami*. I will not have your death at my door. More than ever do we depend upon making contact with Mlle Whitcombe.’

The next few days were quiet and uneventful. Not willing to commit himself to newspaper accounts, Poirot contented himself with regular telephonic communication with the Yard. On the afternoon of our fourth day at Landsdow’s house, while our host was away as usual, Poirot emerged from a spell of deep contemplation to say:

‘Hastings, my friend— a little favour, if you please. Would you be so good as to make a telephone call? I believe that Constable Farrier is keeping a close look-out at Whitehaven Mansions. A key to our flat resides in his keeping. It would interest me greatly if he took a look inside it.’

I looked up from my book in surprise. ‘What do you expect to find?’

Poirot shrugged. ‘It may be that someone has been to call. Do not look so surprised at the idea, Hastings. A covert break-in is child’s play to a man like Gregory Johnston, *il va de soi*. I am particularly interested in the exact contents of my desk top.’

One feels an absolute fool running errands and relaying messages for Poirot at times, but I duly made the call. This enigmatic task performed, I returned to my book, but my concentration had deserted me.

Just two hours later, Creoney materialised in the doorway to announce the arrival of Constable Farrier and Japp himself. Poirot and I had barely risen to our feet when Japp strode swiftly across the study to us, with Farrier bustling to catch up.

‘I don’t suppose you’d like to tell me just how you knew about this, Poirot.’ Japp waved a sheet of paper under my friend’s moustache.

‘Ah, there has been a message, then. I did not know, *mon cher*.’

‘Tell that to the Marines! How you get onto these things completely beats me. Unnerving, that’s what it is. Oh, I know, you’ll tap that funny-shaped head of yours and say it’s those bonny little grey—’

Poirot had extracted his pince-nez and was now coldly holding his hand out for the paper. Japp stopped and handed it to him. As he unfolded it, I read the single sentence scrawled in black:

P and H: This is how I will destroy you. -J

‘And if you’re wondering what that charming communication means,’ said Japp, unearthing something from his breast pocket, ‘*this* was sitting on top of the note.’

He held between his fingers a single bullet.

Poirot removed his pince-nez and took the bullet into his own hand.

‘So...’ he said, more to himself than to us, ‘it is like that. Yes... it fits in.’

Japp shot me an exasperated look that clearly said, *Does he have to be such a blasted oyster and can't you do anything about it?*

‘M. Poirot,’ piped up Constable Farrier, ‘you said as you wanted a full account of what was on your desk, is that right?’

My friend snapped out of his reverie and delicately handed the bullet back to Japp. ‘Yes, if you please.’

From the little notebook he held, Farrier rattled off a list of items, including the note, the single bullet, and several desk accoutrements.

‘Ah!’ said Poirot with something almost like triumph in his voice. ‘You noticed, Hastings? There were no paper knives. Indeed, that was something I did expect. *C'est enfantillage*, but while he was there, Johnston could not resist the temptation of retrieving the little trophies that indicated a past victory over the London Syndicate. Well, we shall put it from our mind for the present.’

‘Listen, Poirot, are you still assuming that girl will be to see you here?’

‘I am, my good Japp, and I thank you again for placing the key of Harold Whitcombe in my keeping for this purpose.’

Japp snorted. ‘The Commissioner’s none too pleased at the moment, I can tell you. It’s been an infernal disaster, letting a man like that escape again— an assault and prison break, with everything else going on. We’re lucky he didn’t just go the whole hog and break Harold Whitcombe out while he was at it, so we’d have all three big shots of the London Syndicate at large!’

‘*Oui*,’ said Poirot thoughtfully. ‘That is lucky for us. It is truer than you realise, Chief Inspector.’

We dined with Landsdow that evening on sole Normande and roasted asparagus. Poirot insisted on waiting until dinner was

over and we could retire to the drawing room before explaining the details of Japp's visit to Landsdown.

For my part, I had been full of foreboding all evening, and was now keeping my revolver in my pocket at all times. With every little noise, I expected to see Johnston, having silently and mysteriously entered right through the walls, training a gun on us. Creoney, that fount of perfect and conscientious hospitality, had offered me some sort of noisome herbal draught that was evidently for 'the calming of the nerves.' I politely declined and requested a whisky and soda instead.

Poirot was attempting to keep a brave face, but I noticed that he happily pounced upon my rejected *tisane* and downed it himself.

It was a cloudy, brooding sort of evening, and we were up late with Landsdown, smoking and passing the time in the darkness of the drawing room. A roaring fire illuminated our little circle.

I was just thinking of suggesting that we all get some sleep when a sharp clack was heard at the large window at the opposite end of the room. A dark shadow passed.

Landsdown and I leapt to our feet at the same instant, followed by Poirot, who cautiously stepped toward the window. A shadow moved again.

'Looks like a tramp,' muttered Landsdown, and grabbed a poker from the fireplace. But we all knew quite well that it wasn't a tramp. I drew out my revolver and angled in front of Poirot as Landsdown came up to the window. With the swiftest gesture, he unlatched the window, threw it open, and hissed:

'Don't move! Not a muscle!'

With extraordinary strength, he lunged forward and dragged the intruder straight through the window and into a heap on the drawing room floor. I held my gun at the ready. Poirot, probably annoyed that he could not see what was happening, was endeavouring to push me to the side. Landsdown reached down and drew back the hood from the figure on the floor.

I took a deep, anxious breath. Poirot finally succeeded in shoving me out of the way and stepped forward.

‘Mlle Whitcombe, I presume?’ he said with a little bow. ‘My apologies for this most awkward reception. Allow me to assist you to your feet.’

Chapter 9

The Plan

As Poirot and Landsdow assisted the heavily-muffled figure to rise, I hastily pocketed my revolver again. It was not likely to aid us in the pursuit of friendly negotiations. At any rate, Landsdow and I would be more than a match for our visitor in the event of mischief.

‘I haven’t been followed,’ Rose Whitcombe said. ‘Someone certainly tried, but I’ve shaken them off.’

The young lady was already shedding layers of dripping wet outerwear onto Landsdow’s Turkish carpet. For his part, he still seemed too stunned by the sudden arrival to notice. Stammered apologies were all he could manage.

At last the familiar figure emerged, shivering and breathing heavily. She was wearing a dark cardigan and woolen skirt. Her chestnut hair was pinned back, but strands were escaping around the face in a windswept confusion. I watched her closely, curious as to the manner she would adopt, but she did not meet my eye. An unpleasant apprehension stole over me, mingling with already shot nerves. Our last meeting had been one of profound deception and much subsequent embarrassment. I hoped feverishly that Poirot would refrain from bringing up any of his notions about the lady’s romantic interest. It seemed unlikely that she would know of his suspicions.

Poirot returned to the window, leaned out of it, and peered into the darkness. Then he carefully closed and locked it again.

‘We do not want the draughts of cold air,’ he said serenely. ‘*Asseyez-vous, s’il vous plaît, mademoiselle.*’

We returned to the seats by the fire with Miss Whitcombe. In the dimness of the firelight and shadow, my companions looked curiously obscure and colourless. It occurred to me that I had never yet seen Miss Whitcombe by the clear light of day. The study was darker than the well-lit park in which we had met on that mild December evening. She was, I had to admit, still very lovely.

We seated ourselves somewhat uncertainly, except for Poirot, who remained standing. He took it upon himself to switch on a small table lamp with a stained glass shade. The atmosphere brightened just a little.

‘I wish you good evening,’ he said with his usual politeness.

‘You’ve been waiting for me,’ she replied. ‘And you know my name. Do call me Rose, won’t you?’

The previous affectation of the lady, of which I had been familiar, was now considerably altered. She sounded younger, more confident, and mischievous. The voice also carried a manner that I had noticed in many an interview conducted over the course of Poirot’s various investigations. It was the tone of a woman determined not to give herself away.

‘Yes, I have been waiting for you, Mlle Rose.’ With a gesture, he added, ‘You have met my friends, Captain Hastings... Sgt Landsdow.’

At this her eyes met mine at last, but only for a moment. If her face flushed, I could not quite make it out. The only noteworthy colours in the figures opposite me were in Rose’s remarkable blue eyes and Poirot’s watchful green ones.

‘Oh no, mademoiselle—the trifles of the past are behind us. Pray, do not derange yourself.’

The young lady’s amusement at my friend’s turn of phrase was interrupted by another figure who emerged suddenly from the shadows. We all jumped, badly startled. But it was only Creoney again, bearing a tray with a flagon and cups.

‘A hot chocolate for you, monsieur, and perhaps for the young miss?’ he inquired with imperturbable placidity, as if the

sudden appearance of a strange young woman in the drawing room in the middle of the night was a perfectly ordinary occurrence.

Poirot beamed and accepted the offer.

‘And shall I hang up the articles on the floor, sir, to dry?’

Landsdow, who was seated beside me, still seemed rather slow on the uptake. But he made an affirming gesture. ‘Oh, yes— please do.’

‘Very good, sir.’

As these operations proceeded, Landsdow suddenly rose again and excused himself, looking uncomfortable. My friend murmured a few words to him that I did not catch, and the taller man strode to the other side of the study. He appeared to be busying himself with refilling his pipe. I fancied that the idea was to give his three unconventional house guests some measure of privacy.

Poirot helped himself to Landsdow’s vacated seat by the fire and laid his cup of chocolate on the table beside him.

‘*Oh, là là,*’ he said pleasantly. ‘What service! The good manservant— how difficult to find in these grey and latter days!’

Placing the tips of his fingers together in a familiar gesture, he gazed at Rose Whitcombe, seated opposite us.

‘Forgive my forwardness, I beg you, but time is of the essence and we must waste it not.’

‘It’s frightfully important to get down to business, yes,’ she concurred, venturing a sip of her hot chocolate. ‘Not a standard social call, this. What *will* the neighbours think?’

I disliked the flippancy she was bringing to a most serious business. Poirot displayed no annoyance, however.

‘We must be on the same page. To this end, I shall recount some facts. You came to understand, did you not, that your fiancé’s robbery attempt at the exhibition had failed, and your communications with us had somehow become known.’

Rose Whitcombe looked genuinely astonished. Even her air of confidence wavered. But she regained her aplomb after the briefest of moments.

‘I’d no idea that our engagement had become public knowledge,’ she said. ‘Or maybe that was your own sleuthing? But

yes, monsieur, you're right. My note to you seemed to have gone astray.'

I felt the heat rising in my own face and was suddenly glad of the dimness of the room. Poirot went on.

'And now he is on the run, and certain evidence suggests that his rage has consequently reached murderous proportions. The two men bludgeoned at the prison break-in are still in critical condition, I believe. It even seems,' added Poirot offhandedly, 'that Johnston bears a particular grudge against my good friend Hastings, whom he may be seeking out specially.'

She did not dare to look at me. But she winced a little. 'Yes.'

Her gaze fastened on my friend, whom she seemed to regard as a sort of conjuror. Indeed, in the faintly-coloured light of the lampshade, a slightly fantastical air of carnival unreality seemed to play over my friend's already exotic features.

'And you are willing to aid us again, mademoiselle? This is why you have come?'

Miss Whitcombe's voice came sharply.

'Why, exactly, should I aid you, M. Poirot? You sent my father to prison.'

Poirot said:

'Why indeed? *Tout de même*, here you are. Perhaps you are not very comfortable with cruelty.'

She suddenly became very stiff, as though trying to resume her more guarded air. Poirot continued.

'You found out about the scheme with the Girl Guide and sent me a note. Have you attempted to explain your actions to the rest of the Syndicate in any way? It is evident that they have not detained you.'

'Yes, I have,' said Miss Whitcombe in measured—almost rehearsed—tones. 'The news travelled quickly that you had escaped the nursing home and foiled the robbery. Gregory was on the run, but at the first opportunity he reached me on the telephone. When I realised he had seen the note, I felt the best thing to do was to admit that I had sent it to you, but only to keep you from— from serious harm. I explained that I was sure that the robbery would have successfully taken place already by the time

you received the note, and that Gregory would have gotten well away with the goods. He had no intention of remaining employed as a doorman after that night. The note was delivered earlier than I expected. In any event, I believed that no matter what reasons you may have given, the staff at that nursing home would not have permitted you to leave the premises. The disruption of the robbery itself was not my intention, but an unfortunate consequence.'

'And perhaps, mademoiselle, that was not a mere excuse, but the simple truth.'

She gazed at him coolly. 'Yes, perhaps it was.'

'He believed you? No suspicion of any kind attaches itself to you in his mind?'

'Of course he believes me.' She looked uncomfortable.

I shifted in my chair skeptically. If Johnston were truly convinced of the lady's fidelity to him, it did not seem likely that he would retain a deadly vendetta against me, which he clearly had. *She's lying*, I thought.

Poirot looked grave. 'Mademoiselle, you know that M. Johnston is a dangerous man. Additionally, he may wish to mobilise the entire Syndicate to a course diametrically opposed to your father's wishes. We cannot afford to wait much longer. We must know whatever you can tell us about the files kept by this organisation.'

She stared at him. Finally she laughed.

'You don't ask for much, do you!'

'For the sake of all of our safety, it would be most useful if we could indeed locate Messieurs Johnston and Griffon. But I will settle for information about the files at present.'

It was my turn to stare.

My friend reached into his pocket and withdrew a key.

'Do you know what this is, mademoiselle?'

Her face was blank.

'This is the key that your fiancé was to deliver to your father in the events surrounding the Battersea Scandal.'

Rose Whitcombe reached out her hand, and Poirot relinquished the key to her. As she turned it over, her eyes grew wide and fearful. There were several moments of silence.

Poirot finally spoke again: 'I believe, mademoiselle, that this key may help us in some way to discover what we want. The London Syndicate lives and breathes on blackmail. I have reason to suspect that there is a series of files— files which, if found and destroyed, would remove the best part of the power of this organisation.'

The lady's imperturbable calm had once more been shaken. She looked up at Poirot with eyes that were bright, tearful, and— yes, angry. I could not help but think that my friend had made a grave error in laying stress on the Battersea Scandal and the events that had led to her father's arrest. And he was concerned that *I* would antagonise her!

At last she spoke, directing her words to the object in her hands.

'This is a key to the headquarters of the London Syndicate. Only a few have been made. But— oh, how very difficult. I must have your word— your solemn word— that you will not involve the police in any way until after you make your search. It is too dangerous.'

