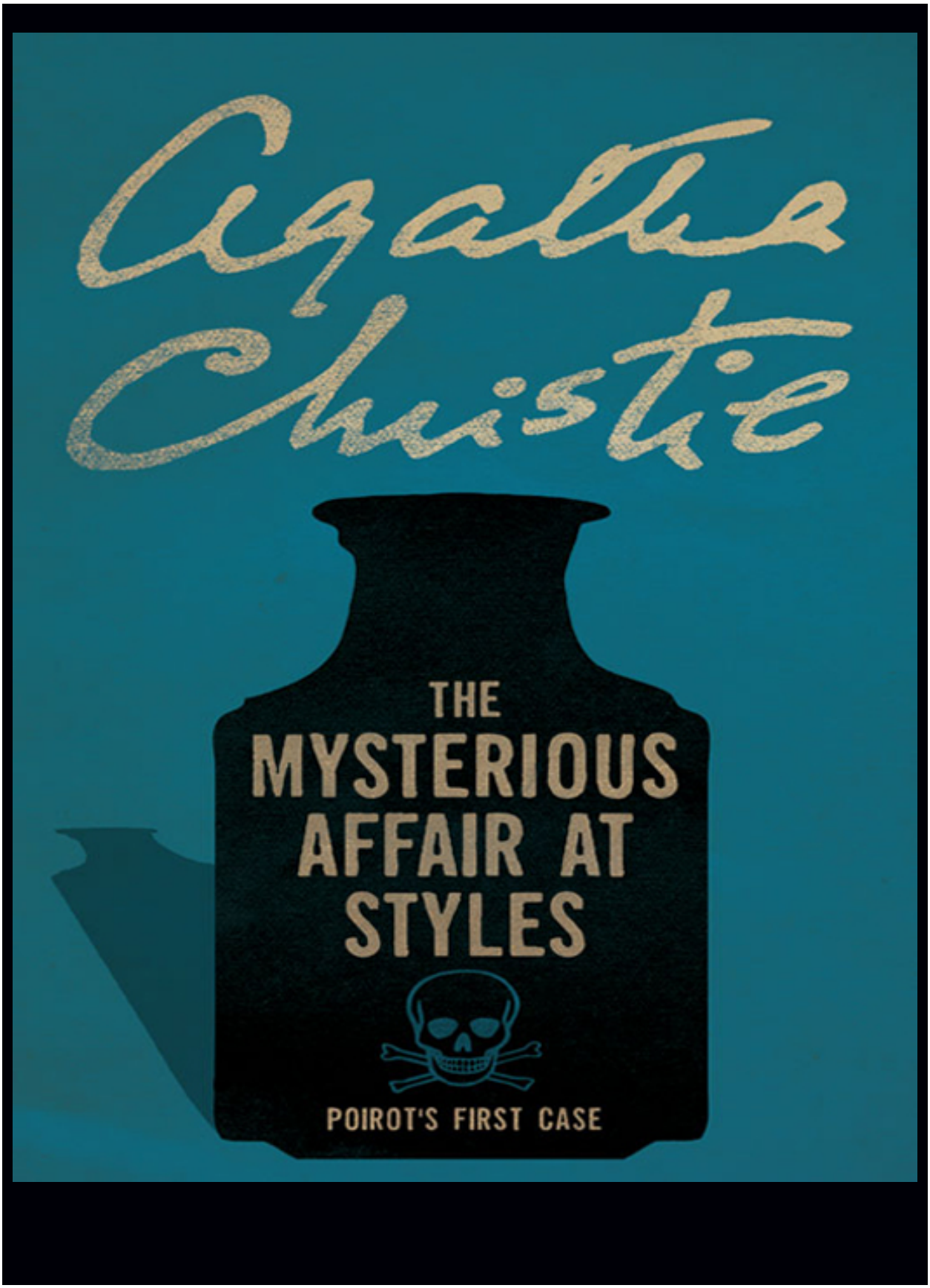
Agatha Christie
THE
MYSTERIOUS
AFFAIR AT
STYLES
POIROT'S FIRST CASE

Agatha Christie

The Mysterious Affair at Styles

HarperCollins e-books

To my mother

Contents

About Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie is known throughout the world as the Queen of Crime. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English and another billion in 100 foreign languages. She is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Mrs Christie is the author of eighty crime novels and short story collections, nineteen plays, and six novels written under the name of Mary Westmacott.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was written towards the end of World War I (during which she served in the Voluntary Aid Detachments). In it she created Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian investigator who was destined to become the most popular detective in crime fiction since Sherlock Holmes. After having been rejected by a number of houses, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was eventually published by The Bodley Head in 1920.

In 1926, now averaging a book a year, Agatha Christie wrote her masterpiece. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was the first of her books to be published by William Collins and marked the beginning of an author-publisher relationship that lasted for fifty years and produced over seventy books. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was also the first of Agatha Christie's works to be dramatised—as *Alibi*—and to have a successful run in London's West End. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play, opened in 1952 and runs to this day at St Martin's Theatre in the West End; it is the longest-running play in history.

Agatha Christie was made a Dame in 1971. She died in 1976, since when a number of her books have been published: the bestselling novel *Sleeping Murder* appeared in 1976, followed by *An Autobiography* and the short story collections *Miss Marple's Final Cases*; *Problem at Pollensa Bay*; and *While the Light Lasts*. In 1998 *Black Coffee* was the first of her plays to be novelised by Charles Osborne, Mrs Christie's biographer.

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The Murder on the Links

Poirot Investigates

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

The Big Four

The Mystery of the Blue Train

Black Coffee *

Peril at End House

Lord Edgware Dies

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Murder in the Mews

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Death on the Nile

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Hercule Poirot’s Christmas

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Miss Marple Mysteries

The Murder at the Vicarage

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A Pocket Full of Rye

4.50 from Paddington

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A Caribbean Mystery

At Bertram’s Hotel

Nemesis

Sleeping Murder

Miss Marple’s Final Cases

Tommy & Tuppence

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Giant’s Bread

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Absent in the Spring

The Rose and the Yew Tree

A Daughter’s a Daughter

The Burden

Memoirs

An Autobiography

Come, Tell Me How You Live

Play Collections

The Mousetrap and Selected Plays

Witness for the Prosecution and Selected Plays

* novelised by Charles Osborne

Chapter 1

I Go to Styles

The intense interest aroused in the public by what was known at the time as ‘The Styles Case’ has now somewhat subsided. Nevertheless, in view of the world-wide notoriety which attended it, I have been asked, both by my friend Poirot and the family themselves, to write an account of the whole story. This, we trust, will effectually silence the sensational rumours which still persist.

I will therefore briefly set down the circumstances which led to my being connected with the affair.

I had been invalided home from the Front; and, after spending some months in a rather depressing Convalescent Home, was given a month’s sick leave. Having no near relations or friends, I was trying to make up my mind what to do, when I ran across John Cavendish. I had seen very little of him for some years. Indeed, I had never known him particularly well. He was a good fifteen years my senior, for one thing, though he hardly looked his forty-five years. As a boy, though, I had often stayed at Styles, his mother’s place in Essex.

We had a good yarn about old times, and it ended in his inviting me down to Styles to spend my leave there.

‘The mater will be delighted to see you again—after all those years,’ he added.

‘Your mother keeps well?’ I asked.

‘Oh, yes. I suppose you know that she has married again?’

I am afraid I showed my surprise rather plainly. Mrs Cavendish, who had married John’s father when he was a widower with two sons, had been a handsome woman of middle-age as I remembered her. She certainly could

not be a day less than seventy now. I recalled her as an energetic, autocratic personality, somewhat inclined to charitable and social notoriety, with a fondness for opening bazaars and playing the Lady Bountiful. She was a most generous woman, and possessed a considerable fortune of her own.

Their country-place, Styles Court, had been purchased by Mr Cavendish early in their married life. He had been completely under his wife's ascendancy, so much so that, on dying, he left the place to her for her lifetime, as well as the larger part of his income; an arrangement that was distinctly unfair to his two sons. Their stepmother, however, had always been most generous to them; indeed, they were so young at the time of their father's remarriage that they always thought of her as their own mother.

Lawrence, the younger, had been a delicate youth. He had qualified as a doctor but early relinquished the profession of medicine, and lived at home while pursuing literary ambitions; though his verses never had any marked success.

John practised for some time as a barrister, but had finally settled down to the more congenial life of a country squire. He had married two years ago, and had taken his wife to live at Styles, though I entertained a shrewd suspicion that he would have preferred his mother to increase his allowance, which would have enabled him to have a home of his own. Mrs Cavendish, however, was a lady who liked to make her own plans, and expected other people to fall in with them, and in this case she certainly had the whip hand, namely: the purse strings.

John noticed my surprise at the news of his mother's remarriage and smiled rather ruefully.

'Rotten little bounder too!' he said savagely. 'I can tell you, Hastings, it's making life jolly difficult for us. As for Evie—you remember Evie?'

'No.'

'Oh, I suppose she was after your time. She's the mater's factotum, companion, Jack of all trades! A great sport—old Evie! Not precisely young and beautiful, but as game as they make them.'

‘You were going to say –’

‘Oh, this fellow! He turned up from nowhere, on the pretext of being a second cousin or something of Evie’s, though she didn’t seem particularly keen to acknowledge the relationship. The fellow is an absolute outsider, anyone can see that. He’s got a great black beard, and wears patent leather boots in all weathers! But the mater cottoned to him at once, took him on as secretary—you know how she’s always running a hundred societies?’

I nodded.

‘Well, of course, the war has turned the hundreds into thousands. No doubt the fellow was very useful to her. But you could have knocked us all down with a feather when, three months ago, she suddenly announced that she and Alfred were engaged! The fellow must be at least twenty years younger than she is! It’s simply bare-faced fortune hunting; but there you are—she is her own mistress, and she’s married him.’

‘It must be a difficult situation for you all.’

‘Difficult! It’s damnable!’

Thus it came about that, three days later, I descended from the train at Styles St Mary, an absurd little station, with no apparent reason for existence, perched up in the midst of green fields and country lanes. John Cavendish was waiting on the platform, and piloted me out to the car.

‘Got a drop or two of petrol still, you see,’ he remarked. ‘Mainly owing to the mater’s activities.’

The village of Styles St Mary was situated about two miles from the little station, and Styles Court lay a mile the other side of it. It was a still, warm day in early July. As one looked out over the flat Essex country, lying so green and peaceful under the afternoon sun, it seemed almost impossible to believe that, not so very far away, a great war was running its appointed course. I felt I had suddenly strayed into another world. As we turned in at the lodge gates, John said:

‘I’m afraid you’ll find it very quiet down here, Hastings.’

‘My dear fellow, that’s just what I want.’

‘Oh, it’s pleasant enough if you want to lead the idle life. I drill with the volunteers twice a week, and lend a hand at the farms. My wife works regularly “on the land”. She is up at five every morning to milk, and keeps at it steadily until lunch-time. It’s a jolly good life taking it all round—if it weren’t for that fellow Alfred Inglethorp!’ He checked the car suddenly, and glanced at his watch. ‘I wonder if we’ve time to pick up Cynthia. No, she’ll have started from the hospital by now.’

‘Cynthia! That’s not your wife?’

‘No, Cynthia is a protégée of my mother’s, the daughter of an old schoolfellow of hers, who married a rascally solicitor. He came a cropper, and the girl was left an orphan and penniless. My mother came to the rescue, and Cynthia has been with us nearly two years now. She works in the Red Cross Hospital at Tadminster, seven miles away.’

As he spoke the last words, we drew up in front of the fine old house. A lady in a stout tweed skirt, who was bending over a flower bed, straightened herself at our approach.

‘Hullo, Evie, here’s our wounded hero! Mr Hastings—Miss Howard.’

Miss Howard shook hands with a hearty, almost painful, grip. I had an impression of very blue eyes in a sunburnt face. She was a pleasant-looking woman of about forty, with a deep voice, almost manly in its stentorian tones, and had a large sensible square body, with feet to match—these last encased in good thick boots. Her conversation, I soon found, was couched in the telegraphic style.

‘Weeds grow like house afire. Can’t keep even with ’em. Shall press you in. Better be careful!’

‘I’m sure I shall be only too delighted to make myself useful,’ I responded.

‘Don’t say it. Never does. Wish you hadn’t later.’

‘You’re a cynic, Evie,’ said John, laughing. ‘Where’s tea today—inside or out?’

‘Out. Too fine a day to be cooped up in the house.’

‘Come on then, you’ve done enough gardening for today. “The labourer is worthy of his hire,” you know. Come and be refreshed.’

‘Well,’ said Miss Howard, drawing off her gardening gloves, ‘I’m inclined to agree with you.’

She led the way round the house to where tea was spread under the shade of a large sycamore.

A figure rose from one of the basket chairs, and came a few steps to meet us.

‘My wife, Hastings,’ said John.

I shall never forget my first sight of Mary Cavendish. Her tall, slender form, outlined against the bright light; the vivid sense of slumbering fire that seemed to find expression only in those wonderful tawny eyes of hers, remarkable eyes, different from any other woman’s that I have ever known; the intense power of stillness she possessed, which nevertheless conveyed the impression of a wild untamed spirit in an exquisitely civilized body—all these things are burnt into my memory. I shall never forget them.

She greeted me with a few words of pleasant welcome in a low clear voice, and I sank into a basket chair feeling distinctly glad that I had accepted John’s invitation. Mrs Cavendish gave me some tea, and her few quiet remarks heightened my first impression of her as a thoroughly fascinating woman. An appreciative listener is always stimulating, and I described, in a humorous manner, certain incidents of my Convalescent Home, in a way which, I flatter myself, greatly amused my hostess. John, of course, good fellow though he is, could hardly be called a brilliant conversationalist.

At that moment a well remembered voice floated through the open french window near at hand:

‘Then you’ll write to the Princess after tea, Alfred? I’ll write to Lady Tadminster for the second day, myself. Or shall we wait until we hear from the Princess? In case of a refusal, Lady Tadminster might open it the first day, and Mrs Crosbie the second. Then there’s the Duchess—about the school fête.’

There was the murmur of a man’s voice, and then Mrs Inglethorp’s rose in reply:

‘Yes, certainly. After tea will do quite well. You are so thoughtful, Alfred dear.’

The french window swung open a little wider, and a handsome white-haired old lady, with a somewhat masterful cast of features, stepped out of it on to the lawn. A man followed her, a suggestion of deference in his manner.

Mrs Inglethorp greeted me with effusion.

‘Why, if it isn’t too delightful to see you again, Mr Hastings, after all these years. Alfred, darling, Mr Hastings—my husband.’

I looked with some curiosity at ‘Alfred darling’. He certainly struck a rather alien note. I did not wonder at John objecting to his beard. It was one of the longest and blackest I have ever seen. He wore gold-rimmed pince-nez, and had a curious impassivity of feature. It struck me that he might look natural on a stage, but was strangely out of place in real life. His voice was rather deep and unctuous. He placed a wooden hand in mine and said:

‘This is a pleasure, Mr Hastings.’ Then, turning to his wife: ‘Emily dearest, I think that cushion is a little damp.’

She beamed fondly at him, as he substituted another with every demonstration of the tenderest care. Strange infatuation of an otherwise sensible woman!

With the presence of Mr Inglethorp, a sense of constraint and veiled hostility seemed to settle down upon the company. Miss Howard, in particular, took no pains to conceal her feelings. Mrs Inglethorp, however, seemed to notice nothing unusual. Her volubility, which I remembered of old, had lost nothing in the intervening years, and she poured out a steady flood of conversation, mainly on the subject of the forthcoming bazaar which she was organizing and which was to take place shortly. Occasionally she referred to her husband over a question of days or dates. His watchful and attentive manner never varied. From the very first I took a firm and rooted dislike to him, and I flatter myself that my first judgements are usually fairly shrewd.

Presently Mrs Inglethorp turned to give some instructions about letters to Evelyn Howard, and her husband addressed me in his painstaking voice:

‘Is soldiering your regular profession, Mr Hastings?’

‘No, before the war I was in Lloyd’s.’

‘And you will return there after it is over?’

‘Perhaps. Either that or a fresh start altogether.’

Mary Cavendish leant forward.

‘What would you really choose as a profession, if you could just consult your inclination?’

‘Well, that depends.’

‘No secret hobby?’ she asked. ‘Tell me—you’re drawn to something? Everyone is—usually something absurd.’

‘You’ll laugh at me.’

She smiled.

‘Perhaps.’

‘Well, I’ve always had a secret hankering to be a detective!’

‘The real thing—Scotland Yard? Or Sherlock Holmes?’

‘Oh, Sherlock Holmes by all means. But really, seriously, I am awfully drawn to it. I came across a man in Belgium once, a very famous detective, and he quite inflamed me. He was a marvellous little fellow. He used to say that all good detective work was a mere matter of method. My system is based on his—though of course I have progressed rather further. He was a funny little man, a great dandy, but wonderfully clever.’

‘Like a good detective story myself,’ remarked Miss Howard. ‘Lots of nonsense written, though. Criminal discovered in last chapter. Every one dumbfounded. Real crime—you’d know at once.’

‘There have been a great number of undiscovered crimes,’ I argued.

‘Don’t mean the police, but the people that are right in it. The family. You couldn’t really hoodwink them. They’d know.’

‘Then,’ I said, much amused, ‘you think that if you were mixed up in a crime, say a murder, you’d be able to spot the murderer right off ?’

‘Of course I should. Mightn’t be able to prove it to a pack of lawyers. But I’m certain I’d know. I’d feel it in my finger-tips if he came near me.’

‘It might be a “she”,’ I suggested.

‘Might. But murder’s a violent crime. Associate it more with a man.’

‘Not in a case of poisoning.’ Mrs Cavendish’s clear voice startled me. ‘Dr Bauerstein was saying yesterday that, owing to the general ignorance of the more uncommon poisons among the medical profession, there were probably countless cases of poisoning quite unsuspected.’

‘Why, Mary, what a gruesome conversation!’ cried Mrs Inglethorp. ‘It makes me feel as if a goose were walking over my grave. Oh, there’s Cynthia!’

A young girl in VAD uniform ran lightly across the lawn.

‘Why, Cynthia, you are late today. This is Mr Hastings—Miss Murdoch.’

Cynthia Murdoch was a fresh-looking young creature, full of life and vigour. She tossed off her little VAD cap, and I admired the great loose waves of her auburn hair, and the smallness and whiteness of the hand she held out to claim her tea. With dark eyes and eyelashes she would have been a beauty.

She flung herself down on the ground beside John, and as I handed her a plate of sandwiches she smiled up at me.

‘Sit down here on the grass, do. It’s ever so much nicer.’

I dropped down obediently.

‘You work at Tadminster, don’t you, Miss Murdoch?’

She nodded.

‘For my sins.’

‘Do they bully you, then?’ I asked, smiling.

‘I should like to see them!’ cried Cynthia with dignity.

‘I have got a cousin who is nursing,’ I remarked. ‘And she is terrified of “Sisters”.’

‘I don’t wonder. Sisters *are*, you know, Mr Hastings. They simp-ly *are*! You’ve no idea! But I’m not a nurse, thank heaven, I work in the dispensary.’

‘How many people do you poison?’ I asked, smiling.

Cynthia smiled too.

‘Oh, hundreds!’ she said.

‘Cynthia,’ called Mrs Inglethorp, ‘do you think you could write a few notes for me?’

‘Certainly, Aunt Emily.’

She jumped up promptly, and something in her manner reminded me that her position was a dependent one, and that Mrs Inglethorp, kind as she might be in the main, did not allow her to forget it.

My hostess turned to me.

‘John will show you your room. Supper is at half-past seven. We have given up late dinner for some time now. Lady Tadminster, our Member’s wife—she was the late Lord Abbotsbury’s daughter—does the same. She agrees with me that one must set an example of economy. We are quite a war household; nothing is wasted here—every scrap of waste paper, even, is saved and sent away in sacks.’

I expressed my appreciation, and John took me into the house and up the broad staircase, which forked right and left half-way to different wings of the building. My room was in the left wing, and looked out over the park.

John left me, and a few minutes later I saw him from my window walking slowly across the grass arm in arm with Cynthia Murdoch. I heard Mrs Inglethorp call ‘Cynthia’ impatiently, and the girl started and ran back to the house. At the same moment, a man stepped out from the shadow of a tree and walked slowly in the same direction. He looked about forty, very dark with a melancholy clean-shaven face. Some violent emotion seemed to be mastering him. He looked up at my window as he passed, and I recognized him, though he had changed much in the fifteen years that had elapsed since we last met. It was John’s younger brother, Lawrence Cavendish. I wondered what it was that had brought that singular expression to his face.

Then I dismissed him from my mind, and returned to the contemplation of my own affairs.

The evening passed pleasantly enough; and I dreamed that night of that enigmatical woman, Mary Cavendish.

The next morning dawned bright and sunny, and I was full of the anticipation of a delightful visit.

I did not see Mrs Cavendish until lunch-time, when she volunteered to take me for a walk, and we spent a charming afternoon roaming in the woods, returning to the house about five.

As we entered the large hall, John beckoned us both into the smoking-room. I saw at once by his face that something disturbing had occurred. We followed him in, and he shut the door after us.

‘Look here, Mary, there’s the deuce of a mess. Evie’s had a row with Alfred Inglethorp, and she’s off.’

‘Evie? Off ?’

John nodded gloomily.

‘Yes; you see she went to the mater, and—oh, here’s Evie herself.’

Miss Howard entered. Her lips were set grimly together, and she carried a small suit-case. She looked excited and determined, and slightly on the defensive.

‘At any rate,’ she burst out, ‘I’ve spoken my mind!’

‘My dear Evelyn,’ cried Mrs Cavendish, ‘this can’t be true!’

Miss Howard nodded grimly.