I was infuriated. *Don't go to the police yet* indeed— yes, those had been her very words to me when I had delivered that parcel for her. She must have thought we were utter fools. I had opened my mouth to protest when Poirot cut me off in haste.

'No, Hastings. Let the lady explain what she means.'

Rose became businesslike.

'I can give you the location of headquarters. A meeting was held there earlier this afternoon— that is why I have waited until now to come to you. You are quite right about the files, though how you knew... Several prominent members of the Syndicate carry their own file representing a different area of London. The updated files are brought to the monthly meeting and remain at the premises for review for some forty-eight hours, at which point they are redistributed.'

'And what happens in those forty-eight hours?'

She paused. ‘Gregory runs an analysis of the files. And at the present, he and Robert Griffon are the only two people who know where on the premises the files are stored. That information is absolutely confidential— and will not be offered to me, for any reason. But,’ she added as she leaned forward, ‘I can get you into headquarters where you can make a search.’

‘*Eh bien*, and supposing M. Johnston is waiting there to greet us?’

‘I thought that you *wanted* to know where he was,’ she said with a little smirk. ‘But he won’t be there at the time when I take you. If anyone happens to show up later, we’ll hear them coming and I can make sure you’re well-hidden. Although I don’t actually have a key of my own at present, I am given free access to the premises. If I approach with a borrowed key, those on guard outside won’t stop me or any travelling with me. The files in question are only together at headquarters for a short space of time, and when they are there, there is usually heavy surveillance of the area. Any police attention will be noticed and dealt with swiftly. And if it is suspected at all that our position is known, headquarters will be moved elsewhere at once and the key will be useless.’

‘You could, perhaps, search the premises yourself unsuspected.’

She looked at Poirot shrewdly. ‘I am not sure that your friends at Scotland Yard would appreciate me disappearing into the night on my own with this key of yours.’

He spread out his hands and smiled. ‘*Alors*, perhaps not.’

‘Also, the documents are very cleverly hidden at headquarters. There is said to be a secret chamber that is impossible for anyone to find without demolishing the entire building brick by brick. As I said, any suspicious activity around the building in these crucial hours is exceedingly dangerous. Police are no good. But I’ve heard of your skills in searching for missing documents, monsieur. The Lavington affair, and the Violet Marsh case— I believe that, given the chance, you can find these files as well.’

I was utterly unconvinced. To me, it seemed altogether safer to surround the area with all the police force we could muster. If the whole building had to come down, so be it!

Poirot's hands were still templed before him, and he appeared to be thinking deeply. Finally he said:

'On those conditions, I will give you my word, mademoiselle, that we shall not involve the police until we search the premises.'

'What?' I cried, taken out of myself. 'You cannot be serious. Walk blindly into the headquarters of the London Syndicate without backup?'

'It would seem that this is our best chance, *mon cher*,' he answered. 'Even with an army of policemen, what could be done? We can hardly destroy a building merely because evidence may be there. If the police come with a warrant to the proprietor and make a search, mademoiselle tells us they are likely to find nothing, and all our advantage disappears.'

I could not suppress a scornful laugh. 'Well, let's have it. Where is this headquarters, then?'

Rose Whitcombe looked at me coolly.

'The West Lodge Café,' she replied.

My eyes widened. Poirot emitted a despondent moan.

'Ah, it is too terrible,' he said sadly. 'And they had the most excellent brioche...'

'But—' I sputtered, 'the West Lodge Café is where— er—'

'Yes,' interrupted Poirot with the air of someone attempting to avoid an embarrassing *faux pas*, 'it is the place where we unexpectedly came together some months ago.'

Landsdow, who was standing at the far end of the room by the staircase, had evidently been listening to the conversation and now stood gaping in surprise.

'By Jove,' he cried suddenly, 'do you mean that all three of us had been sitting about and having our lunch inside the crime headquarters that day?'

Rose Whitcombe said (with some exasperation): ‘Not *in* the headquarters. The owners of the restaurant know very little about the doings of the Syndicate. We use their back rooms and facilities. I was the only agent in the area on that day we met. It was rather a frightful surprise to us, really,’ she added to Poirot, ‘that you ended up going there at all— but it later became clear that no one suspected the establishment as headquarters, and so headquarters it remained. If we go to search when the files are there, tomorrow night is our only chance. By the time another month is past, they may have gotten the wind up.’

‘Now, look here,’ I said. ‘This is a dangerous proposition. There are people out there who are looking to kill us. What sort of guarantee can you give us of your good faith?’

Her vivid eyes met mine once more. Then, reaching into a pocket, she withdrew a small, shining object and held it up for us to see. It was a smooth, silver ring, bright and unadorned save for a solitaire amethyst in its centre.

She passed it to Poirot.

‘That ring,’ she said, ‘belonged to my father. He gave it to me some time ago. A few of them were made for heads of the Syndicate by Matthew Carrington— the same man who copied your paper knife. Each one is unique. Take it if you like as collateral and a sign of good faith.’

A curious look passed over Poirot’s face as he rolled the ring between his fingers. Meanwhile, I studied Rose Whitcombe’s face intently. It soon took on a faint smile.

‘Speaking of those silly knives,’ she added, ‘I’m afraid to tell you that they’re at the bottom of the sea. I daresay you know about Gregory breaking into your office. He was in a mad temper and was determined that you should never retrieve either of them. A damn fool thing to do, but there it is.’

Poirot told her about the message left at his desk and the spent bullet that was found there.

‘So you see,’ I interjected, ‘Johnston wants both me and my friend dead. It’s not just this file business. He’s got to be stopped.’

‘That,’ said Poirot to Rose, ‘is Hastings’ own theory. I do not expect that the London Syndicate plans to murder *me*.’

I was puzzled. When news of Griffon’s escape had first reached us, I assumed that Poirot had panicked and feared a repeat of the kidnapping episode. But surely Johnston’s clear death threat overrode that idea. If Poirot was merely meaning to heighten Rose’s sympathies for me at his own expense, it seemed a useless sort of tactic. The fact that Johnston had threatened to shoot both of us surely made our case stronger.

Poirot carried on: ‘And concerning this latest development, I may take it that Robert Griffon has not forgotten nor forgiven. He has no love for my friend, who secured his imprisonment, nor me for evading his clutches.’

Rose said: ‘A few of the Syndicate’s French contacts arrived in England, not far from London, two days ago. I cannot think that it is a coincidence.’

‘My God!’ I exploded, remembering that some of those French criminals colluding with Griffon had had murderous intentions toward my friend. ‘Another threat of death?’

‘Yes, *mon ami*... it is another threat of death.’

I rose swiftly. ‘Enemies everywhere,’ I muttered. ‘Roving through London, escaping from prison, coming from France! *No one* can be trusted, Poirot— no one at all. This fool plan of searching the headquarters is a blasted death trap.’

A noise from Poirot’s direction made me look back to the seated figures. Rose Whitcombe was staring at me.

There was reproach in Poirot’s eyes. At last he said:

‘Hastings, go upstairs to my room and retrieve my fountain pen and my little agenda book. They are there somewhere. Then, enter my bathroom and locate my tweezers, and bring them also.’

There was no mistaking it— I was being got out of the way. Poirot was going to attempt to smooth ruffled feathers while I was sent upstairs like a wayward child. Resentment and shame strove

against caution within me. Surely, it would be madness to leave Poirot downstairs with an agent of the London Syndicate...

'Tout de suite,' he ordered. 'And be sure to conduct yourself very quietly as you go.'

Abashed, I turned away. Landsdow stood lounging between the doorway and the staircase. He would be a lookout, at least. Silently I strode passed him and up the stairs, feeling distraught with the universe in general.

The particular guest room I wanted was about as far from the stairs leading to the drawing room as could well be imagined. It took me several minutes to locate my friend's pen and book. These were, inexplicably, perched on the very top of the wardrobe in Poirot's room. It seemed quite uncharacteristic of my friend, the great master of order and method, to keep his writing implements in such an inconvenient location. He could have told me exactly where they were—I had no doubt that he knew. I tried to temper my annoyance. There was a great deal at stake, and I knew I should have held my tongue. All the same, it had been an ignominious episode, made worse with a real nagging worry that I had made a dangerous situation worse.

But there was no time to brood. I had to find his cursed tweezers. That ridiculous man!

The bathroom in question was next door to Poirot's room. I closed the heavy door behind me and laid down the book and pen on the edge of the sink. There was no mistaking the imprint of my friend's personality upon this particular room. On the shelves above the sink, all of the bottles had been arranged by height into a neat, graduated row. The twin towels hanging upon the bar to the right of the sink had been arranged with perfectly accurate symmetry. I shook my head and could not help but smile.

A quick glance at the tidy row of familiar grooming implements laid out on the bottom shelf did not reward me with the item I wanted. I tried the cabinet drawers and peered into the recesses. Nothing. With rising impatience, I strode over to the

closet that stood between the door and the toilet and wrenched it open. Prim stacks of linens and towels reposed there.

Suddenly, I thought I heard a noise outside in the hall— a small, creaking sound. Distracted, I moved to the door with a mind to see what it was. I placed my hand on the knob.

The door would not budge.

What next? I thought in disgust. I fought with the doorknob, to no avail. It seemed to be stuck fast. One might even suspect it was locked.

Locked!

A fresh wave of horror passed over me. If someone else were in the house...! Quickly I stooped and applied my eye to the keyhole. It might have been my fancy, but some dark apparition seemed to pass in the hall outside. I rose and prepared to hammer on the door with a shout, but my fist froze before it struck. Poirot had instructed me to conduct myself very quietly. Now that I thought of it, the instruction seemed odd and meaningful. Had he suspected an intruder? Or was there some other need for quiet?

I was torn between obeying orders and an increasing panic to get out of the room. Dashing over to the window opposite the door, I flung aside the curtains and tried it. To my surprise, it was not locked. That seemed suggestive— surely Poirot, with his perennial distrust of draughts, would not leave his bathroom window open. I pulled it up and looked out into the night. There seemed to be no convenient way for an intruder to gain entry here, nor a promising way to escape the room. I closed the window again quickly and returned to the door.

Minutes seemed to fly by with maddening speed. My search for the tweezers, I need hardly say, was completely abandoned. Instead, I engaged in soft, persistent rapping with the assumption that Creoney was bound to pass by this way eventually. I had nearly given up, and was contemplating the quickest way to break down the door, when it suddenly opened again.

‘Is everything all right, sir?’ came Creoney’s voice in polite astonishment, but I hardly heard him. Grabbing Poirot’s agenda book and pen, I flew past him down the hallway and made for the stairs to the drawing room.

Poirot and our visitor were still where I had left them by the fireplace, the former utilising his best conciliatory manner. Landsdow, to my renewed anger, was nowhere to be seen! Poirot had been alone with a dangerous criminal agent and God knows who else possibly lurking about the place.

Poirot looked up in mild surprise as I approached, flushed and out of breath.

‘Hastings, my dear friend! You are a long time in coming. No,’ he held up his hand as I opened my mouth to pour out all that had happened upstairs, ‘not at this moment. We are finishing up here first. The lady must be on her way.’

With a great effort, I subdued my emotion and handed him his book and pen. ‘I couldn’t find the tweezers,’ I said. It was just as well, I thought, not to speak of the episode before Rose Whitcombe. She was looking at me now with great keenness, and something else— a hint, perhaps, of melancholy.

‘It is of no great importance. *Merci, mon ami.*’ Poirot opened the book and made a little note before sliding both items into his breast pocket. ‘The date is set.’

He rose, and the girl jumped up as well, looking eager to be gone.

At that moment, Landsdow entered the study from the next room, bearing the visitor’s coat and her other sundry winter items.

‘Here you are, miss,’ he said. Retrieving them, she bundled herself up quickly and returned to the window.

‘Are you sure you don’t want the door this time?’ Landsdow asked uncertainly. Rose smiled a little.

‘I think I prefer the window,’ she said. ‘A much more fitting portal for the disreputable visitor.’

Poirot gave a little bow. ‘Until tomorrow, then.’

And with a sudden waft of chilled air, Rose Whitcombe disappeared into the night.

The three of us stood for a moment looking out of the window. Then I snapped back to my senses.

‘Poirot,’ I said urgently, ‘there might be an intruder upstairs. I believe I was locked in the bathroom.’

My friend’s eyebrows rose, and I was extremely annoyed to see the humour evident on his face.

‘That is why you took your time, eh, my friend? I myself have noticed that bathroom door to stick somewhat. Well, we must be sure. Sgt Landsdown, would you be so kind as to make the search upstairs with Creoney while I converse with Hastings here?’

Landsdown removed himself hastily, and I turned to my friend (now drawing the curtains on the window vacated by our visitor) and relayed my experiences. He seemed interested, and his amused manner subsided.

‘Could someone have followed Rose here after all, as she suspected?’ I said.

‘It is, of course, possible.’

‘I’m sure,’ I said doggedly, ‘quite sure, that someone was in the house who didn’t belong here— someone upstairs.’

Poirot looked thoughtful. ‘You know, I am inclined to agree with you. On occasion you manage to hit on the truth exactly, and this may be one of those times. But I do not think they will find any intruder upstairs now. It is not tonight, I am sure, that will pose the danger for us. All the danger is concentrated in our visit to the West Lodge Café tomorrow night.’

‘So you believe that whoever it was has escaped, and this doesn’t worry you?’

‘It should not worry *you*. Leave the worry with me, my friend.’

It was no use trying to drag further information about it from him. ‘Was it quite necessary to send me upstairs?’ I added irritably. ‘You didn’t really need your book and all that.’

Poirot gave me one of his patented looks of paternalism. ‘It was for your own good, Hastings. I told you not to antagonise her.’

‘Well,’ I pressed on, ‘what else did Rose Whitcombe have to say?’

‘After you left, I soothed her feelings as best as I could and we made arrangements to meet together tomorrow evening in

Soho. From thence we will proceed to the café. Then begins the search.'

We had returned to the fireplace, and the two of us sank into our chairs again. I was exhausted.

My little friend, I noticed, had placed the silver ring Rose had offered upon the smallest finger of his left hand and was twisting it about absently. '*Mon ami*, I must impress upon you once more the danger to yourself in tomorrow's mission. Perhaps, even, I should not bring you with me at all. Landsdow—'

'You're not leaving me behind while you go off with Landsdow,' I shot back heatedly. 'I'm going, and that's final.'

'You see, the young lady spoke to me of a specific threat from Johnston; she was, I believe, not willing to mention it in your presence. The man knows you are armed. He told her that he wished to shoot you in your sleep with your own pistol.'