‘True enough! Afraid I said some things to Emily she won’t forget or forgive in a hurry. Don’t mind if they’ve only sunk in a bit. Probably water off a duck’s back, though. I said right out: “You’re an old woman, Emily, and there’s no fool like an old fool. The man’s twenty years younger than you, and don’t you fool yourself as to what he married you for. Money! Well, don’t let him have too much of it. Farmer Raikes has got a very pretty

young wife. Just ask your Alfred how much time he spends over there." She was very angry. Natural! I went on: "I'm going to warn you, whether you like it or not. That man would as soon murder you in your bed as look at you. He's a bad lot. You can say what you like to me, but remember what I've told you. He's a bad lot!"'

'What did she say?'

Miss Howard made an extremely expressive grimace.

'"Darling Alfred"—"dearest Alfred"—"wicked calumnies"—"wicked lies"—"wicked woman"—to accuse her "dear husband"! The sooner I left her house the better. So I'm off.'

'But not now?'

'This minute!'

For a moment we sat and stared at her. Finally John Cavendish, finding his persuasions of no avail, went off to look up the trains. His wife followed him, murmuring something about persuading Mrs Inglethorp to think better of it.

As she left the room, Miss Howard's face changed. She leant towards me eagerly.

'Mr Hastings, you're honest. I can trust you?'

I was a little startled. She laid her hand on my arm, and sank her voice to a whisper.

'Look after her, Mr Hastings. My poor Emily. They're a lot of sharks—all of them. Oh, I know what I'm talking about. There isn't one of them that's not hard up and trying to get money out of her. I've protected her as much as I could. Now I'm out of the way, they'll impose upon her.'

'Of course, Miss Howard,' I said, 'I'll do everything I can, but I'm sure you're excited and overwrought.'

She interrupted me by slowly shaking her forefinger.

‘Young man, trust me. I’ve lived in the world rather longer than you have. All I ask you is to keep your eyes open. You’ll see what I mean.’

The throb of the motor came through the open window, and Miss Howard rose and moved to the door. John’s voice sounded outside. With her hand on the handle, she turned her head over her shoulder, and beckoned to me.

‘Above all, Mr Hastings, watch that devil—her husband!’

There was no time for more. Miss Howard was swallowed up in an eager chorus of protests and goodbyes. The Inglethorps did not appear.

As the motor drove away, Mrs Cavendish suddenly detached herself from the group, and moved across the drive to the lawn to meet a tall bearded man who had been evidently making for the house. The colour rose in her cheeks as she held out her hand to him.

‘Who is that?’ I asked sharply, for instinctively I distrusted the man.

‘That’s Dr Bauerstein,’ said John shortly.

‘And who is Dr Bauerstein?’

‘He’s staying in the village doing a rest cure, after a bad nervous breakdown. He’s a London specialist; a very clever man—one of the greatest living experts on poisons, I believe.’

‘And he’s a great friend of Mary’s,’ put in Cynthia, the irrepressible.

John Cavendish frowned and changed the subject.

‘Come for a stroll, Hastings. This has been a most rotten business. She always had a rough tongue, but there is no stauncher friend in England than Evelyn Howard.’

He took the path through the plantation, and we walked down to the village through the woods which bordered one side of the estate.

As we passed through one of the gates on our way home again, a pretty young woman of gipsy type coming in the opposite direction bowed and smiled.

‘That’s a pretty girl,’ I remarked appreciatively.

John’s face hardened.

‘That is Mrs Raikes.’

‘The one that Miss Howard –’

‘Exactly,’ said John, with rather unnecessary abruptness.

I thought of the white-haired old lady in the big house, and that vivid wicked little face that had just smiled into ours, and a vague chill of foreboding crept over me. I brushed it aside.

‘Styles is really a glorious old place,’ I said to John.

He nodded rather gloomily.

‘Yes, it’s a fine property. It’ll be mine some day—should be mine now by rights, if my father had only made a decent will. And then I shouldn’t be so damned hard up as I am now.’

‘Hard up, are you?’

‘My dear Hastings, I don’t mind telling you that I’m at my wits’ end for money.’

‘Couldn’t your brother help you?’

‘Lawrence? He’s gone through every penny he ever had, publishing rotten verses in fancy bindings. No, we’re an impecunious lot. My mother’s

always been awfully good to us, I must say. That is, up to now. Since her marriage, of course –' He broke off, frowning.

For the first time I felt that, with Evelyn Howard, something indefinable had gone from the atmosphere. Her presence had spelt security. Now that security was removed—and the air seemed rife with suspicion. The sinister face of Dr Bauerstein recurred to me unpleasantly. A vague suspicion of everyone and everything filled my mind. Just for a moment I had a premonition of approaching evil.

Chapter 2

The 16th and 17th of July

I had arrived at Styles on the 5th of July. I come now to the events of the 16th and 17th of that month. For the convenience of the reader I will recapitulate the incidents of those days in as exact a manner as possible. They were elicited subsequently at the trial by a process of long and tedious cross-examinations.

I received a letter from Evelyn Howard a couple of days after her departure, telling me she was working as a nurse at the big hospital in Middlingham, a manufacturing town some fifteen miles away, and begging me to let her know if Mrs Inglethorp should show any wish to be reconciled.

The only fly in the ointment of my peaceful days was Mrs Cavendish's extraordinary and, for my part, unaccountable preference for the society of Dr Bauerstein. What she saw in the man I cannot imagine, but she was always asking him up to the house, and often went off for long expeditions with him. I confess that I was quite unable to see his attraction.

The 16th of July fell on a Monday. It was a day of turmoil. The famous bazaar had taken place on Saturday, and an entertainment, in connection with the same charity, at which Mrs Inglethorp was to recite a War poem, was to be held that night. We were all busy during the morning arranging and decorating the Hall in the village where it was to take place. We had a late luncheon and spent the afternoon resting in the garden. I noticed that John's manner was somewhat unusual. He seemed very excited and restless.

After tea, Mrs Inglethorp went to lie down to rest before her efforts in the evening and I challenged Mary Cavendish to a single at tennis.

About a quarter to seven, Mrs Inglethorp called to us that we should be late as supper was early that night. We had rather a scramble to get ready in time; and before the meal was over the motor was waiting at the door.

The entertainment was a great success, Mrs Inglethorp's recitation receiving tremendous applause. There were also some tableaux in which Cynthia took part. She did not return with us, having been asked to a supper party, and to remain the night with some friends who had been acting with her in the tableaux.

The following morning, Mrs Inglethorp stayed in bed to breakfast, as she was rather over-tired; but she appeared in her briskest mood about 12.30, and swept Lawrence and myself off to a luncheon party.

'Such a charming invitation from Mrs Rolleston. Lady Tadminster's sister, you know. The Rollestons came over with the Conqueror—one of our oldest families.'

Mary had excused herself on the plea of an engagement with Dr Bauerstein.

We had a pleasant luncheon, and as we drove away Lawrence suggested that we should return by Tadminster, which was barely a mile out of our way, and pay a visit to Cynthia in her dispensary. Mrs Inglethorp replied that this was an excellent idea, but as she had several letters to write she would drop us there, and we could come back with Cynthia in the pony-trap.

We were detained under suspicion by the hospital porter, until Cynthia appeared to vouch for us, looking very cool and sweet in her long white overall. She took us up to her sanctum, and introduced us to her fellow dispenser, a rather awe-inspiring individual, whom Cynthia cheerily addressed as 'Nibs'.

'What a lot of bottles!' I exclaimed, as my eye travelled round the small room. 'Do you really know what's in them all?'

'Say something original,' groaned Cynthia. 'Every single person who comes up here says that. We are really thinking of bestowing a prize on the first individual who does *not* say: "What a lot of bottles!" And I know the next thing you're going to say is: "How many people have you poisoned?"'

I pleaded guilty with a laugh.

‘If you people only knew how fatally easy it is to poison someone by mistake, you wouldn’t joke about it. Come on, let’s have tea. We’ve got all sorts of secret stores in that cupboard. No, Lawrence—that’s the poison cupboard. The big cupboard—that’s right.’

We had a very cheery tea, and assisted Cynthia to wash up afterwards. We had just put away the last teaspoon when a knock came at the door. The countenances of Cynthia and Nibs were suddenly petrified into a stern and forbidding expression.

‘Come in,’ said Cynthia, in a sharp professional tone.

A young and rather scared-looking nurse appeared with a bottle which she proffered to Nibs, who waved her towards Cynthia with the somewhat enigmatical remark:

‘*I*’m not really here today.’

Cynthia took the bottle and examined it with the severity of a judge.

‘This should have been sent up this morning.’

‘Sister is very sorry. She forgot.’

‘Sister should read the rules outside the door.’

I gathered from the little nurse’s expression that there was not the least likelihood of her having the hardihood to retail this message to the dreaded ‘Sister’.

‘So now it can’t be done until tomorrow,’ finished Cynthia.

‘Don’t you think you could possibly let us have it tonight?’

‘Well,’ said Cynthia graciously, ‘we are very busy, but if we have time it shall be done.’

The little nurse withdrew, and Cynthia promptly took a jar from the shelf, refilled the bottle and placed it on the table outside the door.

I laughed.

‘Discipline must be maintained?’

‘Exactly. Come out on our little balcony. You can see all the outside wards there.’

I followed Cynthia and her friend and they pointed out the different wards to me. Lawrence remained behind, but after a few moments Cynthia called to him over her shoulder to come and join us. Then she looked at her watch.

‘Nothing more to do, Nibs?’

‘No.’

‘All right. Then we can lock up and go.’

I had seen Lawrence in quite a different light that afternoon. Compared to John, he was an astoundingly difficult person to get to know. He was the opposite of his brother in almost every respect, being unusually shy and reserved. Yet he had a certain charm of manner, and I fancied that, if one really knew him well, one could have a deep affection for him. I had always fancied that his manner to Cynthia was rather constrained, and that she on her side was inclined to be shy of him. But they were both gay enough this afternoon, and chatted together like a couple of children.

As we drove through the village, I remembered that I wanted some stamps, so accordingly we pulled up at the post office.

As I came out again, I cannoned into a little man who was just entering. I drew aside and apologized, when suddenly, with a loud exclamation, he clasped me in his arms and kissed me warmly.

‘*Mon ami* Hastings!’ he cried. ‘It is indeed *mon ami* Hastings!’

‘Poirot!’ I exclaimed.

I turned to the pony-trap.

‘This is a very pleasant meeting for me, Miss Cynthia. This is my old friend, Monsieur Poirot, whom I have not seen for years.’

‘Oh, we know Monsieur Poirot,’ said Cynthia gaily.

‘But I had no idea he was a friend of yours.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Poirot seriously. ‘I know Mademoiselle Cynthia. It is by the charity of that good Mrs Inglethorp that I am here.’ Then, as I looked at him inquiringly: ‘Yes, my friend, she had kindly extended hospitality to seven of my country-people who, alas, are refugees from their native land. We Belgians will always remember her with gratitude.’

Poirot was an extraordinary-looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible; I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. Yet this quaint dandified little man who, I was sorry to see, now limped badly, had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police. As a detective, his *flair* had been extraordinary, and he had achieved triumphs by unravelling some of the most baffling cases of the day.