I drew in my breath rather sharply. 'Charming fellow,' I muttered. 'But, Poirot— whatever you had previously thought about the nature of the danger, it's clear now that Johnston means murder for both of us. He addressed his threatening note to P and H.'

Poirot leaned back and closed his eyes. 'You will recall that I had asked the police for a detailed description of the items on my desk. Now, answer these questions for me, Hastings. Why, in the note that Johnston left at our flat for the two of us, did he say that he meant to *destroy* us? Second: since he means to destroy us both, where is the second bullet?'

Bewildered, I shook my head. 'Well, for the first— I suppose that *destroy* is a stronger word than *kill*.'

'Your command of the English language is always inspiring, Hastings.'

'And for the second— well. Isn't it splitting hairs to say that he left only one bullet instead of two? Surely the intention is clear.'

'I wonder. Two bullets would have made for a stronger gesture to correspond to the strong language. It is not easy, you comprehend, to kill two men with a single bullet. There is no guarantee of success.'

In spite of the rather gruesome nature of the conversation, I burst out laughing. ‘You are the limit, Poirot. There is such a thing as reading too much into a simple death threat. Next you’ll suggest that one of the two bullets he left was stolen by someone.’

Poirot scowled at me. ‘Sometimes, I fear that your sheer stupidity will be more deadly to us both than anything the London Syndicate might pull from their sleeve, Hastings.’

This halted my laughter in a hurry.

‘Well, how do you explain Johnston’s note, then? Even if you’re not worried about being killed by him, you did acknowledge the threat of death from the French enemies that Rose Whitcombe mentioned to us.’

Poirot merely shook his head. ‘If you do not understand, I do not know that I can explain it to you. Your level of obtuseness is at an all-time low, I fear.’

I set my jaw and said nothing.

Poirot studied me with a strange expression on his face. Finally he said:

‘Very well. You shall come with me tomorrow night, on one condition— on this you must swear.’

‘Yes?’

‘That you follow precisely any instructions I give you, quickly and without question.’

I sighed. That had always gone without saying. ‘Yes, yes.’

‘And you will display no more rash fits of temper in the presence of Rose Whitcombe.’

‘You needn’t treat me like a child. Yes, very well.’

‘*Bon*. It is a dark danger for which we brace ourselves, my friend. We cannot let ourselves be carried away by the emotions. We must be orderly and methodical. Landsdow, he too will have his part to play.’

‘I don’t like the man,’ I said bluntly.

To my surprise, Poirot smiled. ‘This I have seen, *mon cher*. Yes, it stands to reason that you ought to like him. But I had a little idea that you would not.’

My friend became suddenly animated, waving his hands about excitedly.

‘But lift your spirits, *mon ami!* We are close, very close, to an opportunity— to strike a mighty blow to our adversaries. Does that not please you? Because, my dear Hastings, if we can bring down the London Syndicate once and for all, what a message that will send to the criminals of England! Dismantling a local, an aggressive crime ring, that will be something to publicise at once. Think of all the harmful tricks they have tried. If the Syndicate is undone, then all will know, beyond question, that tactics of that sort do not succeed against Hercule Poirot. Only a fool would attempt them. You will be able to rest easy once more, and leave that splendid revolver of yours at home.’

As Poirot had suspected, the search of the house yielded no results. If there had been a break-in, the culprit had made a clean getaway. Creoney was instructed to lock all doors and windows before retiring for the night.

I prepared myself for bed, but could not bring myself to relax in spite of my great tiredness. Poirot poked his head around the door to see me pacing nervously about my room.

‘You must rest, my friend,’ he said, entering and closing the door carefully behind him. ‘It is a big affair for which we prepare.’

‘Poirot,’ I said, exasperated, ‘this plan cannot possibly work. You’re hanging all your hopes on this idea that Rose Whitcombe still has— well—’

‘The *tendresse*? It is true that you did not quite distinguish yourself as I should have hoped—’

‘This isn’t one of your games,’ I huffed. ‘There is no way you can know that she won’t merely lead us into a trap. Indeed, that seems far likelier. I daresay she never had these flighty feelings for me to begin with, and it was all a fancy or invention of your own.’

‘You think I was imagining things, *hein*? No, I was not imagining, and neither was Johnston. Perhaps you have asked yourself: “What did she see, this Rose Whitcombe, that evening in the park?” The notion of love at first sight— I admit that it is often the nonsense. Certainly it is not worth staking our lives upon. But

there was more than that, as I have expressed before, had you been using your ears. Shall I tell you what she saw in the park that day?’

My glance strayed at once to the glass on the wall. I am not, I hope, ill-looking, but nothing particularly out of the ordinary.

‘I have no idea,’ I said shortly.

‘Well, my friend, here is what I think.’ He crossed his hands behind his back and drew closer. ‘Superficially, she sees a tall man, and not an old one, of military bearing; by no means a Greek god, but—’

‘I know *that*, for heaven’s sake,’ I said, annoyed.

‘The first impression is a sympathetic gentleman— and a targeted victim. But sympathetic gentlemen have been her victims before and have not aroused such strong feeling in her. Why is it different now?’

‘You must consider the psychology of *la femme*. In that moment, I believe that she sees in you the embodiment of that trait that she values above all others: *loyalty*. She has heard something of you before, but now she meets you in the flesh. And the weight of horror at what she is doing suddenly falls upon her. She is trying to send Poirot out of the country, where he might possibly be a sitting duck for elimination. She is trying to separate him from his most faithful companion— to arrange for you to betray your friend unknowingly. Can you not understand what that does to her mind?’

‘If she felt that way,’ I said with indignance, ‘she should have given up on the plan then and there.’

Poirot shook his head. ‘Part of her very much wished to do just that. But this ran up against her own strong loyalty to her father and his Syndicate. And as I told you before, another part of her was attracted to the loyalty and sympathy you represented, and in that moment she saw the Syndicate’s plan as an opportunity to draw closer to you.’

‘Ridiculous,’ I said darkly. ‘The young woman is a mass of foolish contradictions!’

‘I suspect that she has been very lonely, *mon cher*. She has lost her mother to crime. She has, in a deeper sense, lost her father to crime. Her companions are those of the criminal underground, where loyalty and trust look very different than they do in stable,

law-abiding relationships. She has clung with love and fidelity to her father for a very long time. Perhaps she had never really loved Johnston, but remained with him out of duty, for his own sake. (Ever will a woman believe that she can reform a scoundrel of a man!) The thought of being with a man without ties to crime, a man of the most conscientious and upright, has undoubtedly been for her a great longing. Her own moral acumen in accomplishing this goal has been, shall we say, blunted from her long exposure to crime. Yet she had pitied you, that you would lose someone to whom you had been so faithful; that you would be a cause of his shame.'

I shook my head. I knew Poirot was seeking to arouse my own pity, but after what the London Syndicate had put us through, sympathy was too much to ask of me.

'So you suppose that all this means that we can trust her?'

'It is perilous to place one's life in the hands of a person with a blunted conscience. I cannot guarantee that these initial feelings she had for you have remained. Our young lady was careful to give nothing away this evening. But nonetheless, I believe that this is the chance we must take.'

He arose and moved to the door.

'Tomorrow, my friend,' he said, 'means success or failure. It is you and I against the London Syndicate. Pray God that we find what we are seeking.'

I finally drifted off to sleep that night, trying not to think about the fact that I could not even find a pair of tweezers in a locked bathroom...

Chapter 10

Our Arrival

The morrow came, bright and cold and forbidding. I awoke late in the morning. Landsdow was out as usual.

During the course of the afternoon I repeatedly begged Poirot to disregard the plan proposed by Rose Whitcombe and to relay everything to the police at once, but he refused.

‘I have given my word, Hastings,’ he said, straightening his tie meticulously in the hall mirror. ‘And the word of Hercule Poirot is a sacred trust. The young lady only informed us of the location of headquarters because of that promise. To tell the police everything now would not be *le sport*, do you not agree?’

‘But we have nothing to go on,’ I argued. ‘No hint as to what we’re getting into— no facts to consider!’

‘*Ma foi*, Hastings, you surprise me! There are plenty of useful facts that you would do well to consider.’

‘Such as?’

‘The *fact* that criminals are notoriously predictable in method. The *fact* of your dislike of Sgt Landsdow. The *fact* that Johnston wishes to destroy us and sent us a bullet to say so. The *fact* that Matthew Carrington is an expert jewellery craftsman. The *fact* that we are lucky to have Harold Whitcombe safely in prison instead of on our track. The *fact* that French criminals have suddenly decided to come to London at this time. And, the *fact* that my tweezers were missing from my upstairs bathroom.’

I blinked.

‘Poirot, I know that you like to be maddening, but is this the time?’

‘*Reflection* is key, my friend— the exercising of the little grey cells. But over these past few days, reflection has been very dark, very difficult.’ He sighed and stroked his moustache pensively. His face was grave.

‘It has been my part to consider the psychology of our enemies— to decide which courses of action they are likely to take. In order to do so, one delves into the past. Our *rencontres* with the London Syndicate have been of a most distinctive and unique character. They are both defensive and increasingly aggressive. First, an attempted snub and minor robbery. Then greater threats and assault. More extreme measures again in Bexhill, and attempted retribution for the failure of that plan. Finally, along comes Gregory Johnston.

‘He is the chief danger, *mon cher*. But we know something of him, his thoughts and his methods. He is cruel, and patient. He can wait as long as necessary to accomplish his purposes. His goal is what the Syndicate has been slowly advancing toward all along— the destruction of Hercule Poirot.’

On this (somewhat overly) dramatic note, my friend reached out his hand to trace the edge of a leaf of a potted cyclamen that was perched on the shelf before the mirror, his brow knitted in thought.

‘And he came close,’ he murmured. ‘So very close to success. The ultimate question is: how does one destroy Hercule Poirot?’

‘A prodigious undertaking,’ I said solemnly.

But my jocular manner was lost on my friend. He replied: ‘*Mais oui*. How would you undertake such a project, *mon ami*?’

‘Too ambitious a goal for me, old son,’ I demurred. ‘How does a chap go about bringing down any opponent? Remove natural advantages and exploit natural disadvantages, I suppose.’

Poirot nodded. He appeared to be lost in his own thoughts.

At this juncture, Landsdow entered the hall, holding a bundle of mail.

‘Plenty for you today, monsieur,’ he said, handing some envelopes to Poirot.

‘Ah.’ My friend opened the top envelope carefully and skimmed the enclosure. ‘*Bon*. It is a missive from Dr Lansing-Hayes, and accords with my little idea.’

Next, he opened a larger manila envelope. He studied the contents with care, nodded again, and replaced the papers.

‘Hastings, I need to speak with you and Sgt Landsdow at once. It is most important that we are as prepared as we can be for this evening.’

He drew us down the hall and into the dining room, where we sat together at one end of the long table. Poirot laid his mail on the table in front of him, folded his hands, and looked at us solemnly.

‘*Eh bien, mes amis*,’ began Poirot, as though commencing a lecture, ‘tonight we face a dark danger. It grieves me to admit that I— I, Hercule Poirot!— cannot guarantee success. It is a state of affairs nearly without precedent—’

(Here I murmured to myself as a mental check to Poirot’s egotism, but did not dare actually interrupt him.)

‘—and for this reason, I am loath to expose you to these risks.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Landsdow heartily.

‘Damn the risk,’ I added, not to be outdone. ‘We need to have done with these scoundrels. If it will bring them down, I’m in.’

‘We are entering an area,’ continued Poirot as he absently smoothed an unsightly wrinkle in the tablecloth, ‘that is currently being watched most carefully by armed agents. As you know, the London Syndicate has eschewed murder in the past, but that may be changing— we do not yet know the full extent of Johnston’s present influence. And there is a great deal of damage that may be done to a person without actually killing them. Therefore I must insist that if either of you unexpectedly encounter a threatening gunman, you must not run the risk of attacking. You must comply immediately.’

I protested. ‘But—’

Poirot swung round on me. 'But yes— especially you, Hastings! We shall use all possible stealth to avoid revealing our identities, *bien sûr*. But if there is a gun in your face, no, you shall not resist. Not unless it is Gregory Johnston himself! The greatest threat of being shot is directed to you. I have sworn, above all, that you shall *not* be shot, and that is that. If you cannot acquiesce to this, you are not coming with me.'

'All right, all right,' I grumbled. 'But I still think—'

'At this point,' interrupted Poirot, 'perhaps you should leave the thinking to me. I have cause to be concerned about gunmen.'

He removed a sheet of paper from one of his envelopes. It contained a rough sketch that resembled a blueprint.

'In light of the new information we received last night,' he said, drawing his finger across the paper, 'I took it upon myself to procure a little more information about our destination tonight—the headquarters of the London Syndicate. This is the building which now houses the West Lodge Café. The establishment has only been in operation since last autumn, and our key was procured in the spring, so it is safe to assume that this location has been their hideout since at least that time. The building sat derelict for some little while before the new business obtained it for their premises. Mademoiselle tells us that the café owners have little or no knowledge of the doings of the Syndicate, so it is unlikely to be profitable to look for assistance in those quarters. And time is against us. We must meet Mlle Whitcombe at the corner of Paston and Vine, six blocks northeast of Regent Street, and journey from there on foot to arrive at our destination.'

'At ten o'clock,' murmured Landsdow. 'The area will be sufficiently deserted by then?'

'It will be well after dark,' I said, leaning forward to peer at the sketch. 'And we will need the time to search, if it's true that the documents will be difficult to find.'

The drawing before us, made out in a slightly wobbly pencil, portrayed the long walkway from the road to the building we sought to enter. The café faced the street, but the back rooms appeared to be accessible by a side door in the far right corner.

Poirot extracted a pen of his own and drew a neat 'X' to mark the spot as our point of entry.

'We shall not, I think, need to scour the entire building,' my friend said optimistically, gesturing with his pen, 'nor take it apart "brick by brick" as mademoiselle indicated. That which we seek is bound to be in one of these three rooms— those used for headquarters.'

'What is that?' I queried, pointing to a complicated tangle of lines about the perimeter of the building.

Landsdow broke in: 'I reckon it's to indicate the foliage. You remember, there are some pretty big pines going all round the grounds here. It provides a bit of cover, once we get down the walkway. And over here—' he pointed to the paper's edges— 'are some jolly tall buildings. Anyone watching out from up there will have a clear view of our entry.'

'But of course, *mon ami*. Hastings and I will not be attempting to conceal our entry. Mademoiselle is leading us straight in, within clear view of those on guard, and will identify herself and give the signal to let her and her companions through. You see my concern about the gunmen. She does not know their exact location. They have cover in which to hide on the grounds, as well as from above. If they are especially suspicious, we could be fired down upon from there. I impress once more upon you not to do anything foolish if taken by surprise by an armed agent.'

'M. Poirot,' said Landsdow doubtfully, 'are you quite sure you'd rather I remain outside rather than coming in with the rest of you?'

'*Oui*. It is enough that Mlle Rose brings two guests with her into the headquarters. Three, I fear, would rouse too much suspicion. You are to remain outside of the area that she indicates and keep an eye on things. It will be dangerous for all three of us here, and yet, I do have hope of success. As I have told to Hastings— crime leaves traces. To know what your enemy will do, to comprehend the psychology of the criminal, is a great advantage. Me, I have been giving a great deal of thought to this Gregory Johnston, alias John St Vincent.'

Our evening meal was a quiet one. We ate lightly, and I accepted Creeney's offer of a glass of port afterwards. My nerves were on edge. Landsdow, in his turn, received a very small serving of brandy, but although the assiduous Creeney offered several varieties of sweet liqueurs, Poirot refused any kind of digestif.

'I am as a cat upon the jumps,' he murmured as we returned to our rooms upstairs to get changed. 'But I must maintain my full concentration. These files for which we seek represent misery and bondage for a good many people. We must not fail.'

When the three of us came down the stairs, through the study, and into the hall again, we surveyed each other. Landsdow's apparel was dark and somewhat shabby, and he wore black hobnail boots. Poirot and I both wore dark suits, but the little detective was, I noted with a mixture of amusement and exasperation, otherwise dressed exactly the same as ever. His wine-coloured waistcoat, natty bow tie, and shining patent leather shoes looked highly impractical for our mission.

'And you're not going to wear that, are you?' I said, pointing to the elegant silver ring that was our collateral from Rose Whitcombe. 'You certainly seem to have taken a fancy to it—'

Poirot ignored my negative aspect and beamed, admiring his left hand. '*C'est très jolie, n'est-ce pas?*' he said happily. 'Regard, Hastings, how well it matches my cufflinks. And this waistcoat, I think—'

I interrupted this flow of speech to hand him his overcoat. No one knew better than I the extent of Poirot's eloquence when started upon the subject of his wardrobe.

'You don't want to borrow a pair of galoshes, monsieur?' asked Landsdow as we donned coats, hats, and mufflers. 'Those shoes of yours are bound to get rather wet and muddy, and they're pretty distinctive too.'

'They can be seen a mile away,' I muttered.

Poirot remained firm, however, and Creeney held the door for us as we departed from the house and bundled into Landsdow's car.

The drive seemed to go on and on for hours. The darkness grew steadily blacker, and we toiled on through the melted snow on

our fateful journey to London, my revolver reposing safely in my pocket.

We arrived at our appointed street corner without incident at a quarter to ten. Rose Whitcombe was there, her dark, slender figure emerging from the shadows to meet us. Without a word, the four of us set off down the street in the direction of the café, the white vapour of our breath floating away into the chilled night.

Several minutes later, the girl stopped and murmured something to Poirot. He nodded and turned to Landsdown, lowing his muffler slightly.

‘This is where you must remain behind,’ he said in a low voice. ‘God guard you, my friend.’

The rest of us continued on, our pace quickening slightly. We rounded the corner and found ourselves on the street we wanted. I could see the beginning of the path leading to the café straight ahead of us, illuminated in a bright circle of lamplight. Instinctively, I huddled down further into my muffler and tipped my hat down slightly.

Steadily, we approached that bright island of light. In a minute, we were standing in it together.

‘All right,’ she whispered. ‘It’s now or never. Come with me— look straight ahead— I will give the signal to let us pass.’

She threw back her hood and raised her arm in a kind of salute. Then, in the dark stillness of the night, Rose Whitcombe walked straight towards the West Lodge Café. Poirot and I walked side by side behind her.

I confess that I held my breath the entire way. The dark pine trees on either side of us seemed to close in, and I knew that somewhere among them, the vigilant eyes of guards were following us. If only they did not suspect...

At last, we found ourselves at the side door at the far end of the building, and I exhaled quietly. Poirot had presumably given the girl the key as we walked along the street, for she now stood

with her back to us, manipulating the door. Her movements were entirely silent, and in a moment the door was open.

As we entered, Rose switched on the light, revealing a drab, colourless room with a sparse interior. A single table stood in the centre. Several chairs had been pushed back against the wall, and boxes were stacked here and there. It was not the most inviting of spaces, but I supposed that it was in the best interests of the London Syndicate for their headquarters to resemble nothing more than a storage area.

We removed our coats, gloves, hats, and mufflers, and deposited them in the small alcove by the door. Poirot's eyes swept the surroundings.

'Yes,' he said slowly, 'we begin. The door to the left, mademoiselle— I believe it leads to the kitchens?'

'Oh, yes,' said Rose, stepping forward. 'You can go straight through to the café from there.'

'Good. We will not trouble about that for now, but confine ourselves to these back rooms.' Striding forward, he reached out and touched a wall. 'It is a challenge,' he admitted, 'but with method, we shall see what can be done.'

For the next ten minutes, we acquainted ourselves with the rooms— dismal rooms, all of them. There were only one or two windows in the entire vicinity, and they were fitted with heavy bars. Poirot began his searching with the first room we had entered, continuing to run his fingers lightly over the walls and frowning. Uncertainly, I poked through the contents of several boxes. It seemed unlikely that the Syndicate's precious files would be there, but I was determined that we must make a thorough job of searching the entire place.

It was only about twenty past ten, and Poirot and I were examining the area around the alcove together, when we heard the noise we were dreading— the sound of footsteps outside the side door.

'Quickly,' hissed Rose. She grabbed my arm and almost pushed me into the next room. Poirot hurried after us. This room, which was the only one of the three crammed full of supplies and utilities for the café, contained a large wardrobe in the corner. We

rushed over to it and swung the doors open to reveal an empty recess. Poirot and I slipped inside and Rose shut us in.

I am not claustrophobic as a rule, but I find it difficult to convey the terror of that moment. All was inky blackness, the close smell of musty wood, the distant muffled voices of Miss Whitcombe and the unknown newcomer, the hammering of my own heart, and the deep breaths of Poirot beside me. Supposing one of the guards had come into the building and wished to have a better look at the visitors who had entered?

It would be well, I thought, to be prepared with my revolver. If we were discovered by some unlucky accident, we needed to have the upper hand. Gingerly (for there was hardly room to move) I felt my coat pockets. Blast, where had I stowed the thing? It was there somewhere...

I did not hear the footsteps returning. But suddenly, the doors of the wardrobe flew wide open!

A man stared back at us. He was tall and burly, with an aggressive chin, wide grey eyes, and russet hair. In a flash I took in his expensive navy suit, the surprisingly calm demeanour... and something else. The man was definitely familiar.

It took only a moment for the truth to register. I had seen him once before—hunched over, disguised. I had torn off his coat and discovered my friend unconscious there. The man standing before me was one I had kicked, cursed, and handed over to the police and prison.

This was Robert Griffon.

My shock was terrific, but it was not that shock alone that left me frozen where I stood. It was the sight of Rose Whitcombe standing beside Griffon, pointing my own revolver at me.

Chapter 11

The Execution

Before I could regain my wits, I felt Poirot's hand on my arm in a repressive gesture. 'Do not move,' he whispered.

Indeed, in another moment I would have flung myself forward in wild outrage, forgetting all of Poirot's previous warnings. But his words seemed to have a stabilising effect. Instinctively I did exactly according to his instructions.

Griffon raised his eyebrows. I heard a faint, distressed noise coming from Poirot. God only knows the thoughts and the memories that were running through his mind in that moment.

'Isn't this interesting,' the man said. His voice was unusually deep and sonorous. 'I thought I might meet you here. We have some unfinished business, we three. I wouldn't try anything if I were you— Miss Rose here is an excellent shot.'

In dumb incredulity, I looked at the girl holding my gun. Griffon gave a hoarse chuckle.

'I heard about that incident with the switched parcels. Really amazing that you can have forgotten so soon that the lady can employ an excellent sleight-of-hand. It's one of your finest talents, isn't it, Miss Rose?'

The girl's eyes were locked on Poirot's. She nodded slowly.

'It's not very comfortable, standing in a wardrobe,' she said. 'Why don't you just step out now. The next room is far more amenable.'

Thus, we were ushered back into the larger room with the small table in the centre.

‘Have a seat,’ said Griffon quietly. ‘And don’t bother shouting. The walls here are very solid, and the little noise that gets through is drowned out in the shrubbery outside. A good location is everything. Also, shouting annoys me. Do yourselves a favour, and don’t annoy me.’

With dignity, Poirot seated himself at the table. I followed his example, my eyes straying constantly back to Rose Whitcombe and the revolver. She had returned to the door we had entered, drew back the little curtain, and glanced outside, as though she anticipated something. Then she turned and rejoined Griffon, who stood facing Poirot and myself. All of my hopes were focussed on the assumption that Poirot had contingency plans for precisely this sort of disaster. Had he not spoken of reflecting on the moves of the enemy? Surely, surely he was already one or two steps ahead. Perhaps... perhaps Rose Whitcombe herself was still our ally, and was play-acting for Poirot’s purposes. Clinging in desperation to this idea, I tried to suppress the growing fear inside.

Griffon’s manner was placid and unnerving. He seemed to loom over us.

‘An interesting tactic,’ he said, ‘to walk right into our headquarters and take a look around. It surprises me a good deal that you thought you could get away with it. Pride comes before a fall, Mr Poirot. Didn’t think you made those sorts of errors of judgment.’

Poirot answered feebly: ‘It is not a common occurrence, no.’

‘Mr Johnston worked out everything— and sent Miss Rose to find you. He knew you would fall for the bait, the offer to search here for secret documents. And we wanted the two of you here, seeing as this is the most convenient location for tonight’s events.’

He surveyed Poirot, who was looking ashen and more than a little sick. Not at all, I thought, like someone who had a contingency plan.

‘Well, you know about the business,’ continued Griffon. ‘It may seem a bit hard on you, but I’ve got my way to make like everyone else. The matter stands like this.’ He looked at his watch.

‘I’m heading out in a bit to meet some colleagues of mine, just come over from France.’

Another indeterminate noise came from beside me.

‘We should be back here at about half past two. Mr Poirot will go with them... and there will be no mistakes this time. They will make quite sure of that.’

I cast a glance at my friend. A fine dew was breaking out on his forehead.

‘And what about me?’ I found myself saying.

Griffon considered me. ‘That remains to be seen, doesn’t it.’

Rose Whitcombe was flushed but steady. This was certainly not the blush of admiration or infatuation. Was it embarrassment? Nerves? Or, more likely, the unpleasant thoughts of what was inevitably in store?

‘Miss Rose,’ asked Griffon, ‘why don’t you get Mr Poirot and his friend a drink. Looks like they could use it.’

And to my continued shock, Rose Whitcombe handed my revolver to Robert Griffon and disappeared into the kitchen area.

Keeping the gun aimed in the general direction of Poirot and me, Griffon looked carefully after her. I could hear the sound of pouring liquid.

‘Poirot,’ I said in a hoarse whisper, ‘what do we do?’

My friend was staring at the gun that Griffon held. His answer came quietly but clearly.

‘Do nothing rash, *mon ami*,’ he said. ‘As I told you before.’

In a bid for greater clarity, my mind raced over Poirot’s prior instructions. Don’t resist a threatening gunman. Obey my friend’s orders at once without question. Display no fits of temper to antagonise Rose Whitcombe. Well, it seemed a bit late for that last one...

I could just make out the faintest of plopping sounds from the next room. The girl was out of sight from the place where Poirot and I sat at the table, but Griffon obviously had a clear vantage point of all three of us from where he stood. He was still watching

Rose as she emerged from the other room, bearing two identical glasses of a clear fluid.

‘Do you really think,’ I said with a mirthless laugh as she approached us, ‘that I would drink anything you would give me? You could have put anything in that. Set it in front of me and I’ll sweep it right off the table again.’

Poirot quickly said, ‘No, my friend, you shall not!’ at exactly the same moment that Griffon cocked the gun and pointed it directly between my eyes.

‘I don’t like it,’ said the big man quietly, ‘when my hospitality is not appreciated.’

A deep breath came from the girl standing beside me with the glasses. Poirot’s hands flew up in an eloquent gesture. He became very foreign.

‘You may place them down, mademoiselle,’ he said. ‘*Tout va bien*. My friend, he is much excited. It is understandable, yes? There shall be no refusal of hospitality or disturbing of the drinks.’

The glasses were set on the table before us. Rose Whitcombe backed away until she was once again beside Griffon.

‘Understand, Hastings,’ continued Poirot assuredly, as he leaned toward me, ‘that there is no poison in our glasses. You need not fear it. That is not their way.’

In spite of his confident tone, he looked pale and upset. His eyes suddenly became fixed on the window in the door across from us.

‘Indeed,’ he cried as he pointed, ‘it is the arrival of Gregory Johnston that is the real threat.’

So dramatic was the delivery of this remark that Griffon and Miss Whitcombe instantly wheeled round to the window. The girl gave a little shriek as she strained to see into the darkness. Even I half-rose from my chair and endeavoured to look.

‘Ah, *mais non, mais non*,’ said Poirot hurriedly, ‘I did not mean that this gentleman was here.’ The two Syndicate agents and I (all of us in rather an ill-temper) turned to see my friend leaning back in his chair, shaking his head. He indicated that I sit down again and I did so, my heart in my throat. He was taking his foreign exaggeration pose a little too far for my liking.

‘A thousand apologies— I allow the emotion to get the better of me. I merely meant to indicate, my friend, that your drink is not what you should fear. There is nothing in it. The Syndicate, they would not dare to poison us at this juncture.’

Robert Griffon came closer and raised the gun again. ‘So drink.’

Poirot nodded to me. ‘Do not be afraid, Hastings.’

He lifted his own glass and took a long draught. With a sigh, I followed suit. Was there a slightly bitter taste to the tonic water? Perhaps— I could not be sure. At this stage it may have been my imagination only. If Poirot said that there was nothing to fear, the best thing to do, I thought, was to take him at his word. Griffon may have offered us drinks merely to see if he could unnerve us further. Or perhaps he did have curious ideas about offering hospitality to his adversaries. We finished the water and the girl removed our glasses to the kitchen once more.