He pointed out to me the little house inhabited by him and his fellow Belgians, and I promised to go and see him at an early date. Then he raised his hat with a flourish to Cynthia and we drove away.

‘He’s a dear little man,’ said Cynthia. ‘I’d no idea you knew him.’

‘You’ve been entertaining a celebrity unawares,’ I replied.

And, for the rest of the way home, I recited to them the various exploits and triumphs of Hercule Poirot.

We arrived back in a very cheerful mood. As we entered the hall, Mrs Inglethorp came out of her boudoir. She looked flushed and upset.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she said.

‘Is there anything the matter, Aunt Emily?’ asked Cynthia.

‘Certainly not,’ said Mrs Inglethorp sharply. ‘What should there be?’ Then catching sight of Dorcas, the parlourmaid, going into the dining-room, she called to her to bring some stamps into the boudoir.

‘Yes, m’m.’ The old servant hesitated, then added diffidently: ‘Don’t you think, m’m, you’d better get to bed? You’re looking very tired.’

‘Perhaps you’re right, Dorcas—yes—no—not now. I’ve some letters I must finish by post-time. Have you lighted the fire in my room as I told you?’

‘Yes, m’m.’

‘Then I’ll go to bed directly after supper.’

She went into her boudoir again, and Cynthia stared after her.

‘Goodness gracious! I wonder what’s up?’ she said to Lawrence.

He did not seem to have heard her, for without a word he turned on his heel and went out of the house.

I suggested a quick game of tennis before supper and, Cynthia agreeing, I ran upstairs to fetch my racquet.

Mrs Cavendish was coming down the stairs. It may have been my fancy, but she, too, was looking odd and disturbed.

‘Had a good walk with Dr Bauerstein?’ I asked, trying to appear as indifferent as I could.

‘I didn’t go,’ she replied abruptly. ‘Where is Mrs Inglethorp?’

‘In the boudoir.’

Her hand clenched itself on the banisters, then she seemed to nerve herself for some encounter, and went rapidly past me down the stairs across the hall to the boudoir, the door of which she shut behind her.

As I ran out to the tennis court a few moments later, I had to pass the open boudoir window, and was unable to help overhearing the following scrap of dialogue. Mary Cavendish was saying in the voice of a woman desperately controlling herself: ‘Then you won’t show it to me?’

To which Mrs Inglethorp replied:

‘My dear Mary, it has nothing to do with that matter.’

‘Then show it to me.’

‘I tell you it is not what you imagine. It does not concern you in the least.’

To which Mary Cavendish replied, with a rising bitterness: ‘Of course, I might have known you would shield him.’

Cynthia was waiting for me, and greeted me eagerly with:

‘I say! There’s been the most awful row! I’ve got it all out of Dorcas.’

‘What kind of row?’

‘Between Aunt Emily and *him*. I do hope she’s found him out at last!’

‘Was Dorcas there, then?’

‘Of course not. She “happened to be near the door”. It was a real old bust-up. I do wish I knew what it was all about.’

I thought of Mrs Raikes’s gipsy face, and Evelyn Howard’s warnings, but wisely decided to hold my peace, whilst Cynthia exhausted every

possible hypothesis, and cheerfully hoped, ‘Aunt Emily will send him away, and will never speak to him again.’

I was anxious to get hold of John, but he was nowhere to be seen. Evidently something very momentous had occurred that afternoon. I tried to forget the few words I had overheard; but, do what I would, I could not dismiss them altogether from my mind. What was Mary Cavendish’s concern in the matter?

Mr Inglethorp was in the drawing-room when I came down to supper. His face was impassive as ever, and the strange unreality of the man struck me afresh.

Mrs Inglethorp came down at last. She still looked agitated, and during the meal there was a somewhat constrained silence. Inglethorp was unusually quiet. As a rule, he surrounded his wife with little attentions, placing a cushion at her back, and altogether playing the part of the devoted husband. Immediately after supper, Mrs Inglethorp retired to her boudoir again.

‘Send my coffee in here, Mary,’ she called. ‘I’ve just five minutes to catch the post.’

Cynthia and I went and sat by the open window in the drawing-room. Mary Cavendish brought our coffee to us. She seemed excited.

‘Do you young people want lights, or do you enjoy the twilight?’ she asked. ‘Will you take Mrs Inglethorp her coffee, Cynthia? I will pour it out.’

‘Do not trouble, Mary,’ said Inglethorp. ‘I will take it to Emily.’ He poured it out, and went out of the room carrying it carefully.

Lawrence followed him, and Mrs Cavendish sat down by us.

We three sat for some time in silence. It was a glorious night, hot and still. Mrs Cavendish fanned herself gently with a palm leaf.

‘It’s almost too hot,’ she murmured. ‘We shall have a thunderstorm.’

Alas, that these harmonious moments can never endure! My paradise was rudely shattered by the sound of a well-known, and heartily disliked, voice in the hall.

‘Dr Bauerstein!’ exclaimed Cynthia. ‘What a funny time to come.’

I glanced jealously at Mary Cavendish, but she seemed quite undisturbed, the delicate pallor of her cheeks did not vary.

In a few moments, Alfred Inglethorp had ushered the doctor in, the latter laughing, and protesting that he was in no fit state for a drawing-room. In truth, he presented a sorry spectacle, being literally plastered with mud.

‘What have you been doing, doctor?’ cried Mrs Cavendish.

‘I must make my apologies,’ said the doctor. ‘I did not really mean to come in, but Mr Inglethorp insisted.’

‘Well, Bauerstein, you are in a plight,’ said John, strolling in from the hall. ‘Have some coffee, and tell us what you have been up to.’

‘Thank you, I will.’ He laughed rather ruefully, as he described how he had discovered a very rare species of fern in an inaccessible place, and in his efforts to obtain it had lost his footing, and slipped ignominiously into a neighbouring pond.

‘The sun soon dried me off,’ he added, ‘but I’m afraid my appearance is very disreputable.’

At this juncture, Mrs Inglethorp called to Cynthia from the hall, and the girl ran out.

‘Just carry up my despatch-case, will you, dear? I’m going to bed.’

The door into the hall was a wide one. I had risen when Cynthia did, John was close by me. There were, therefore, three witnesses who could

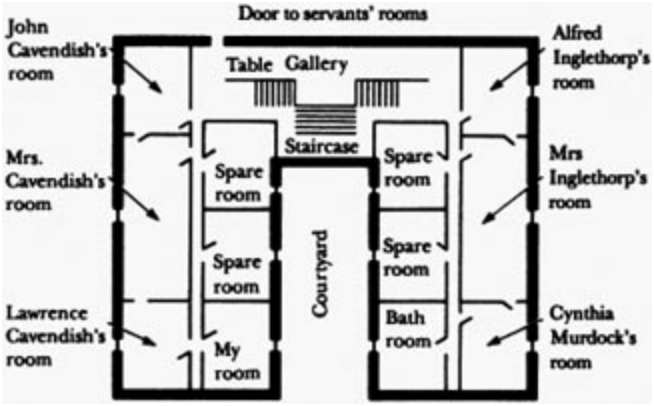
swear that Mrs Inglethorp was carrying her coffee, as yet untasted, in her hand. My evening was utterly and entirely spoilt by the presence of Dr Bauerstein. It seemed to me the man would never go. He rose at last, however, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

'I'll walk down to the village with you,' said Mr Inglethorp. 'I must see our agent over those estate accounts.' He turned to John. 'No one need sit up. I will take the latch-key.'

Chapter 3

The Night of the Tragedy

To make this part of my story clear, I append the following plan of the first floor of Styles. The servants' rooms are reached through the door B. They have no communication with the right wing, where the Inglethorps' rooms were situated.



It seemed to be the middle of the night when I was awakened by Lawrence Cavendish. He had a candle in his hand, and the agitation of his face told me at once that something was seriously wrong.

'What's the matter?' I asked, sitting up in bed, and trying to collect my scattered thoughts.

'We are afraid my mother is very ill. She seems to be having some kind of fit. Unfortunately she has locked herself in.'

'I'll come at once.'

I sprang out of bed, and pulling on a dressing-gown, followed Lawrence along the passage and the gallery to the right wing of the house.

John Cavendish joined us, and one or two of the servants were standing round in a state of awe-stricken excitement. Lawrence turned to his brother.

‘What do you think we had better do?’

Never, I thought, had his indecision of character been more apparent.

John rattled the handle of Mrs Inglethorp’s door violently, but with no effect. It was obviously locked or bolted on the inside. The whole household was aroused by now. The most alarming sounds were audible from the interior of the room. Clearly something must be done.

‘Try going through Mr Inglethorp’s room, sir,’ cried Dorcas. ‘Oh, the poor mistress!’

Suddenly I realized that Alfred Inglethorp was not with us—that he alone had given no sign of his presence. John opened the door of his room. It was pitch dark, but Lawrence was following with the candle, and by its feeble light we saw that the bed had not been slept in, and that there was no sign of the room having been occupied.

We went straight to the connecting door. That, too, was locked or bolted on the inside. What was to be done?

‘Oh, dear, sir,’ cried Dorcas, wringing her hands, ‘whatever shall we do?’

‘We must try and break the door in, I suppose. It’ll be a tough job, though. Here, let one of the maids go down and wake Baily and tell him to go for Dr Wilkins at once. Now then, we’ll have a try at the door. Half a moment, though, isn’t there a door into Miss Cynthia’s room?’

‘Yes, sir, but that’s always bolted. It’s never been undone.’

‘Well, we might just see.’

He ran rapidly down the corridor to Cynthia’s room. Mary Cavendish was there, shaking the girl—who must have been an unusually sound sleeper—and trying to wake her.

In a moment or two he was back.

‘No good. That’s bolted too. We must break in the door. I think this one is a shade less solid than the one in the passage.’

We strained and heaved together. The framework of the door was solid, and for a long time it resisted our efforts, but at last we felt it give beneath our weight, and finally, with a resounding crash, it was burst open.

We stumbled in together, Lawrence still holding his candle. Mrs Inglethorp was lying on the bed, her whole form agitated by violent convulsions, in one of which she must have overturned the table beside her. As we entered, however, her limbs relaxed, and she fell back upon the pillows.

John strode across the room and lit the gas. Turning to Annie, one of the housemaids, he sent her downstairs to the dining-room for brandy. Then he went across to his mother whilst I unbolted the door that gave on the corridor.

I turned to Lawrence, to suggest that I had better leave them now that there was no further need of my services, but the words were frozen on my lips. Never have I seen such a ghastly look on any man’s face. He was white as chalk, the candle he held in his shaking hand was sputtering on to the carpet, and his eyes, petrified with terror, or some such kindred emotion, stared fixedly over my head at a point on the further wall. It was as though he had seen something that turned him to stone. I instinctively followed the direction of his eyes, but I could see nothing unusual. The still feebly flickering ashes in the grate, and the row of prim ornaments on the mantelpiece, were surely harmless enough.

The violence of Mrs Inglethorp’s attack seemed to be passing. She was able to speak in short gasps.