‘That wasn’t difficult, was it?’ he said grimly as he returned the gun to the girl. ‘I’ve not much more to say to you now. But I’d be obliged if you’d come with me and wait somewhere out of the way.’

We stood, and Griffon quickly passed his hands over us to make sure that we had no weapons.

‘And if you’d take my advice,’ he added when he had finished, ‘you’d use the time to say your goodbyes. After tonight, you won’t be seeing each other again.’

Poirot and I were escorted into the third room, and the door closed behind us with an abrupt bang and the click of a bolt. We had previously made a perfunctory examination of the room when we had first arrived, and now I looked about me with a good deal more urgency. It was the largest of the three back rooms, and unusually empty. A few sparse shelves to our left held a small supply of table linens and dish cloths. There was a single window directly across from the door, and it was, of course, heavily barred. On either side of the window, a pair of dark, heavy pipes ran from

floor to ceiling. The only furniture was a rickety chair reposing in the corner not far from the window. One glance around told me that escape was likely to be impossible.

I was in a thorough blue funk at this point, but Poirot appeared to have calmed down and pulled himself together somewhat—an attitude inspired, perhaps, by no longer being in the direct vicinity of Robert Griffon.

‘It is not pretty, this,’ said my friend in a quiet voice.

‘Do you mean the room, or the situation in which we find ourselves?’ I asked drily.

‘Both. You noticed, perhaps, that the room with the wardrobe was overcrowded with supplies, while this one lies almost vacant? It seems suggestive now.’

‘How so?’

He shook his head, crestfallen. ‘It is likely that this room was cleared out, and its contents removed to the wardrobe room, in preparation for our arrival. There is precious little here that we can utilise to free ourselves.’

I realised that he was right, and soundly cursed the wretched girl in the other room. All the same, I did not see how Poirot could possibly have guessed such a thing in advance based on the state of the rooms themselves, and it seemed unreasonable for him to place undue censure upon himself.

‘We could attempt to break the window,’ I hazarded, ‘and call for help. Landsdow might be near enough to hear.’

‘It is not likely that we should succeed in breaking it. The bars have been fastened on the inside of the room, and it would be difficult to create sufficient impact upon the glass.’

‘How about wrenching apart some of that pipe?’ I strode quickly over to the window to examine one of the metal pillars. I gripped it with both hands and attempted to manipulate it, to no avail. ‘Good Lord, this is solid. I’m afraid it’s not going anywhere.’

‘You forget,’ Poirot said, ‘that even if we could do such things, there are armed guards just outside that window. They can, perhaps, see us even now.’

‘Well, what do you suggest?’ I demanded impatiently. ‘Giving up?’

Poirot gazed about him. 'There is one thing that we can do... one thing that might yet prove fatal to the London Syndicate. We can attempt to do exactly what we came here to do.'

'You mean, find the files? Perhaps they're not really even hidden here now after all. And if so, would they lock us in the same room in which they are hidden? I don't see how we can get them out of the headquarters even if we were to find them.'

'I suggest the location of the files in this room as a possibility only. For reasons of my own, I believe they *are* here at headquarters. And I do not speak of removing the files from the room. At this stage, our enemies are expecting us to be preoccupied with thoughts of escape. They do not imagine that we continue to hunt for their files. And if we found them, *eh bien*, what of it? But if we do find them, *mon ami*— we can destroy them. It is still within our power to do that.'

My heart sank. It would not save our necks, but my friend had a point. However unlikely our chances, that had been what we had come here to do.

'I take it,' I said, as Poirot began once again to run his hands over dull, uneven walls, 'that you are still searching for a hidden compartment of some kind in the structure of the building itself.'

'But certainly. When the young lady told us previously that the hiding place is reputed to be impossible to find without dismantling the building brick by brick— of that I am convinced. It is in accordance with the methods of individuals like Johnston as well.'

For the next ten minutes, we analysed, prodded, and shoved segments of wall. It was a fruitless and discouraging task, and no success of any kind rewarded us.

Suddenly, Poirot made an abrupt halt in his searching. He extracted his large pocket watch, glanced at it, and to my surprise, removed it from his waistcoat, placing it in his jacket pocket. He proceeded to do the same with various other accoutrements on his

person, including his pince-nez and the silver ring given him by Miss Whitcombe. I stared.

‘What the devil are you doing?’ I finally asked.

But asking Poirot to explain before he is ready is always useless. He merely shook his head, removed his jacket entirely, and laid it over the little chair near the window. Assuming he was simply feeling warm with anxiety, I resumed my scrutiny of the unobliging walls.

Several moments later I heard a stifled yawn. I turned to find Poirot retrieving some linens from the shelf. He proceeded to examine and compare them minutely. At last he seemed satisfied, and brought down two acceptable specimens. To my mystification, he carefully spread one out on the floor near the chair, flicking every bit of dust (real or imagined) from its surface. The other piece of linen he folded up into a neat square bundle.

‘Do you have some sort of escape plan in mind?’ I said, for his actions seemed quite unaccountable.

‘No, my friend, I am afraid not. I am preparing to lay myself down.’

‘What? On the floor? *Why?*’

Poirot shrugged. ‘I have the great tiredness, *mon cher*. There is nowhere else to lay down.’

‘Have you utterly lost your senses? This is not the time for taking a nap. We must be on alert!’

My words fell on deaf ears. The little man placed the square folds of linen neatly at one end of the flat sheet and dropped down onto this unconventional arrangement with another little yawn. He looked up at me and I saw the glassiness in his eyes.

‘It is an odd place for a nap, it is true, Hastings. However, at this point, I do not really have much of a choice.’

A bolt of fear struck me. ‘What do you mean?’ I cried. ‘You haven’t been—’

I remembered the drinks given to us by Rose Whitcombe. The way that Griffon pressed us to drink. Poirot’s moment of distraction that caused the rest of us to look the other way. His insistence that I drink, that there was nothing for me to be afraid of...

I exploded. ‘Poirot, you— you—!’

He laid down his head and stretched himself out, closing his eyes.

‘What else could I do, Hastings? They had a gun pointed at us.’

‘If you were going to take my drink, you could have tossed it away!’

‘No, I could not have, *mon ami*, not discreetly.’

‘Was it poison she had given me after all? Are you just laying down to—?’

Poirot opened his eyes again. ‘No, it would not be poison. Johnston did not wish for you to be killed in that fashion. This drug is undoubtedly to cause sleep, unconsciousness, immobilisation. You may recall that it was Johnston’s stated desire to shoot you with your own gun as you slept. If you had been the one to ingest the drug, you would not have stood a chance when he came.’

‘My God, Poirot, my present consciousness isn’t likely to stop him! All you’ve done is made it easier for Griffon...’

It was not to be borne. I was furious with my friend, a sort of strangled, confused, heart-wrung fury.

‘*Courage*, my friend,’ came his quiet voice. ‘This was the only thing to be done. And perhaps you will do one thing for me.’

‘What is it?’ I pressed earnestly, hoping for some final word of brilliance that would provide a solution to our desperate situation.

He closed his eyes. ‘If you do see Johnston, ask him... ask him if he knows why we have come.’

‘But— but he knows why we have come, of course. He’s the one who worked out the whole plan. Griffon told us that.’

‘All the same... ask him.’

‘Poirot, I don’t understand. Not any of it. How did you know they only meant to drug me? Why wouldn’t they drug the both of us?’

His moustaches twitched in a sad little smile. ‘Still you do not understand? Ah, *mon pauvre* Hastings.’

I stared at Poirot in complete bafflement. His breathing slowed and he remained very still. It was a nightmare— a senseless

nightmare in which the great man had completely lost his wits, and left me to face our enemies alone after making what was surely a useless sacrifice.

For several moments I stood looking down at him, too stupefied to move. But subsequently I found myself shaking my friend and shouting his name in a complete panic, so that the door soon came flying open again to admit Griffon and Miss Whitcombe. The latter still held my revolver. They stared down at the two of us.

‘What’s going on?’ Griffon thundered. In a flash, he gestured to the girl to direct the gun at Poirot.

‘Back against the wall,’ he ordered to me, ‘and do not move, unless you want her to use this’— he pointed at the figure on the floor— ‘on your little friend here.’

Unwillingly, I complied— what else could I do?

‘Bracelets,’ Griffon barked to the girl.

At first I did not comprehend. Then, with her free hand, Rose reached into the pocket of her jumper and retrieved something, which flashed brightly as she tossed it to her associate. In another moment, my back was against a length of solid pipe and my hands were fixed behind me.

Griffon then knelt down and grabbed Poirot’s arm, lifting and dropping it. He felt the pulse on the wrist. He applied pressure to the chest. He raised the eyelids, then looked at his accomplice in astonishment. ‘He’s unconscious,’ he exclaimed. ‘Damn it all, the devil switched glasses! The old distraction ruse—’

Rose emitted a gasp of horror. Her eyes met mine, and I gave her a black look.

Griffon appeared more baffled than angry. ‘The utter fool,’ he said. ‘He’ll be out for at least three hours, and when he wakes up—’ He looked at me. ‘He’ll wish he hadn’t.’

It was a bad moment. My fighting instinct collapsed completely, and I stood sunk in black despair. Poirot was not shamming— Griffon would make no mistake of that kind. He had really allowed himself to be drugged by the enemy, to leave me in this horrible mess without the slightest idea what to do. His faith in me had been badly misplaced. Long before he regained consciousness, Johnston would arrive. And I would surely be dead.

The voice of Rose Whitcombe wafted through my whirling consciousness, but I only just made out the words. 'Gregory won't be pleased,' she said uncertainly. 'I've none of the drug left now—my last three tablets were in that glass. He'll think—he'll think—'

'Don't you worry about that,' said Griffon. 'The important thing is that they're both here and not able to cause any trouble. And you did everything all right. I saw you add the tablets to the glass and give it to that—' (Here he delivered some unrepeatable language as he indicated me.) 'We weren't to know that the other would do such a fool thing as switch glasses on us. He must have thought we meant to poison the other after all, and tried to take the fall. I'm off to telephone Mr Johnston before I leave and fill him in.'

The girl nodded. Stepping over Poirot—to my intensifying anger—she approached the window and gazed into the darkness, touching the bars gently. She was standing just a few feet away from me.

'He means to be here in about an hour,' she said. 'I'm waiting until he comes.'

'Not I,' said Griffon. 'Those French chaps have been terribly strung up since they came—wouldn't set foot in London until everything was a definite go. I'm going to collect them. I reckon you'll be gone by half past two, though.'

'Yes,' she said, 'I'll be gone.'

Without a glance at me, the two agents left the room together.

I hadn't thought there was anyone on earth I could hate more than Robert Griffon. Not Ramsey, perhaps not even Johnston. But now there was.

Rose Whitcombe.

A melancholy hour passed. The girl did not show her face again during that time, but the occasional muffled sounds from the other side of the door bore testimony to her presence. I tried to tune it out. Poirot, of course, still lay senseless on the floor, his face turned a little away from me. I thought, despondently, of his hopes

for success in this mission. We knew the danger, of course, but never could I have imagined events playing out in this fashion. I tried to cast my mind back to happier times, but the memories only made me sicker at heart. Nothing could save either of us now. How would Poirot react when he learned of my death, I wondered. *I have sworn, above all, that you shall not be shot*, he had said...

These were the thoughts upon which I dwelt when the door quietly opened once more. It was Rose Whitcombe, revolver in hand. She avoided my eyes as she entered the room. Behind her, coming toward me, was a man. His figure was horribly familiar: his drab brown hair and eyes, his exceptionally ordinary height and build, his slow and easy gait. But his manner was different than it had been as a porter in Whitehaven Mansions. There was a new glint of malice in his eyes, and I saw in his very ordinariness a man who would be easily overlooked, to the danger of anyone in his path.

‘Ah,’ said Gregory Johnston. ‘The great Hercule Poirot.’

He stood over Poirot’s tiny, motionless body and smirked.

Rose Whitcombe said anxiously: ‘He’s been out for about an hour so far. I’m sorry, Gregory, I tried—’

Johnston waved a magnanimous hand.

‘Griffon told me all about it, darling. It doesn’t matter now. I would have preferred for the other to be asleep, but maybe it’s better this way. All the little monsieur has really accomplished is to extend his friend’s life for a couple more hours. And I can wait those couple of hours.’

The comment about Johnston’s intention to wait was not clear to me. I looked down in perplexity at my friend, lying peacefully on his sheet on the floor. Had this been the true reason Poirot had switched our glasses? Did he know that by emptying my drugged glass, he was somehow buying me two more precious hours of life? I closed my eyes bitterly. It had not been worth it. If Poirot had remained conscious, I was convinced he would have managed a means to free himself. Now, I would die all the same, and Griffon and his French acquaintances would surely have no difficulties removing Poirot from the premises.

Rose Whitcombe looked at her watch as she pocketed my revolver again.

‘It’s just before midnight,’ she said. ‘Nearly time for me to take the guards to the Chapel Street garage for the next *coup*. Will they all be waiting on the walkway for me?’ Leaning a little on the small chair near Poirot, she gave one more glance through the barred window.

‘All five of them should be gathered at the end of the walkway already. It’s a deuce being short on manpower— blame monsieur here for that. But we won’t need them here anymore tonight.’

I disliked the satisfaction of the smile that followed these remarks.

The girl came over to Johnston and placed a hand on his arm. ‘I shan’t be more than half an hour,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you then.’

A fresh wave of revulsion toward her swept over me. Perhaps she felt it, for she fled the room at once, closing the door behind her.

Johnston turned back to me and clasped his hands together as he surveyed me.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘And how are we feeling now?’

I just stared at him. Finally I said:

‘There’s no reason that you should have any quarrel with me.’

‘Oh, isn’t there?’ he said sharply, his eyes flashing. ‘I can think of a fair few reasons. So can Griffon, you know. If it weren’t for the fact that your foreign friend is worth his weight in francs, I’d have a bullet for both of you tonight. You’ve been annoyingly meddlesome to the last degree. And then there’s the business with Rose. It’s clear she had a bit of a pash for you at one time— which I rather think you returned.’ I hastened to argue, but he cut me off. ‘Denying it won’t get you anywhere. Anyway, she has proven herself to me tonight. But it’s as well that I put you out of commission— just to be on the safe side.’

The man was mad, mad with animus and jealousy. If only Poirot were able to give me some direction, some word of instruction.