‘Better now—very sudden—stupid of me—to lock myself in.’

A shadow fell on the bed and, looking up, I saw Mary Cavendish standing near the door with her arm around Cynthia. She seemed to be supporting the girl, who looked utterly dazed and unlike herself. Her face was heavily flushed, and she yawned repeatedly.

‘Poor Cynthia is quite frightened,’ said Mrs Cavendish in a low clear voice. She herself, I noticed, was dressed in her white land smock. Then it must be later than I thought. I saw that a faint streak of daylight was showing through the curtains of the windows, and that the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to close upon five o’clock.

A strangled cry from the bed startled me. A fresh access of pain seized the unfortunate old lady. The convulsions were of a violence terrible to behold. Everything was confusion. We thronged round her, powerless to help or alleviate. A final convulsion lifted her from the bed, until she appeared to rest upon her head and her heels, with her body arched in an extraordinary manner. In vain Mary and John tried to administer more brandy. The moments flew. Again the body arched itself in that peculiar fashion.

At that moment, Dr Bauerstein pushed his way authoritatively into the room. For one instant he stopped dead, staring at the figure on the bed, and, at the same instant, Mrs Inglethorp cried out in a strangled voice, her eyes fixed on the doctor:

‘Alfred—Alfred –’ Then she fell back motionless on the pillows.

With a stride, the doctor reached the bed, and seizing her arms worked them energetically, applying what I knew to be artificial respiration. He issued a few short sharp orders to the servants. An imperious wave of his hand drove us all to the door. We watched him, fascinated, though I think we all knew in our hearts that it was too late, and that nothing could be done now. I could see by the expression on his face that he himself had little hope.

Finally he abandoned his task, shaking his head gravely. At that moment, we heard footsteps outside, and Dr Wilkins, Mrs Inglethorp’s own doctor, a portly, fussy little man, came bustling in.

In a few words Dr Bauerstein explained how he had happened to be passing the lodge gates as the car came out, and had run up to the house as fast as he could, whilst the car went on to fetch Dr Wilkins. With a faint gesture of the hand, he indicated the figure on the bed.

‘Ve—ry sad. Ve—ry sad,’ murmured Dr Wilkins. ‘Poor dear lady. Always did far too much—far too much—against my advice. I warned her, ‘Take—it—easy.’ But no—her zeal for good works was too great. Nature rebelled. Na—ture—re—belled.’

Dr Bauerstein, I noticed, was watching the local doctor narrowly. He still kept his eyes fixed on him as he spoke.

‘The convulsions were of a peculiar violence, Dr Wilkins. I am sorry you were not here in time to witness them. They were quite—tetanic in character.’

‘Ah!’ said Dr Wilkins wisely.

‘I should like to speak to you in private,’ said Dr Bauerstein. He turned to John. ‘You do not object?’

‘Certainly not.’

We all trooped out into the corridor, leaving the two doctors alone, and I heard the key turned in the lock behind us.

We went slowly down the stairs. I was violently excited. I have a certain talent for deduction, and Dr Bauerstein’s manner had started a flock of wild surmises in my mind. Mary Cavendish laid her hand upon my arm.

‘What is it? Why did Dr Bauerstein seem so—peculiar?’

I looked at her.

‘Do you know what I think?’

‘What?’

‘Listen!’ I looked round, the others were out of earshot. I lowered my voice to a whisper. ‘I believe she has been poisoned! I’m certain Dr Bauerstein suspects it.’

‘*What?*’ She shrank against the wall, the pupils of her eyes dilating wildly. Then, with a sudden cry that startled me, she cried out: ‘No, no—not that—not that!’ And breaking from me, fled up the stairs. I followed her, afraid that she was going to faint. I found her leaning against the banisters, deadly pale. She waved me away impatiently.

‘No, no—leave me. I’d rather be alone. Let me just be quiet for a minute or two. Go down to the others.’

I obeyed her reluctantly. John and Lawrence were in the dining-room. I joined them. We were all silent, but I suppose I voiced the thoughts of us all when I at last broke it by saying:

‘Where is Mr Inglethorp?’

John shook his head.

‘He’s not in the house.’

Our eyes met. Where *was* Alfred Inglethorp? His absence was strange and inexplicable. I remembered Mrs Inglethorp’s dying words. What lay beneath them? What more could she have told us, if she had had time?

At last we heard the doctors descending the stairs. Dr Wilkins was looking important and excited, and trying to conceal an inward exulation under a manner of decorous calm. Dr Bauerstein remained in the background, his grave bearded face unchanged. Dr Wilkins was the spokesman for the two. He addressed himself to John:

‘Mr Cavendish, I should like your consent to a postmortem.’

‘Is that necessary?’ asked John gravely. A spasm of pain crossed his face.

‘Absolutely,’ said Dr Bauerstein.

‘You mean by that –?’

‘That neither Dr Wilkins nor myself could give a death certificate under the circumstances.’

John bent his head.

‘In that case, I have no alternative but to agree.’

‘Thank you,’ said Dr Wilkins briskly. ‘We propose that it should take place tomorrow night—or rather tonight.’ And he glanced at the daylight. ‘Under the circumstances, I am afraid an inquest can hardly be avoided—these formalities are necessary, but I beg that you won’t distress yourselves.’

There was a pause, and then Dr Bauerstein drew two keys from his pocket, and handed them to John.

‘These are the keys of the two rooms. I have locked them and, in my opinion, they would be better kept locked for the present.’

The doctors then departed.

I had been turning over an idea in my head, and I felt that the moment had now come to broach it. Yet I was a little chary of doing so. John, I knew, had a horror of any kind of publicity, and was an easygoing optimist, who preferred never to meet trouble half-way. It might be difficult to convince him of the soundness of my plan. Lawrence, on the other hand, being less conventional, and having more imagination, I felt I might count upon as an ally. There was no doubt that the moment had come for me to take the lead.

‘John,’ I said, ‘I am going to ask you something.’

‘Well?’

‘You remember my speaking of my friend Poirot? The Belgian who is here? He has been a most famous detective.’

‘Yes.’

‘I want you to let me call him in—to investigate this matter.’

‘What—now? Before the post-mortem?’

‘Yes, time is an advantage if—if—there has been foul play.’

‘Rubbish!’ cried Lawrence angrily. ‘In my opinion the whole thing is a mare’s nest of Bauerstein’s! Wilkins hadn’t an idea of such a thing, until Bauerstein put it into his head. But, like all specialists, Bauerstein’s got a bee in his bonnet. Poisons are his hobby, so, of course, he sees them everywhere.’

I confess that I was surprised by Lawrence’s attitude. He was so seldom vehement about anything.

John hesitated.

‘I can’t feel as you do, Lawrence,’ he said at last, ‘I’m inclined to give Hastings a free hand, though I should prefer to wait a bit. We don’t want any unnecessary scandal.’

‘No, no,’ I cried eagerly, ‘you need have no fear of that. Poirot is discretion itself.’

‘Very well then, have it your own way. I leave it in your hands. Though, if it is as we suspect, it seems a clear enough case. God forgive me if I am wronging him!’

I looked at my watch. It was six o’clock. I determined to lose no time.

Five minutes’ delay, however, I allowed myself. I spent it in ransacking the library until I discovered a medical book which gave a description of strychnine poisoning.

Chapter 4

Poirot Investigates

The house which the Belgians occupied in the village was quite close to the park gates. One could save time by taking a narrow path through the long grass, which cut off the detours of the winding drive. So I, accordingly, went that way. I had nearly reached the lodge, when my attention was arrested by the running figure of a man approaching me. It was Mr Inglethorp. Where had he been? How did he intend to explain his absence?

He accosted me eagerly.

‘My God! This is terrible! My poor wife! I have only just heard.’

‘Where have you been?’ I asked.

‘Denby kept me late last night. It was one o’clock before we’d finished. Then I found that I’d forgotten the latch-key after all. I didn’t want to arouse the household, so Denby gave me a bed.’

‘How did you hear the news?’ I asked.

‘Wilkins knocked Denby up to tell him. My poor Emily! She was so self-sacrificing—such a noble character. She overtaxed her strength.’

A wave of revulsion swept over me. What a consummate hypocrite the man was!

‘I must hurry on,’ I said, thankful that he did not ask me whither I was bound.

In a few minutes I was knocking at the door of Leastways Cottage.

Getting no answer, I repeated my summons impatiently. A window above me was cautiously opened, and Poirot himself looked out.

He gave an exclamation of surprise at seeing me. In a few brief words, I explained the tragedy that had occurred, and that I wanted his help.

‘Wait, my friend, I will let you in, and you shall recount to me the affairs whilst I dress.’

In a few moments he had unbarred the door, and I followed him up to his room. There he installed me in a chair, and I related the whole story, keeping back nothing, and omitting no circumstance, however insignificant, whilst he himself made a careful and deliberate toilet.

I told him of my awakening, of Mrs Inglethorp’s dying words, of her husband’s absence, of the quarrel the day before, of the scrap of conversation between Mary and her mother-in-law that I had overhead, of the former quarrel between Mrs Inglethorp and Evelyn Howard, and of the latter’s innuendoes.

I was hardly as clear as I could wish. I repeated myself several times, and occasionally had to go back to some detail that I had forgotten. Poirot smiled kindly on me.

‘The mind is confused? Is it not so? Take time, *mon ami*. You are agitated; you are excited—it is but natural. Presently, when we are calmer, we will arrange the facts, neatly, each in his proper place. We will examine —and reject. Those of importance we will put on one side; those of no importance, pouf !’—he screwed up his cherub-like face, and puffed comically enough—‘blow them away!’

‘That’s all very well,’ I objected, ‘but how are you going to decide what is important, and what isn’t? That always seems the difficulty to me.’

Poirot shook his head energetically. He was now arranging his moustache with exquisite care.

‘Not so. *Voyons*! One fact leads to another—so we continue. Does the next fit in with that?*A merveille*! Good! We can proceed. This next little fact —no! Ah, that is curious! There is something missing—a link in the chain that is not there. We examine. We search. And that little curious fact, that

possibly paltry little detail that will not tally, we put it here!' He made an extravagant gesture with his hand. 'It is significant! It is tremendous!'

'Y—es –'

'Ah!' Poirot shook his forefinger so fiercely at me that I quailed before it. 'Beware! Peril to the detective who says: "It is so small—it does not matter. It will not agree. I will forget it." That way lies confusion! Everything matters.'

'I know. You always told me that. That's why I have gone into all the details of this thing whether they seemed to me relevant or not.'

'And I am pleased with you. You have a good memory, and you have given me the facts faithfully. Of the order in which you present them, I say nothing—truly, it is deplorable! But I make allowances—you are upset. To that I attribute the circumstance that you have omitted one fact or paramount importance.'

'What is that?' I asked.

'You have not told me if Mrs Inglethorp ate well last night.'

I stared at him. Surely the war had affected the little man's brain. He was carefully engaged in brushing his coat before putting it on, and seemed wholly engrossed in the task.

'I don't remember,' I said. 'And, anyway, I don't see –'

'You do not see? But it is of the first importance.'