Then I remembered that there was something Poirot wanted me to do, a question that I was to pose to Gregory Johnston. Hesitantly, I asked:

‘Do you... know... why Poirot and I have come here tonight?’

The eyebrows of the other man rose, and he suddenly burst into an incredulous laugh.

‘You’re as good as a panto, Captain Hastings,’ he gasped, slapping his hip. ‘Entertainment value— is that why Poirot kept you around? Because, you’ll forgive me, it certainly wasn’t for your sparkling intellect. Of course I know why you came here tonight, you dear idiot.’

He turned and headed to the area of the room with the linen shelves and placed his hands upon the wall. With one ear close to it, he made a careful series of taps, looking as though he were opening a safe. When this operation was completed, a small section of the wall gave way to reveal a compartment. Johnston retrieved some items, strode back to me, and waved them in my face. They were files, and I could read the labels... A— Aldwich, B— Battersea, B— Belgravia, C— Clapham, C— Croydon, D— Deptford...

‘*This* is why you came here tonight,’ he spat, tossing them aside. ‘And I knew you wouldn’t find them. Only Griffon and I have access. But he really thought he could manage it, didn’t he... your little friend. His pride will be the death of you.’

I was silent.

Johnston went on, staring at the man down at his feet.

‘You wouldn’t understand. You’re too great a fool. But he was clever, I admit. I had plenty of time to study the two of you in my role as a doorman. It surprised me often that a man that clever did keep you around. Finally I had to conclude that, for whatever daft reason, he was actually fond of you. It was valuable information, that. Like any game of chess, one has to study the

moves of one's opponent. I had to get rid of him. But how? How does one destroy Hercule Poirot?

I started, but Johnston didn't notice as he went on.

'You know, I had thought that my idea with the Girl Guide was a terribly good one. If you want to really undo a man like Hercule Poirot, you have to go after his *mind*, to put the horror of the responsibility of murder, of the death of another person, upon him. He's quite a fanatic on the subject. After the encounters we've had together, I've come to think that it is the only way to make a man of his type self-destruct. It nearly worked then. And in fact, when taken out of the realm of fantasy and into reality, I think it will work tonight.'

'My gun...'

'Yes, Rose is bringing it back once she finishes her errand at the garage. I wanted it to be your own gun, just for my own satisfaction, you understand. The original plan was to do the deed while you were unconscious, but that's not really so necessary, is it?'

'I don't understand,' I said slowly, 'why you said that you intend to wait a couple more hours.'

'Before I shoot? Good God, man, must you be spoon-fed everything? Living with you must be frustrating as all hell. I really think I might be doing your friend a favour. Very well then. Merely killing you might arouse some measure of guilt and distress in him, yes. But there is a way of utterly ruining Hercule Poirot. Doing the deed isn't enough, as I explained to Rose. All along, I have been determined to do it before his very eyes.'

I swallowed hard and painfully.

'Now that,' said Johnston with satisfaction, '*that* will destroy him. His own responsibility in the affair will cut like a knife. How could he have been so foolish? How could he have made such grave errors and placed you in such needless danger? Think how he fell to pieces when he thought he had brought about the death of a wretched little Girl Guide. How much more so when his dear friend is blown away in his presence, thanks to his own incompetence? I daresay that having your death at his door was his

principle fear throughout your little adventures. That's the trouble with fondness.'

How horribly right he was.

I managed to speak: 'And that was the meaning of the message you delivered to our flat. That is how you intended to destroy us both, with a single bullet.'

He smiled at me.

'It is a pity for you,' he said, 'that you should arrive at your deductions when it is far too late.'

Had Poirot known the meaning of the note and the bullet? He certainly had thought he did. He had spoken of a criminal's predictability in method. He had known the reasons we were each targeted. He even seemed to realise, at the giving of the drinks, that only I would be drugged, because Johnston wanted him awake to witness my murder. Why, why couldn't he have stopped this man?

My chin fell to my chest and I closed my eyes, no longer able to bear the sight of my tormentor. He seemed to be getting bored with me as well, for I heard his footsteps pacing slowly away, and he spoke as though to the opposite wall.

'You thought you'd gotten Griffon put away for good, didn't you. And now the French are coming this way, just the same. If I know your friend, eluding death at that juncture will be especially disappointing to him. Perhaps, if you like, I might do what I did earlier this month, when a distraught little man mendaciously mentioned to his porter that he was having difficulty sleeping. And the innocent, obliging porter offered him his own supply of veronal. Shall I offer him some more for his journey to Paris?'

Suddenly I heard a small, sharp sound, unexpected and incomprehensibly close at hand: the cock of a gun hammer. My head snapped up and I saw an amazing sight—one I had never seen before.

Hercule Poirot was standing beside me, pale and still, with a revolver in his hand. He was pointing it steadily at Johnston, who had turned in astonishment to face us.

My friend's eyes were now dark and blazing.

'Do not move... *monsieur*,' he said hoarsely, in a voice I hardly recognised. 'I do not miss.'

Johnston said nothing. He merely stared in mute incomprehension. I did likewise, disbelieving my own eyes...

'The plans that you and your friends may have had for Poirot—they have been interrupted. I am not so easy to catch as all that.'

Poirot is renowned for springing the impossible on his unsuspecting victims. Considering the events that had passed in the music studio of Alexei Dimitri, I should not have been surprised that in mere seconds, he was somehow able to disengage the cuffs on my wrists with his free hand. But I ceased to wonder at the unlikelihood of our situation when I felt the gun being pressed into my own hand. We were ourselves again. Immediately I pushed my friend aside and glowered at Johnston.

'I ought to kill you now,' I growled. 'The fate you had planned for us—the things you've done—'

Poirot stirred behind me as if to prevent rash action on my part, but I thrust him aside again. I could hear the deep, measured breaths he was taking.

Johnston finally spoke.

'That revolver is your own,' he whispered. 'And you... you should be unconscious.'

'Yes, *monsieur*,' Poirot replied mildly. 'Also, I was able to spring the handcuffs without difficulty. You know what this means.'

The face of the man opposite us had grown very pale.

'It means,' said Poirot, 'that Rose Whitcombe is not what you thought. Your foolish ambition led you to grave errors. It was a mistake for you not to break Harold Whitcombe out of jail when you had the chance. It was a mistake for you to forget about the key from the Battersea Scandal, the details of which you had, of course, neglected to mention to your fiancée. She saw your handwriting on that label, and she realised the truth. Those two simple facts were all the evidence she needed to know that you had utterly betrayed her father. Never would you have her loyalty again.'

‘And now she is gone, and you are without help or recourse. I expect that the police are congregating even as we speak. No, do not take another step,’ he added sharply. ‘If you do, Hastings will fire. He follows instructions remarkably well. We will wait here until the police arrive.’

Poirot reached for his jacket, still lying on the back of the chair, and put it on again with great complacency. He began removing the objects from the pockets and setting them back into place. Finally, drew out Harold Whitcombe’s ring.

Gregory Johnston stared as Poirot positioned the silver ring carefully, meaningfully, on the smallest finger of his left hand.

Johnston’s own hand moved to his mouth. A strange smell filled the air.

All of the sudden, the man staggered and fell.

Poirot was by his side in an instant. He put his fingers to the fallen man’s neck. Shaking his head, he looked up at me.

‘He is dead. Potassium cyanide.’

Pointing to a glint of silver on Johnston’s right hand, he added:

‘He, too, had a ring crafted by Carrington, which he used tonight. I suspected it would end this way.’

Chapter 12

The Aftermath

Standing bewildered, my mind spinning with these revelations about Rose Whitcombe and the sudden demise of our rival, I was unable to fathom even the first explanation of the events of the evening. Poirot noticed my dazed expression.

‘Come, Hastings,’ he said. ‘Observe here.’

I approached the prostrate figure on the floor and bent down to examine the ring that Poirot indicated. It looked very much like the one Poirot wore now, the ring of Harold Whitcombe. But in the centre there was a tiny cavity, and a silver-backed faceted garnet fell away from the opening on a small hinge.

‘A poison ring,’ I exclaimed. ‘Good Lord, like something out of a novel. You knew?’

Poirot nodded, and raised his own hand to show me the ring he wore.

‘Novels sometimes have a basis in reality, my friend.’ With a carefully-executed bit of manipulation, the amethyst swung aside to reveal an empty space inside.

‘But— but— hang on,’ I stammered.

‘*Un moment,*’ said Poirot, struggling to rise to his feet again. He was gasping a little, and I leapt up to assist him. ‘Let us first remove ourselves from this evil room. Collect the files, if you please, and we will return to the area adjoining the kitchens. I must sit down— I have the *maux de tête* of the most abominable. The police should be here shortly.’

Several of the files still lay strewn on the floor where Johnston had tossed them carelessly aside. Gathering them up and emptying the recess in the wall of the remaining documents, I followed Poirot out the door as though in a dream.

We fell side by side into the chairs in the next room. After a moment or two, I was mindful enough to ask Poirot what in the blazes was going on.

‘The ring, yes,’ he said, rubbing his temples. ‘It is not unheard of for the, how do you say, bosses of crime to carry a dose of a lethal drug in such a manner. As soon as I heard that Matthew Carrington had custom-made these rings for certain agents of the London Syndicate, I suspected their true purpose. I myself used one of those rings tonight, Hastings— though not for the poison.’

‘You worked this out with Miss Whitcombe?’ I sputtered. ‘But how? When?’

‘The “when” should not be difficult to guess. When we settled at the residence of Sgt Landsdow, I figured to myself that there might come a time in our interview with mademoiselle when I would need to plan with her in private. I prepared accordingly. There was a reason that the writing implements I sent you to fetch the other night were in a strange location and difficult to access. Likewise, you could not find my tweezers in the bathroom. Have you ever known me to be so utterly without method? Obviously I wanted to keep you occupied for a good while so that I could work out the details with mademoiselle alone. This is why Creeney was instructed to lock you in the bathroom.’

‘Good *gracious*, Poirot!’ I said indignantly.

Poirot cast a piteous look at me that was clearly meant to convey the most blameless of intentions.

‘It was true, *cher ami*, when I said that sending you upstairs was for your own good. Our enemies could only be fooled if you were not in on the crux of the deception. You have never learned how to dissemble, you comprehend, and this was a matter of life and death— the young lady knew that, also. But I realised that, when Rose Whitcombe arrived to see us, you would not voluntarily leave me alone for any amount of time with her. A perceived snub was an ideal opportunity to send you upstairs. The reason I asked

you to go very quietly was so that, once the door was locked, you would not immediately bang and shout out, for then someone would have to release you. *Parbleu*, we could not all pretend to be deaf!

Fortunately for my friend, I was at this moment so relieved that we were presently alive and safe that any natural desire to fly off the handle at him was abated. Also, my mind was still full of unanswered questions.

‘Forget all that,’ I said. ‘I want to know why you felt so certain that Rose was really on *our side!* Before she met with us that night in the study, I thought that you were genuinely undecided whether she really meant to help us or not.’

‘But I was undecided on that point, Hastings! Of certain other facts, I had no doubt whatsoever. I was sure that Johnston had found her after the failed robbery attempt. I was sure that she had managed to explain away the note she had sent to us, but that Johnston remained possessively jealous and suspicious of you, as his threatening note to us indicated. Therefore, it seemed reasonable that he would find a way to test mademoiselle’s loyalty to himself by using her to entrap us.’

Poirot paused to retrieve a handkerchief from his pocket and dab at his forehead before continuing.

‘As it happened, Johnston suspected that the lady may have known our whereabouts, and could draw us to the headquarters by giving us information and letting us search the premises. The chance would be irresistible to us. She was to insist that we not contact the police before searching—indeed, it is true enough that there would be armed guards around the building, and arousing police attention would be fatal to our mission. His plan was to leave the door of the headquarters unlocked, allow the lady to lead us into the building, and send Robert Griffon in soon afterwards. When we heard him enter, Rose Whitcombe would steal from your pocket the revolver, hide us in a cupboard, and lead Griffon right to us.

‘But— as Johnston’s plan ran— the final proof of mademoiselle’s fidelity to the cause will be her drugging of *you*, my friend, with a strong barbiturate. Johnston would arrive at

headquarters during your unconsciousness, and then... and then, he would do what he had threatened— to shoot you in your sleep with your own revolver. But this alone would not satisfy his cruelty. Last night in the drawing room, mademoiselle confirmed that he was determined above all to make me a witness to the murder.’

I winced at the reminder.

Poirot shook his head. ‘I knew his psychology in a way that you cannot possibly fathom, with your so innocent and unsuspecting nature. Once I saw the note and bullet he left us, I knew what was in his mind. The Syndicate would not shoot me as long as there was a good deal of money to be made with the French. Money is always the first and most important motive. Therefore the bullet was meant for you. And a bullet to you meant destruction to me. Oh yes, Johnston knew it too.’

‘When Rose Whitcombe came to visit us last night,’ I said slowly, trying to work things through, ‘she laid out Johnston’s story. Was she unsure even then what she would finally do?’

‘She had two possible plans in mind— the one proposed by Johnston, and an idea by which she could aid us instead. I believe that the latter plan was foremost in her mind, but she was astute enough to realise that for it to succeed, you needed to remain in the dark about it and to believe her to be an enemy. On her way to Landsdow’s house, she was careful to shake off the man that Johnston had sent to spy on her. For she had reservations about her fiancé, indeed. She knew of his near-fatal attack on the prison guards— that he was slipping away from her father’s principles. Japp had said that it was fortunate for us that Harold Whitcombe was not also freed from prison at the same time as Griffon, and I agreed. Neither of you understood that it was fortunate because Johnston could have released his father-in-law, *but did not*.’

‘So this also raised doubts in Rose’s mind about her fiancé and his commitment to her family.’

‘Indeed, and there was the additional fact that she clearly admired and pitied you, and had in the past shown kindness to me as well. I was sure that if she had any reservations left about aiding us, one more fact would clinch her wholehearted support. And so

I made the critical move upon which all depended. *I showed her the key.*'

'Yes— in fact, it seemed rather foolish to me at the time—to remind her of your part in her father's arrest.'

'But now you see. Even our friend Japp, though not gifted with an intellect to match that of Hercule Poirot, had seen the significance of that key. Just as Johnston had recognised his fiancée's writing on the note she sent to us in the nursing home, so she recognised his scrawl of "Harold Whitcombe" on that key's label. Of course, Johnston had failed to mention that label when he had relayed the account of the Battersea Scandal to the girl! But now— she puts two and two together, and she knows! And she is angry and deeply hurt. She waits for a chance to speak with me alone and lay out her alternate plan. But first, she offers me the ring of her father as "security," the ring containing the necessary drug.'