'I can't see why,' I said, rather nettled. 'As far as I can remember, she didn't eat much. She was obviously upset, and it had taken her appetite away. That was only natural.'

'Yes,' said Poirot thoughtfully, 'it was only natural.'

He opened a drawer, and took out a small despatchcase, then turned to me.

‘Now I am ready. We will proceed to the château, and study matters on the spot. Excuse me, *mon ami*, you dressed in haste, and your tie is on one side. Permit me.’ With a deft gesture, he rearranged it.

‘*C¸a y est*! Now, shall we start?’

We hurried up the village, and turned in at the lodge gates. Poirot stopped for a moment, and gazed sorrowfully over the beautiful expanse of park, still glittering with morning dew.

‘So beautiful, so beautiful, and yet, the poor family, plunged in sorrow, prostrated with grief.’

He looked at me keenly as he spoke, and I was aware that I reddened under his prolonged gaze.

Was the family prostrated by grief ? Was the sorrow at Mrs Inglethorp’s death so great? I realized that there was an emotional lack in the atmosphere. The dead woman had not the gift of commanding love. Her death was a shock and a distress, but she would not be passionately regretted.

Poirot seemed to follow my thoughts. He nodded his head gravely.

‘No, you are right,’ he said, ‘it is not as though there was a blood tie. She has been kind and generous to these Cavendishes, but she was not their own mother. Blood tells—always remember that—blood tells.’

‘Poirot,’ I said, ‘I wish you would tell me why you wanted to know if Mrs Inglethorp ate well last night? I have been turning it over in my mind, but I can’t see how it has anything to do with the matter.’

He was silent for a minute or two as we walked along, but finally he said:

‘I do not mind telling you—though, as you know, it is not my habit to explain until the end is reached. The present contention is that Mrs

Inglethorp died of strychnine poisoning, presumably administered in her coffee.'

'Yes?'

'Well, what time was the coffee served?'

'About eight o'clock.'

'Therefore she drank it between then and halfpast eight—certainly not much later. Well, strychnine is a fairly rapid poison. Its effects would be felt very soon, probably in about an hour. Yet, in Mrs Inglethorp's case, the symptoms do not manifest themselves until five o'clock the next morning: nine hours! But a heavy meal, taken at about the same time as the poison, might retard its effects, though hardly to that extent. Still, it is a possibility to be taken into account. But, according to you, she ate very little for supper, and yet the symptoms do not develop until early the next morning! Now that is a curious circumstance, my friend. Something may arise at the autopsy to explain it. In the meantime, remember it.'

As we neared the house, John came out and met us. His face looked weary and haggard.

'This is a very dreadful business, Monsieur Poirot,' he said. 'Hastings has explained to you that we are anxious for no publicity?'

'I comprehend perfectly.'

'You see, it is only suspicion so far. We have nothing to go upon.'

'Precisely. It is a matter of precaution only.'

John turned to me, taking out his cigarette-case, and lighting a cigarette as he did so.

'You know that fellow Inglethorp is back?'

'Yes. I met him.'

John flung the match into an adjacent flower bed, a proceeding which was too much for Poirot's feelings. He retrieved it, and buried it neatly.

'It's jolly difficult to know how to treat him.'

'That difficulty will not exist long,' pronounced Poirot quietly.

John looked puzzled, not quite understanding the portent of this cryptic saying. He handed the two keys which Dr Bauerstein had given him to me.

'Show Monsieur Poirot everything he wants to see.'

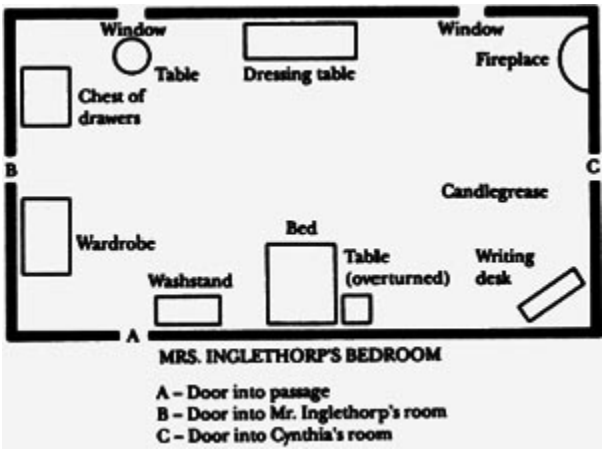
'The rooms are locked?' asked Poirot.

'Dr Bauerstein considered it advisable.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

'Then he is very sure. Well, that simplifies matters for us.'

We went up together to the room of the tragedy. For convenience I append a plan of the room and the principal articles of furniture in it.



Poirot locked the door on the inside, and proceeded to a minute inspection of the room. He darted from one object to the other with the agility of a grasshopper. I remained by the door, fearing to obliterate any clues. Poirot, however, did not seem grateful to me for my forbearance.

‘What have you, my friend?’ he cried, ‘that you remain there like—how do you say it?—ah, yes, the stuck pig?’

I explained that I was afraid of obliterating any footmarks.

‘Footmarks? But what an idea! There has already been practically an army in the room! What footmarks are we likely to find? No, come here and aid me in my search. I will put down my little case until I need it.’

He did so, on the round table by the window, but it was an ill-advised proceeding; for, the top of it being loose, it tilted up, and precipitated the despatch-case on to the floor.

‘*En voilà une table!*’ cried Poirot. ‘Ah, my friend, one may live in a big house and yet have no comfort.’

After which piece of moralizing, he resumed his search.

A small purple despatch-case, with a key in the lock, on the writing-table, engaged his attention for some time. He took out the key from the lock, and passed it to me to inspect. I saw nothing peculiar, however. It was an ordinary key of the Yale type, with a bit of twisted wire through the handle.

Next, he examined the framework of the door we had broken in, assuring himself that the bolt had really been shot. Then he went to the door opposite leading into Cynthia’s room. That door was also bolted, as I had stated. However, he went to the length of unbolting it, and opening and shutting it several times; this he did with the utmost precaution against making any noise. Suddenly something in the bolt itself seemed to rivet his attention. He examined it carefully, and then, nimbly whipping out a pair of small forceps from his case, he drew out some minute particle which he carefully sealed up in a tiny envelope.

On the chest of drawers there was a tray with a spirit lamp and a small saucepan on it. A small quantity of a dark fluid remained in the saucepan, and an empty cup and saucer that had been drunk out of stood near it.

I wondered how I could have been so unobservant as to overlook this. Here was a clue worth having. Poirot delicately dipped his finger into the liquid, and tasted it gingerly. He made a grimace.

‘Cocoa—with—I think—rum in it.’

He passed on to the debris on the floor, where the table by the bed had been overturned. A reading lamp, some books, matches, a bunch of keys, and the crushed fragments of a coffee-cup lay scattered about.

‘Ah, this is curious,’ said Poirot.

‘I must confess that I see nothing particularly curious about it.’

‘You do not? Observe the lamp—the chimney is broken in two places; they lie there as they fell. But see, the coffee-cup is absolutely smashed to powder.’

‘Well,’ I said wearily. ‘I suppose someone must have stepped on it.’

‘Exactly,’ said Poirot, in an odd voice. ‘Someone stepped on it.’

He rose from his knees, and walked slowly across to the mantelpiece, where he stood abstractedly fingering the ornaments, and straightening them—a trick of his when he was agitated.

‘*Mon ami*,’ he said, turning to me, ‘somebody stepped on that cup, grinding it to powder, and the reason they did so was either because it contained strychnine or—which is far more serious—because it did not contain strychnine!’

I made no reply. I was bewildered, but I knew that it was no good asking him to explain. In a moment or two he roused himself, and went on with his investigations. He picked up the bunch of keys from the floor, and twirling them round in his fingers finally selected one, very bright and shining, which he tried in the lock of the purple despatch-case. It fitted, and he opened the box, but after a moment’s hesitation, closed and relocked it,

and slipped the bunch of keys, as well as the key that had originally stood in the lock, into his own pocket.

‘I have no authority to go through these papers. But it should be done—at once!’

He then made a very careful examination of the drawers of the wash-stand. Crossing the room to the left-hand window, a round stain, hardly visible on the dark brown carpet, seemed to interest him particularly. He went down on his knees, examining it minutely—even going so far as to smell it.

Finally, he poured a few drops of the cocoa into a test tube, sealing it up carefully. His next proceeding was to take out a little notebook.

‘We have found in this room,’ he said, writing busily, ‘six points of interest. Shall I enumerate them, or will you?’

‘Oh, you,’ I replied hastily.

‘Very well, then. One, a coffee-cup that has been ground into powder; two, a despatch-case with a key in the lock; three, a stain on the floor.’

‘That may have been done some time ago,’ I interrupted.

‘No, for it is still perceptibly damp and smells of coffee. Four, a fragment of some dark green fabric—only a thread or two, but recognizable.’

‘Ah!’ I cried. ‘That was what you sealed up in the envelope.’

‘Yes. It may turn out to be a piece of one of Mrs Inglethorp’s own dresses, and quite unimportant. We shall see. Five, *this!*’ With a dramatic gesture, he pointed to a large splash of candle grease on the floor by the writing-table. ‘It must have been done since yesterday, otherwise a good housemaid would have at once removed it with blotting-paper and a hot iron. One of my best hats once—but that is not to the point.’

‘It was very likely done last night. We were very agitated. Or perhaps Mrs Inglethorp herself dropped her candle.’

‘You brought only one candle into the room?’

‘Yes. Lawrence Cavendish was carrying it. But he was very upset. He seemed to see something over here’—I indicated the mantelpiece—‘that absolutely paralysed him.’

‘That is interesting,’ said Poirot quickly. ‘Yes, it is suggestive’—his eye sweeping the whole length of the wall—‘But it was not his candle that made this great patch, for you perceive that this is white grease; whereas Monsieur Lawrence’s candle, which is still on the dressing-table, is pink. On the other hand, Mrs Inglethorp had no candlestick in the room, only a reading lamp.’

‘Then,’ I said, ‘what do you deduce?’

To which my friend only made a rather irritating reply, urging me to use my own natural faculties.

‘And the sixth point?’ I asked. ‘I suppose it is the sample of cocoa.’

‘No,’ said Poirot thoughtfully, ‘I might have included that in the six, but I did not. No, the sixth point I will keep to myself for the present.’

He looked quickly round the room. ‘There is nothing more to be done here, I think, unless’—he stared earnestly and long at the dead ashes in the grate. ‘The fire burns—and it destroys. But by chance—there might be—let us see!’

Deftly, on hands and knees, he began to sort the ashes from the grate into the fender, handling them with the greatest caution. Suddenly, he gave a faint exclamation.

‘The forceps, Hastings!’

I quickly handed them to him, and with skill he extracted a small piece of half-charred paper.

‘There, *mon ami!*’ he cried. ‘What do you think of that?’

I scrutinized the fragment. This is an exact reproduction of it:

I was puzzled. It was unusually thick, quite unlike ordinary notepaper. Suddenly an idea struck me.

‘Poirot!’ I cried. ‘This is a fragment of a will!’

‘Exactly.’

I looked at him sharply.‘You are not surprised?’

‘No,’ he said gravely, ‘I expected it.’

I relinquished the piece of paper, and watched him put it away in his case, with the same methodical care that he bestowed on everything. My brain was in a whirl. What was this complication of a will? Who had destroyed it? The person who had left the candle grease on the floor? Obviously. But how had anyone gained admission? All the doors had been bolted on the inside.

‘Now, my friend,’ said Poirot briskly, ‘we will go. I should like to ask a few questions of the parlourmaid—Dorcas, her name is, is it not?’

We passed through Alfred Inglethorp’s room, and Poirot delayed long enough to make a brief but fairly comprehensive examination of it. We went out through that door, locking both it and that of Mrs Inglethorp’s room as before.

I took him down to the boudoir which he had expressed a wish to see, and went myself in search of Dorcas.

When I returned with her, however, the boudoir was empty.

‘Poirot,’ I cried, ‘where are you?’

‘I am here, my friend.’

He had stepped outside the french window, and was standing, apparently lost in admiration, before the various shaped flower beds.

‘Admirable!’ he murmured. ‘Admirable! What symmetry! Observe that crescent; and those diamonds—their neatness rejoices the eye. The spacing of the plants, also, is perfect. It has been recently done; is it not so?’

‘Yes, I believe they were at it yesterday afternoon. But come in—Dorcas is here.’

‘*Eh bien, eh bien!* Do not grudge me a moment’s satisfaction of the eye.’

‘Yes, but this affair is more important.’

‘And how do you know that these fine begonias are not of equal importance?’

I shrugged my shoulders. There was really no arguing with him if he chose to take that line.

‘You do not agree? But such things have been. Well, we will come in and interview the brave Dorcas.’

Dorcas was standing in the boudoir, her hands folded in front of her, and her grey hair rose in stiff waves under her white cap. She was the very model and picture of a good old-fashioned servant.

In her attitude towards Poirot, she was inclined to be suspicious, but he soon broke down her defences. He drew forward a chair.

‘Pray be seated mademoiselle.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘You have been with your mistress many years, is it not so?’

‘Ten years, sir.’

‘That is a long time, and very faithful service. You were much attached to her, were you not?’

‘She was a very good mistress to me, sir.’

‘Then you will not object to answering a few questions. I put them to you with Mr Cavendish’s full approval.’

‘Oh, certainly, sir.’

‘Then I will begin by asking you about the events of yesterday afternoon. Your mistress had a quarrel?’

‘Yes, sir. But I don’t know that I ought –’ Dorcas hesitated.

Poirot looked at her keenly.

‘My good Dorcas, it is necessary that I should know every detail of that quarrel as fully as possible. Do not think you are betraying your mistress’s secrets. Your mistress lies dead, and it is necessary that we should know all —if we are to avenge her. Nothing can bring her back to life, but we do hope, if there has been foul play, to bring the murderer to justice.’

‘Amen to that,’ said Dorcas fiercely. ‘And, naming no names, there’s *one* in this house that none of us could ever abide! And an ill day it was when first *he* darkened the threshold.’

Poirot waited for her indignation to subside, and then, resuming his business-like tone, he asked:

‘Now, as to this quarrel? What is the first you heard of it?’

‘Well, sir, I happened to be going along the hall outside yesterday –’

‘What time was that?’

‘I couldn’t say exactly, sir, but it wasn’t teatime by a long way. Perhaps four o’clock—or it may have been a bit later. Well, sir, as I said, I happened to be passing along, when I heard voices very loud and angry in here. I didn’t exactly mean to listen, but—well, there it is. I stopped. The door was shut, but the mistress was speaking very sharp and clear, and I heard what she said quite plainly. “You have lied to me, and deceived me,” she said. I didn’t hear what Mr Inglethorp replied. He spoke a good bit lower than she did—but she answered: “How dare you? I have kept you and clothed you and fed you! You owe everything to me! And this is how you repay me! By bringing disgrace upon our name!” Again I didn’t hear what he said, but she went on: “Nothing that you can say will make any difference. I see my duty clearly. My mind is made up. You need not think that any fear of publicity, or scandal between husband and wife will deter me.” Then I thought I heard them coming out, so I went off quickly.’

‘You are sure it was Mr Inglethorp’s voice you heard?’

‘Oh, yes, sir, whose else’s could it be?’

‘Well, what happened next?’

‘Later, I came back to the hall; but it was all quiet. At five o’clock, Mrs Inglethorp rang the bell and told me to bring her a cup of tea—nothing to eat—to the boudoir. She was looking dreadful—so white and upset. “Dorcas,” she says, “I’ve had a great shock.” “I’m sorry for that, m’m,” I says. “You’ll feel better after a nice hot cup of tea, m’m.” She had something in her hand. I don’t know if it was a letter, or just a piece of paper, but it had writing on it, and she kept staring at it, almost as if she couldn’t believe what was written there. She whispered to herself, as though she had forgotten I was there: “These few words—and everything’s changed.” And then she says to me: “Never trust a man, Dorcas, they’re not worth it!” I hurried off, and got her a good strong cup of tea, and she thanked me, and said she’d feel better when she’d drunk it. “I don’t know what to do,” she says. “Scandal between husband and wife is a dreadful thing, Dorcas. I’d rather hush it up if I could.” Mrs Cavendish came in just then, so she didn’t say any more.’

‘She still had the letter, or whatever it was, in her hand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘What would she be likely to do with it afterwards?’

‘Well, I don’t know, sir, I expect she would lock it up in that purple case of hers.’

‘Is that where she usually kept important papers?’

‘Yes, sir. She brought it down with her every morning, and took it up every night.’

‘When did she lose the key of it?’

‘She missed it yesterday at lunch-time, sir, and told me to look carefully for it. She was very much put out about it.’

‘But she had a duplicate key?’

‘Oh, yes, sir.’

Dorcas was looking very curiously at him and, to tell the truth, so was I. What was all this about a lost key? Poirot smiled.

‘Never mind, Dorcas, it is my business to know things. Is this the key that was lost?’ He drew from his pocket the key that he had found in the lock of the despatch-case upstairs.

Dorcas’s eyes looked as though they would pop out of her head.

‘That’s it, sir, right enough. But where did you find it? I looked everywhere for it.’

‘Ah, but you see it was not in the same place yesterday as it was today. Now, to pass to another subject, had your mistress a dark green dress in her wardrobe?’

Dorcas was rather startled by the unexpected question.

‘No, sir.’

‘Are you quite sure?’

‘Oh, yes, sir.’

‘Has anyone else in the house got a green dress?’

Dorcas reflected.

‘Miss Cynthia has a green evening dress.’

‘Light or dark green?’

‘A light green, sir; a sort of chiffon, they call it.’

‘Ah, that is not what I want. And nobody else has anything green?’

‘No, sir—not that I know of.’

Poirot’s face did not betray a trace of whether he was disappointed or otherwise. He merely remarked:

‘Good, we will leave that and pass on. Have you any reason to believe that your mistress was likely to take a sleeping powder last night?’

‘Not *last* night, sir, I know she didn’t.’

‘Why do you know so positively?’

‘Because the box was empty. She took the last one two days ago, and she didn’t have any more made up.’

‘You are quite sure of that?’

‘Positive, sir.’

‘Then that is cleared up! By the way, your mistress didn’t ask you to sign any paper yesterday?’

‘To sign a paper? No, sir.’

‘When Mr Hastings and Mr Lawrence came in yesterday evening, they found your mistress busy writing letters. I suppose you can give me no idea to whom these letters were addressed?’

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t, sir. I was out in the evening. Perhaps Annie could tell you, though she’s a careless girl. Never cleared the coffee-cups away last night. That’s what happens when I’m not here to look after things.’

Poirot lifted his hand.

‘Since they have been left, Dorcas, leave them a little longer, I pray you. I should like to examine them.’

‘Very well, sir.’

‘What time did you go out last evening?’

‘About six o’clock, sir.’

‘Thank you, Dorcas, that is all I have to ask you.’ He rose and strolled to the window. ‘I have been admiring these flower beds. How many gardeners are employed here, by the way?’

‘Only three now, sir. Five, we had, before the war, when it was kept as a gentleman’s place should be. I wish you could have seen it then, sir. A fair sight it was. But now there’s only old Manning, and young William, and a new-fashioned woman gardener in breeches and such-like. Ah, these are dreadful times!’

‘The good times will come again, Dorcas. At least, we hope so. Now, will you send Annie to me here?’

‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.’

‘How did you know that Mrs Inglethorp took sleeping powders?’ I asked, in lively curiosity, as Dorcas left the room. ‘And about the lost key and the duplicate?’

‘One thing at a time. As to the sleeping powders, I knew by this.’ He suddenly produced a small cardboard box, such as chemists use for powders.

‘Where did you find it?’

‘In the wash-stand drawer in Mrs Inglethorp’s bedroom. It was Number Six of my catalogue.’

‘But I suppose, as the last powder was taken two days ago, it is not of much importance?’

‘Probably not, but do you notice anything that strikes you as peculiar about this box?’

I examined it closely.

‘No, I can’t say that I do.’

‘Look at the label.’

I read the label carefully: One powder to be taken at bedtime, if required. Mrs Inglethorp. ‘No, I see nothing unusual.’

‘Not the fact that there is no chemist’s name?’

‘Ah!’ I exclaimed. ‘To be sure, that is odd!’

‘Have you ever known a chemist to send out a box like that, without his printed name?’

‘No, I can’t say that I have.’

I was becoming quite excited, but Poirot damped my ardour by remarking:

‘Yet the explanation is quite simple. So do not intrigue yourself, my friend.’

An audible creaking proclaimed the approach of Annie, so I had no time to reply.

Annie was a fine, strapping girl, and was evidently labouring under intense excitement, mingled with a certain ghoulish enjoyment of the tragedy.

Poirot came to the point at once, with a business-like briskness.

‘I sent for you, Annie, because I thought you might be able to tell me something about the letters Mrs Inglethorp wrote last night. How many were there? And can you tell me any of the names and addresses?’

Annie considered.

‘There were four letters, sir. One was to Miss Howard, and one was to Mr Wells, the lawyer, and the other two I don’t think I remember, sir—oh, yes, one was to Ross’s, the caterers in Tadminster. The other one, I don’t remember.’

‘Think,’ urged Poirot.

Annie racked her brains in vain.

‘I’m sorry, sir, but it’s clean gone. I don’t think I can have noticed it.’

‘It does not matter,’ said Poirot, not betraying any sign of disappointment. ‘Now I want to ask you about something else. There is a saucepan in Mrs Inglethorp’s room with some cocoa in it. Did she have that every night?’

‘Yes, sir, it was put in her room every evening, and she warmed it up in the night—whenever she fancied it.’

‘What was it? Plain cocoa?’

‘Yes, sir, made with milk, with a teaspoonful of sugar, and two teaspoonfuls of rum in it.’

‘Who took it to her room?’

‘I did, sir.’

‘Always?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘At what time?’

‘When I went to draw the curtains, as a rule, sir.’