'But,' I interjected, 'I still don't quite see how the drugging actually happened. Griffon *saw* her put three tablets of the drug into my glass.'

Poirot smiled kindly at me.

'I recall to your memory, Hastings, what Griffon himself mentioned to us— mademoiselle's little deception with you in the park with the switched parcel. What you see in the lady's hand is not necessarily what is delivered! She had agreed previously with Johnston to administer three tablets to you. It was enough to cause unconsciousness for at least three hours. I had, in the little poison ring, a single tablet of the same drug. Of course, my dear friend, I never switched the glasses at all.'

'*What?*'

'Mademoiselle handed us both plain glasses of tonic water. I created a ruse so that all three of you would momentarily look away— thus protecting the lady from any later suspicion on Griffon's part that she had intentionally drugged the wrong person— but also ingesting the tablet from the ring I was wearing. Our enemies would be convinced that the drug had truly been in your glass, therefore confirming a belief in mademoiselle's willingness to do away with you. This was the lynchpin of the entire plan: to convince Griffon and Johnston that Rose Whitcombe was

indeed committed to their objectives and was prepared to fall in with their plans. From that point onward, their belief in her was absolute. Griffon was able to relay to Johnston that the girl was “all right,” and upon receiving that assurance, Johnston would arrive and the guards could (so he thought) be safely sent away.’

‘Well,’ I mused, ‘she could also have put the single tablet in my glass, I suppose, and then you could have switched the glasses after we got them.’

‘But what an idea, my friend!’ Poirot looked horrified. ‘I would not have risked you actually drinking it. Suppose that you, instead of I, had ingested some of the drug, and it had taken effect? And suppose that Johnston decided to arrive earlier than he had planned, before the guards needed to be dismissed? He could have shot you at any time. No, no. And for another reason, I would not have risked truly exchanging glasses. There would have been a very good chance that you or Griffon would have observed such an action. If either eventuality had happened, all would be lost.’

‘For all your concern about my well-being,’ I rejoined, ‘you nearly gave me a heart attack when you laid down on that sheet, you know. And all the rest of it was pure agony!’

‘*Oui*,’ said my friend sympathetically. ‘For myself as well, it was not pleasant. To once more face a man like Robert Griffon with no defence—’ He shuddered violently and passed the handkerchief across his forehead again. ‘And to awake from unconsciousness only to hear Johnston’s malicious words and threats, unable to react. But it had to be done. It was necessary for me to drug myself for the first hour to further the illusion to Griffon. He was a kidnapper *par excellence*, and would not have been fooled by a man merely pretending the unconsciousness. I knew it would be difficult for you, Hastings, but I told you no lies about what was happening to me. I merely allowed you to assume, for a short while, that I had transferred the glasses.’

‘As I said— Johnston hears from Griffon, whom he trusts implicitly, that Rose definitely attempted to drug you. I am “out of commission,” as you say, so there seems to be no doubt. Johnston is satisfied with the girl’s fidelity, and allows her to remove the armed guards— and before she leaves, she repeats her *petite*

déception. Did I not tell you that criminals are predictable in method? She slips your revolver into my jacket pocket, while promising her fiancé that when she returns, she will give it to him to use. She also leaves the key to the handcuffs on the window ledge for me to obtain later. Johnston learns from Griffon that I would be unconscious for some three hours. In actuality, I will recover consciousness after about one hour, and then wait until an opportune moment of weakness on Johnston's part presents itself. I lie still until I know that his back is turned for some moments, and I quietly leap up and grab the nearby revolver and key. As long as I was unconscious, or appeared to be so, you, Hastings, would be safe. Johnston was determined to wait for me to wake before shooting you.'

'And supposing,' I exclaimed, 'that this "moment of weakness" didn't appear? Or supposing he restrained you somehow while you were unconscious?'

'I do take the precautions,' he said matter-of-factly. 'Once Rose Whitcombe led the armed guards away—and into the hands of the police, *au fait*—Sgt Landsdow took up his position outside of our window to keep an eye on things in the event of anything going wrong. He, too, was armed. Had I been restrained, Landsdow would have stopped Johnston easily enough. But I did not think that the man would disturb me at least until Rose Whitcombe returned to aid him—which, of course, she never did.'

I ran my hands through my hair, still feeling we'd had a narrow escape. 'It's almost impossible to believe,' I said, 'that you could have worked all this out with Rose in the short time I was out of the room!'

'Ah, *mon ami*,' Poirot said indulgently, 'the explanations I give to you now are long—it was not so when I spoke with the lady about them. She had her ideas well worked out, and I myself had deduced most of Johnston's intentions and had one or two little ideas of my own. Mere minutes sufficed, and you were away for at least ten. There were one or two fine points of clarification which I asked her to send to me the following day, which she did. The sketch of the building was one of them. The idea that she should draw back the little curtain on that window in the door there so I

could pretend to see Johnston, to make my ruse that much more believable— this, too, she noted down to me as a suggestion. *Épatant!* A very clever girl, and a brave one too.’

At that moment we were interrupted by a thunder of footsteps approaching the door. The face of Chief Inspector Japp appeared in the same small window Poirot had just indicated. A loud pounding reverberated through the room. Poirot and I rose as the door was thrown open without ceremony and several officers burst in.

Japp appeared slightly dishevelled, as though he had been rushed off his feet. His fawn overcoat was undone and flapping, and his tie was askew. He stopped when he saw us.

‘Poirot,’ he snapped, ‘are you going to tell me what in Hades is going on?’

Poirot nodded. ‘It is the headquarters of the London Syndicate in which we stand, my friend.’ He indicated the files on the table. ‘This is the material they have been using for blackmail.’

Sgt Landsdow appeared from behind the officers and came up to us as well, sounding out of breath.

‘You have Johnston here, then?’ he gasped to Poirot. ‘When I saw that you and Hastings had him at bay, I hurried off for the police, just like you told me to. Where is he?’

‘He is dead,’ said Poirot solemnly. ‘He chose to end it himself rather than be apprehended by the police. Cyanide poisoning. Chief Inspector, you will find the body in the room through these doors and to the left. Do not make me return there at present, I pray of you. Hastings and I will wait outside to get some air, and you may join us at your leisure.’

Without another word, Japp took up the files and directed his men to follow him to the room in question.

Poirot and I wrapped up in our coats and mufflers once more and stepped outside. Landsdow joined us. The darkness was now punctuated with dim streams of light from electric torches

where additional policemen were searching among the trees outside the establishment.

Landsdow spoke first, with urgency: ‘And Griffon— what’s become of him?’

So preoccupied had I been with the death of Johnston that it had not quite registered to me that Griffon was still out there, fraternising with dangerous French agents.

‘You haven’t let him escape!’ I cried, turning to Poirot.

He was rubbing his hands together and blowing out wisps of condensed breath from beneath his moustaches. ‘Calm yourself, Hastings, he will not escape. It is not yet one o’clock, and—’

At that moment Japp opened the door and joined us outside. He was clearly more interested in explanations than in scrutiny of the body.

‘What’s this all about, Poirot? When you said last week that you had a plan to meet with this Whitcombe girl, you didn’t happen to mention sneaking into a crime headquarters and tangling with John St Vincent! I got your message this evening to let me know that your lady friend would be bringing a number of armed agents to a certain garage not far from here a little after midnight. Then right after we’d nabbed them, Landsdow here comes running in all out of breath to tell us to get to the West Lodge Café as soon as possible, as you and Hastings were fending off St Vincent himself—or Johnston, I should say. Answers would be helpful, if you don’t mind!’

Poirot and I gave a brief summary of the events of the last twenty-four hours. Japp’s eyebrows climbed steadily upward.

‘You always did like a thing to be difficult! Crikey, why on earth go through such an elaborate charade? This girl— she’s being taken to the station, if you want to know— surely if she wanted to help, she could have done so in some simpler way. Why didn’t you put this into the hands of the police immediately?’

Poirot sighed. ‘For various reasons, but most importantly, I did not want to risk the lives of your men. Mlle Whitcombe did not know how many gunmen were on guard or where they were hiding. I wanted to get the guards well away before summoning police to this café. This plan was the only way we could apprehend Johnston,

Griffon, the guards, and the files all together. To make Johnston certain of her, mademoiselle had to make a pretense of going through with his own plan. When Griffon thought he had abundantly clear evidence that she was against us— that is, when the drug had been administered to create unconsciousness— *only then* would he contact Johnston to call him to headquarters. And only then would mademoiselle be permitted to send the guards away.’

‘I don’t say the lady wasn’t helpful,’ said Japp, ‘but all the same, you put a lot of trust in a known criminal. Especially in taking an unknown drug.’

‘It was not all blind faith, my friend. It was not even all pure psychology, although that is where it began. After our interview with Mlle Whitcombe and the procuring of the ring last night, I took additional precautions. I broke the tablet apart and sent a tiny sample to our chemist friend, Dr Lansing-Hayes, asking him to analyse it immediately. The post I received in the afternoon confirmed that the drug was exactly what she said it was— a powerful and fast-acting barbiturate.’

Japp glanced at the stack of files still in his hands. ‘And how’d you get Johnston to show you where the files were hidden? Saves us a bit of work, I must say.’

‘Ah, that was accomplished by Hastings here.’ Poirot turned to me with a smile. ‘He asked Johnston if he knew why the two of us had come to the headquarters. Johnston could not resist taunting a man he thought would not live to tell anything of the files. A neat little trick. It might not have worked, but this time it did. The criminal is a most conceited animal. He likes to say: “See how clever I have been!”’

It struck me that if criminality depended on conceit, Hercule Poirot would have made an truly excellent criminal.

Japp looked at Poirot appreciatively. ‘I must say, you’re the goods. One can’t argue with results. Still,’ he said, peering closer, ‘you do look a right mess, Moosior.’

‘You are a fine one to speak,’ retorted Poirot, reaching out to straighten Japp’s crooked tie. ‘Permit me— it does not look professional, that. But yes, my friend, I admit that I feel a “right

mess,” as you call it. Lying on the hard ground is not *amusant* at my age. And the drug I had to take, *cent tonnerres*, it kicks like the mule! A *tisane* would be a piece of heaven at this moment.’

‘Looks like you could use something stronger than that,’ replied Japp. ‘You’re pale as a ghost. I might be able to get Dixon to find you a spot of brandy.’

‘No, I thank you. I have had to turn down several excellent liqueurs this evening already because of the reaction the alcohol could have with the barbiturate. I will wait, and rest. Perhaps I might be permitted to sit for a time in one of your cars? The thought of returning to the café does not please me.’

‘Sure thing. I’ve got some things to see to now, if you’ll excuse me.’ The Scotland Yard man moved off.

I looked at Poirot. ‘But, Griffon—’ I began again.

He held up a hand to stop me. ‘As you know, Robert Griffon is scheduled to return to the headquarters with his friends from France at a half past two. I have advised the police to surround the area within a certain diameter of our location, but to remain hidden and to let them pass through until he approaches the café. Have no fear, my friend. But join me as we await developments. I should like to be on the scene.’

Leaving Landsdow with the rest of the police searchers, my friend and I found Japp’s patrol car and climbed inside to wait. It was far more comfortable than the chairs inside had been.

‘Poirot,’ I said, turning to him, ‘there’s something else you haven’t explained. What did my personal dislike of Sgt Landsdow have to do with all of this?’

Poirot effected a broad grin.

‘Do you know why you have disliked Landsdow, *mon ami*?’

‘Well, his whole manner has been off-putting. Constantly saying “By Jove” and hanging onto every word of yours like some sort of toady. Jumping into the action as though it were all a game. He annoyed me more than I can say.’

Poirot looked up innocently and said: 'You dislike Sgt Landsdow because he is so very much like *you*, my friend.'

I gaped. 'Surely not,' I protested. 'I'm not a bit like that!'

'I think, perhaps, that you are somewhat unflattering in your description of the man. He is loyal and upright. He is a former military man. He is willing to be the man of action in spite of great personal risk. Perhaps, you had felt a trifle displaced due to his participation in our affairs with the London Syndicate, yes?'

'Rubbish,' I retorted, feeling rather red in the face.

'I have noticed, also, that he has an obvious admiration for Rose Whitcombe. All has turned out satisfactorily. I have the great hope that in light of her invaluable assistance, mademoiselle will be cleared from wrongdoing by the police, and she and Landsdow will someday be able to begin anew together.'

'She and Landsdow!' I spluttered. 'Do you take her to be as changeable in her moods towards men as all that?'

'You are offended, *mon ami*?' said my infuriating little friend, with a twinkle. 'You have not the romantic interest in the girl.'

'Of course not,' I huffed. 'But don't tell me you intended to foment a romance between those two all along!'

'Why not? I had told you, had I not, that there were three reasons for our staying with Landsdow while we awaited developments. First, because we knew we could trust him. Second, because in light of my previous introduction of the two, I was confident that mademoiselle would make contact with him to get to us. And third,' he said with his most Gallic shrug, 'I was eager to make the introductions between them yet again, preparatory for the future.'

'Poirot— you nosy, *interfering* little—'

'Ah, do not enrage yourself. Rose Whitcombe had begun to care for you, and therefore, for similar reasons, I believe she can come to love him. It is a good match. Landsdow, he is a worthy man, enthusiastic about criminal matters and the thwarting of crime. The young lady has discovered, these past months, that she too is capable of using her knowledge of crime for more noble ends.'

‘There is another consideration. Do you remember the previous night, when you believed an intruder to be upstairs, and Landsdow went to search? You said that there was someone upstairs who didn’t belong there. I agreed with you. I was speaking of Landsdow himself. He had once been stationed out in India and longed for the life he has left behind. It seems likely that he shall retire and go back to a faraway land of sun and warmth. It would be ideal for mademoiselle to go with him and to get well away from the ties to crime she has made in London. All of this would be most beneficial to all parties. Hercule Poirot, you see, thinks of everything.’

I shook my head in disbelief. Poirot smiled and patted my shoulder in a paternalistic manner.

‘There is no cause for distress. Things have worked out so far as well as could be expected. And you, my friend? Well, there is plenty of time. I shall find a suitable match for you yet.’

Of all the infernal cheek!

It was a quarter past two in the morning. We had waited in the car for some time, noticing little or no movement around the café itself. I was just beginning to doze. But suddenly, a police constable ran up the car and rapped on the window, scaring me half to death.

‘What is it?’ I exclaimed as I opened the door.

‘They found Robert Griffon, not a hundred yards from the headquarters. He’s been stabbed to death.’

I uttered an exclamation of surprise. Poirot looked thoughtful.

‘Yes... a most likely outcome,’ he said sententiously.

‘But why?’

‘You yourself mentioned that the appearance of the French agents was “another threat of death.” And you were correct—but not *my* death! Do you not remember my words about Griffon after the Bexhill kidnapping? I said that he would be in prison for a long time, and that when he came out, the French, *they would not*

forget. He had disappointed them and had imperiled their own operations when you caught him at Newhaven. Remember the valuable information on the French criminal underground that the police had found on him when he was arrested. And so when the French hear of Griffon's escape from prison, they immediately deploy agents to London to find him.

'Both to save his own skin and to make good this time, he offers once more to deliver the little Belgian into their hands. And when he brings them close to the hideout, what do they see? Policemen everywhere! It is clear that something has gone badly wrong with Johnston's plan, or (as Griffon's comrades see it) he may have intentionally betrayed them. Either way, they are enraged. It is the last straw. Griffon has again failed as well as endangering their own position. He is eliminated.'

I gave a shudder.

Suddenly I was glad, extremely glad, not to be an enemy of Hercule Poirot.

The following afternoon was a quiet one in our flat. As I was venturing from my bedchamber to get a glass of water from the kitchen, I caught sight of Poirot in the sitting room. He was situated in an armchair facing the fireplace, and I detoured to join him. When I drew nearer, I was surprised to see the expression on his face. He appeared to be in a state of deep contemplation, concern etched on his brows.

'Penny for your thoughts?' I said, lowering myself onto the couch.

Starting a little, he looked over at me and smiled.

'I was thinking of the words of Gregory Johnston,' he said. 'He spoke of how there was only one way to destroy a man like myself.'

'I wouldn't put too much stock in the words of a man like Johnston,' I reassured.

'But no, Hastings, it was profound statement he made. It has lingered in my mind, and I believe he may be right. A perfect storm

of the right (or wrong) conditions and the unthinkable happens. To begin by setting out to protect the innocent, the vulnerable, those guileless souls with no conception whatever of the malignancy which sets itself against them. And in the course of time, to have upon my shoulders the responsibility of murder.'

'You do not take the blame for the deaths of Johnston or Griffon, I hope.'

'It is not my meaning, that. It was your murder for which they wished me to be responsible. The agents of the Syndicate, that is quite a different matter. There was clear evidence against those scoundrels, and we were prepared to hand them over to the police. Defending the innocent is the chief end; catching the criminal is merely the means. Me, I had no qualms whatsoever about using that revolver if Johnston had attacked. No, their fates they have brought upon their own heads.'

He stopped to light one of his tiny cigarettes before continuing on.

'I know that you are ready and eager for peril, my friend. You have the impulsive temperament. Never should I have involved you in this final encounter, but for your own insistence to defeat the Syndicate at all costs and no matter the risk. But if anything had happened to you, I would not forgive myself. Nothing that Griffon nor his business associates could have done to me afterwards would have been worse than that burden. Murder—even when it seems justified, or when it comes about by indirect causes and influences—has a most terrible effect on the perpetrator. It would be the end.'

My little friend seemed unnecessarily overwrought and unhappy on the subject. I had expected him to be in a more celebratory frame of mind in light of our recent triumph.

'But Poirot,' I said warmly, 'you're not a murderer. You're not a thing like Johnston. Dash it all, the man announced that he meant murder, and then planned to drug and shoot me while unconscious. Completely unsporting. That's not the sort of thing you would do.'

'In a desperate cause, to save the innocent—perhaps you, *mon ami*? I wonder. It may be that the London Syndicate has

indeed found my heel of Achilles. But for that, Hercule Poirot would be immortal.'

'Oh, really,' I said with a laugh. 'Don't go mashing up classical mythologies in your morbid mood. The London Syndicate is dead and gone, and Hercule Poirot carries on with his moustache and his radiators and his patent leather shoes. And for a good many years yet, no doubt. Anyway, you must look at the advantages. You had said yourself that if the Syndicate were brought down, England's ruffians would give a serious second thought before ever resorting to violence with us again. That's a feather in the cap for your *immortal* reputation, isn't it?'

Poirot leaned back in his armchair and stroked his moustache. Finally he smiled.

'You cheer me, Hastings. I must not brood. After a year of dealing with this organisation, it is time to lay it down and move on.'

'Absolutely,' I said.

The last time I ever saw Rose Whitcombe was in late March, some weeks after our final brush with the London Syndicate. We received a call from Japp one afternoon, summoning us to Scotland Yard. The lady had requested an interview with Poirot, and he had insisted that I accompany him. I hailed a taxi and we set off.

Japp was waiting for us in the corridor outside one of the main floor offices.

'All is well, my friend?' asked Poirot as we greeted each other.

'Very well, I should say. The Syndicate is well and truly no more. Those files were the end of them— all their secrets, lost. People have been jumping ship left and right. They've got nothing left. Now as for the young lady, she's waiting inside. For security reasons, we didn't send her over to your flat—'

'Security reasons?' I asked, puzzled.

'For her sake, not yours, Captain Hastings. There was an option for police escort, but she thought it would be better to keep

the connection between you three as much under wraps as possible. The less known on the street, the better, at least for now. I can't say as I disagree. Anyhow, I'll leave you to it— she said it wouldn't take long.'

Poirot seemed unsurprised that Japp was not accompanying us. He opened the door and the two of us entered.

Rose Whitcombe stood by a sunny window at the opposite end of the office. She wore a china blue frock and wrapped her arms about her, as if she were cold. Her face bore a pensive expression. But after a moment she noticed our arrival and came quickly over to us.

Poirot bowed gallantly over her hand.

'Mademoiselle, once more I salute you. With great fortitude you have carried your burdens, and you have come out into the sun.'

A faint smile played over her lips.

'It's funny you should say that,' she said, 'at a time when I've been hiding myself away.'

'What are your plans for the future, *ma petite*? Do you mean to depart from here?'

She nodded.

'There are too many ties to the underground here. I think I shall go abroad— out East, perhaps.'

'Ah!' said Poirot with satisfaction. 'Out East, yes? That is an idea most sensible.'

'Have you seen your father?' I asked her.

She turned her very blue eyes in my direction.

'Yes, I have,' she said, her voice lowering. The sadness in her words was poignant. 'I have visited with him for the first time in— so very long. He knows everything now, of course. I thought he would be more angry than he was. Well, he was very upset about Gregory, which is only natural, isn't it? But news of the collapse of the Syndicate seemed to hardly affect him. He accepted it. And he also thinks that I should go away, somewhere I don't need to be afraid of retribution. Somewhere to start over.'

The girl studied my face. Suddenly she said: 'Captain Hastings, you must think me an absolute beast.'

This took me rather aback. I stammered something in the negative, but she flowed on. ‘When I met you, I lied and betrayed your trust and caused all manner of difficulties. So much of the damage that has been done is entirely my fault.’

‘Oh, no,’ I said earnestly, my awkwardness leaving me, ‘it isn’t, really. It is through your help that innocent people have been spared a great deal of pain— perhaps their lives saved, even. And although you stood to lose a good deal, you held your ground and did what was right. That shows strong character.’

I hadn’t realised until that very moment that I had quite forgiven Rose Whitcombe for her part in the events of the last several months.

She flushed and held out her hand.

‘You have helped me,’ she said simply. ‘Don’t ask how— you helped me by being who you are. By showing me a road I wished to take, right from the start. That’s all.’

Poirot drew a silver ring out of his pocket and presented it to Rose. ‘It is yours, *ma chère*.’

She shook her head.

‘It was mine,’ she said, ‘but I can’t have it anymore. It will remind me of... of everything. Crime, and Gregory’s death, and everything it stood for. I would like for you to keep it, monsieur.’

My friend paused, and then his hand closed over the ring. He looked very moved.

She smiled again, a little ironical smile.

‘Consider it a trophy,’ she said, ‘from the London Syndicate.’

Poirot bowed again.

‘I do not call it a trophy, mademoiselle. I will call it a gift.’

March gave way to a drizzling and overcast April. I proposed to take Poirot to dinner at the Château Dentremont for the occasion of his birthday. He acceded to the plan.

‘It is most kind of you,’ he said as we prepared to leave the flat. ‘I do not very much care to be reminded of my age at this stage of life, but an occasion for fine dining is never to be despised.’

(Poirot, of course, was getting on in years, but I confess that I did not know his age, nor did I propose to broach the subject with him. Some things, I have found, are best left unasked.)

Twenty minutes later we were seated at a small corner table and examining the menu.

‘The place, it is very *chic*,’ admitted Poirot, running his eye over the wine list. ‘And it has gastronomic promise. As long as no secret societies of an unlawful type have pitched their camp in the kitchen storage, it shall be a pleasant evening.’

I laughed.

‘Speaking of that late lamented society,’ I said, ‘there’s something that I wanted to give to you.’

Reaching into my pocket, I extracted a small, thin box and passed it to my friend. He looked surprised.

‘Eh? What is this, then?’

He opened it and lifted out a slender, silver paper knife. It was shaped like a two-edged sword.

‘There,’ I said, gratified. ‘You didn’t need two paper knives, anyway. But since they got pitched, some sort of replacement seemed indicated. This one should remind you that you are none the worse for wear after crossing swords with the London Syndicate.’

Poirot twinkled at me and laid the miniature sword back in the box.

‘*Merci beaucoup*,’ he said.

Afterword

Writers who wish to create “continuation” stories featuring their favourite characters fall into various categories. From casual fan fics to more serious and in-depth works, different projects have different *raison d'être*.

For my part, I wanted to create Poirot stories that would read very much like Christie originals. I was not interested in personalising the characters according to my own tastes or placing them in scenarios that Christie herself never could have imagined or written. Her unique Belgian detective has stood the test of time, and Poirot himself would certainly demand a respectful and careful treatment.

Some fandom writers enjoy, when encountering plot holes or other little unexplained details casually referenced in the authors' original stories, to then create new stories which explain these points. *The London Syndicate* was born from a speculation of mine: considering Poirot's many successes and his uncanny lack of failure, why don't local criminals try a little harder to get him out of the way? With the exception of the outrageously bold Big Four, a minor incident with a train in another novel, and a clumsy little bid in Egypt, criminals don't even dare when it comes to Poirot. I was struck by the following quote in one of Christie's best-known novels:

‘It would be most unwise on your part to attempt to silence me as you silenced ----- . That kind of business does not succeed against Hercule Poirot, you understand.’

At which point, the culprit meekly replies, ‘My dear Poirot, whatever else I may be, I am not a fool.’ How remarkable, I thought!

Christie has different ways of working around the problem. When it is convenient for her plot, she either makes Poirot unrecognised and ‘unknown in this great London of yours’ (‘The Kidnapped Prime Minister’) or else very famous and instantly recognisable. But certainly at the beginning of his star’s ascendancy in England, it is clear that he is at least a well-known figure among criminals, as well as a good portion of the London general public (‘The Veiled Lady,’ ‘Hunter’s Lodge’). So why do criminals seem so certain that they cannot succeed in outright silencing their rival?

I began to wonder: if some ambitious and intelligent London criminals took it upon themselves to get rid of Poirot, how would they go about it? How might they even— almost— succeed? I envisioned an extensive crime ring with many different irons in the fire. I wanted to explore different ideas— ones more subtle than just killing him off in the street— so I created criminals that sought to evade outright murder. Instead, they would go after his property, his friends, his reputation, and so on. In bringing down this local crime ring and its activities, Poirot would prove to English society that he is impossible to thwart directly by such means. Henceforth, criminals would seek only to evade detection rather than to personally attack, thus explaining the lack of such attempts in Christie’s own stories. I also contemplated the series of events that did essentially destroy Poirot at the end of his life, as related in Christie’s canon, and how some foreshadowing might be employed in this much earlier tale.

Ever since I began reading Poirot, I’ve enjoyed the outlandish and uniquely death-defying (if somewhat incredible) escapades chronicled in *The Big Four*. *The London Syndicate* owes a great deal to that book. But instead of an international conspiracy of immense proportions, I wanted to create something perhaps a little more understated and organised. *The Big Four* is an anomaly in Christie’s Poirot canon. It’s almost as though she were writing *her own* fan fiction— Poirot and Hastings dropped into the middle of a James Bond plot! Why not, I thought, thrill Hastings with a

little more adventure? I also thought it might be fun (and sporting?) to let Hastings solve just one crime himself, and to work out the singular circumstances in which his detecting might prove to be successful.

Charles Osborne, when novelising Christie's play *Black Coffee* in the late 1990s, inserted an original little detail of his own into Chapter 1:

‘Meticulously tidy as always, [Poirot] had placed the discarded envelopes in one neat pile. They had been opened very carefully, with the paper-knife in the form of a miniature sword which his old friend Hastings had given him for a birthday many years ago.’

My story offers a friendly nod to his own ‘fan fiction’ by showing how and why this new paper knife makes its appearance.

Poirot's silver-and-amethyst ring, which is ubiquitous in the long-running ITV series *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, is also given a back story in *The London Syndicate*. The series is such a beautiful tribute to the original stories that I have endeavoured to make my own story, as far as possible, remain consistent with its character as well as with the books.

Many, many thanks to my longsuffering husband Alex for enduring the curious extremes of my Poirot habit, even to the point of formatting and editing this book for me and providing plenty of fortifying tea. Thanks also to David Suchet and Hugh Fraser, not only for having portrayed the main characters so brilliantly on film, but also for their ever-courteous support and encouragement in my varied creative expressions of Poirot fandom. (I will forgive Mr Fraser for calling me a ‘fangirl’ on account of this story since he also informally designated me ‘the official Poirot artist.’ Over which, of course, I fangirled.) A big thank-you to Aaron Smith, author of many excellent new Sherlock Holmes stories, for the beta and the encouragement, as someone with an insider's understanding of why we do what we do. I also owe a debt to the rest of the readers who have been following along as the story progressed and grew, whose enthusiasm has helped me carry on with it and not give up.

Finally, much gratitude and appreciation to Agatha Christie for creating characters and stories so beloved that 60 years of them just didn't feel like enough.

Kelly Klages
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