‘Did you bring it straight up from the kitchen then?’

‘No, sir, you see there’s not much room on the gas stove, so Cook used to make it early, before putting the vegetables on for supper. Then I used to bring it up, and put it on the table by the swing door, and take it into her room later.’

‘The swing door is in the left wing, is it not?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And the table, is it on this side of the door, or on the farther—servants’ side?’

‘It’s this side, sir.’

‘What time did you bring it up last night?’

‘About quarter-past seven, I should say, sir.’

‘And when did you take it into Mrs Inglethorp’s room?’

‘When I went to shut up, sir. About eight o’clock. Mrs Inglethorp came up to bed before I’d finished.’

‘Then, between seven-fifteen and eight o’clock, the cocoa was standing on the table in the left wing?’

‘Yes, sir.’ Annie had been growing redder and redder in the face, and now she blurted out unexpectedly:

‘And if there *was* salt in it, sir, it wasn’t me. I never took the salt near it.’

‘What makes you think there was salt in it?’ asked Poirot.

‘Seeing it on the tray, sir.’

‘You saw some salt on the tray?’

‘Yes. Coarse kitchen salt, it looked. I never noticed it when I took the tray up, but when I came to take it into the mistress’s room I saw it at once, and I suppose I ought to have taken it down again, and asked Cook to make some fresh. But I was in a hurry, because Dorcas was out, and I thought maybe the cocoa itself was all right, and the salt had only gone on the tray. So I dusted it off with my apron, and took it in.’

I had the utmost difficulty in controlling my excitement. Unknown to herself, Annie had provided us with an important piece of evidence. How she would have gaped if she had realized that her ‘coarse kitchen salt’ was strychnine, one of the most deadly poisons known to mankind. I marvelled at Poirot’s calm. His self-control was astonishing. I awaited his next question with impatience, but it disappointed me.

‘When you went into Mrs Inglethorp’s room, was the door leading into Miss Cynthia’s room bolted?’

‘Oh! Yes, sir; it always was. It had never been opened.’

‘And the door into Mr Inglethorp’s room? Did you notice if that was bolted too?’

Annie hesitated.

‘I couldn’t rightly say, sir; it was shut but I couldn’t say whether it was bolted or not.’

‘When you finally left the room, did Mrs Inglethorp bolt the door after you?’

‘No, sir, not then, but I expect she did later. She usually did lock it at night. The door into the passage, that is.’

‘Did you notice any candle grease on the floor when you did the room yesterday?’

‘Candle grease? Oh, no, sir. Mrs Inglethorp didn’t have a candle, only a reading-lamp.’

‘Then, if there had been a large patch of candle grease on the floor, you think you would have been sure to have seen it?’

‘Yes, sir, and I would have taken it out with a piece of blotting-paper and a hot iron.’

Then Poirot repeated the question he had put to Dorcas:

‘Did your mistress ever have a green dress?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Nor a mantle, nor a cape, nor a—how do you call it?—a sports coat?’

‘Not green, sir.’

Nor anyone else in the house?’

Annie reflected.

‘No, sir.’

‘You are sure of that?’

‘Quite sure.’

‘*Bien!* That is all I want to know. Thank you very much.’

With a nervous giggle, Annie took herself creakingly out of the room. My pent-up excitement burst forth.

‘Poirot,’ I cried, ‘I congratulate you! This is a great discovery.’

‘What is a great discovery?’

‘Why, that it was the cocoa and not the coffee that was poisoned. That explains everything! Of course, it did not take effect until the early morning, since the cocoa was only drunk in the middle of the night.’

‘So you think that the cocoa—mark well what I say, Hastings, the *cocoa*—contained strychnine?’

‘Of course! That salt on the tray, what else could it have been?’

‘It might have been salt,’ replied Poirot placidly.

I shrugged my shoulders. If he was going to take the matter that way, it was no good arguing with him. The idea crossed my mind, not for the first time, that poor old Poirot was growing old. Privately I thought it lucky that he had associated with him someone of a more receptive type of mind.

Poirot was surveying me with quietly twinkling eyes.

‘You are not pleased with me, *mon ami*?’

‘My dear Poirot,’ I said coldly, ‘it is not for me to dictate to you. You have a right to your own opinion, just as I have to mine.’

‘A most admirable sentiment,’ remarked Poirot, rising briskly to his feet. ‘Now I have finished with this room. By the way, whose is the smaller desk in the corner?’

‘Mr Inglethorp’s.’

‘Ah!’ He tried the roll top tentatively. ‘Locked. But perhaps one of Mrs Inglethorp’s keys would open it.’ He tried several, twisting and turning them with a practised hand, and finally uttering an ejaculation of

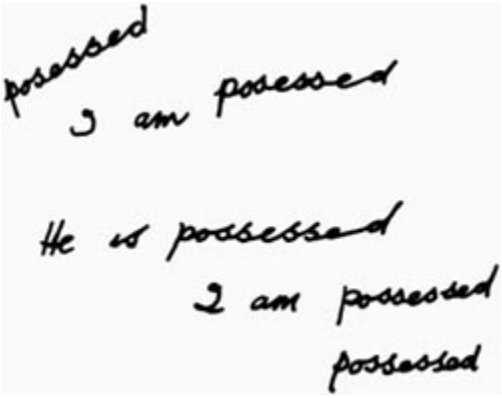
satisfaction. ‘*Voila!* It is not the key, but it will open it at a pinch.’ He slid back the roll top, and ran a rapid eye over the neatly filed papers. To my surprise, he did not examine them, merely remarking approvingly as he relocked the desk: ‘Decidedly, he is a man of method, this Mr Inglethorp!’

A ‘man of method’ was, in Poirot’s estimation, the highest praise that could be bestowed on any individual.

I felt that my friend was not what he had been as he rambled on disconnectedly:

‘There were no stamps in his desk, but there might have been, eh, *mon ami*? There might have been? Yes’—his eyes wandered round the room—‘this boudoir has nothing more to tell us. It did not yield much. Only this.’

He pulled a crumpled envelope out of his pocket, and tossed it over to me. It was rather a curious document. A plain, dirty-looking old envelope with a few words scrawled across it, apparently at random. The following is a facsimile of it:



Chapter 5

‘It isn’t Strychnine, is it?’

‘Where did you find this?’ I asked Poirot, in lively curiosity.

‘In the waste-paper basket. You recognize the handwriting?’

‘Yes, it is Mrs Inglethorp’s. But what does it mean?’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘I cannot say—but it is suggestive.’

A wild idea flashed across me. Was it possible that Mrs Inglethorp’s mind was deranged? Had she some fantastic idea of demoniacal possession? And, if that were so, was it not also possible that she might have taken her own life?

I was about to expound these theories to Poirot, when his own words distracted me.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘now to examine the coffee-cups!’

‘My dear Poirot! What on earth is the good of that, now that we know about the cocoa?’

‘Oh, *làlà!* That miserable cocoa!’ cried Poirot flippantly.

He laughed with apparent enjoyment, raising his arms to heaven in mock despair, in what I could not but consider the worst possible taste.

‘And, anyway,’ I said, with increasing coldness, ‘as Mrs Inglethorp took her coffee upstairs with her, I do not see what you expect to find, unless you consider it likely that we shall discover a packet of strychnine on the coffee tray!’

Poirot was sobered at once.

‘Come, come, my friend,’ he said, slipping his arm through mine. ‘*Ne vous fâchez pas!* Allow me to interest myself in my coffee cups, and I will respect your cocoa. There! Is it a bargain?’

He was so quaintly humorous that I was forced to laugh; and we went together to the drawing-room, where the coffee cups and tray remained undisturbed as we had left them.

Poirot made me recapitulate the scene of the night before, listening very carefully, and verifying the position of the various cups.

‘So Mrs Cavendish stood by the tray—and poured out. Yes. Then she came across to the window where you sat with Mademoiselle Cynthia. Yes. Here are the three cups. And the cup on the mantelpiece, half drunk, that would be Mr Lawrence Cavendish’s. And the one on the tray?’

‘John Cavendish’s. I saw him put it down there.’

‘Good. One, two, three, four, five—but where, then, is the cup of Mr Inglethorp?’

‘He does not take coffee.’

‘Then all are accounted for. One moment, my friend.’

With infinite care, he took a drop or two from the grounds in each cup, sealing them up in separate test tubes, tasting each in turn as he did so. His physiognomy underwent a curious change. An expression gathered there that I can only describe as half puzzled, and half relieved.

‘*Bien!*’ he said at last. ‘It is evident! I had an idea—but clearly I was mistaken. Yes, altogether I was mistaken. Yet it is strange. But no matter!’

And, with a characteristic shrug, he dismissed whatever it was that was worrying him from his mind. I could have told him from the beginning that this obsession of his over the coffee was bound to end in a blind alley, but I

restrained my tongue. After all, though he was old, Poirot had been a great man in his day.

‘Breakfast is ready,’ said John Cavendish, coming in from the hall. ‘You will breakfast with us, Monsieur Poirot?’

Poirot acquiesced. I observed John. Already he was almost restored to his normal self. The shock of the events of the last night had upset him temporarily, but his equable poise soon swung back to the normal. He was a man of very little imagination, in sharp contrast with his brother, who had, perhaps, too much.

Ever since the early hours of the morning, John had been hard at work, sending telegrams—one of the first had gone to Evelyn Howard—writing notices for the papers, and generally occupying himself with the melancholy duties that a death entails.

‘May I ask how things are proceeding?’ he said. ‘Do your investigations point to my mother having died a natural death—or—or must we prepare ourselves for the worst?’

‘I think, Mr Cavendish,’ said Poirot gravely, ‘that you would do well not to buoy yourself up with any false hopes. Can you tell me the views of the other members of the family?’

‘My brother Lawrence is convinced that we are making a fuss over nothing. He says that everything points to its being a simple case of heart failure.’

‘He does, does he? That is very interesting—very interesting,’ murmured Poirot softly. ‘And Mrs Cavendish?’

A faint cloud passed over John’s face.

‘I have not the least idea what my wife’s views on the subject are.’

The answer brought a momentary stiffness in its train. John broke the rather awkward silence by saying with a slight effort:

‘I told you, didn’t I, that Mr Inglethorp has returned?’

Poirot bent his head.

‘It’s an awkward position for all of us. Of course, one has to treat him as usual—but, hang it all, one’s gorge does rise at sitting down to eat with a possible murderer!’

Poirot nodded sympathetically.

‘I quite understand. It is a very difficult situation for you, Mr Cavendish. I would like to ask you one question. Mr Inglethorp’s reason for not returning last night was, I believe, that he had forgotten the latch-key. Is not that so?’

‘Yes.’

‘I suppose you are quite sure that the latch-key *was* forgotten—that he did not take it after all?’

‘I have no idea. I never thought of looking. We always keep it in the hall drawer. I’ll go and see if it’s there now.’

Poirot held up his hand with a faint smile.

‘No, no, Mr Cavendish, it is too late now. I am certain that you will find it. If Mr Inglethorp did take it, he has had ample time to replace it by now.’

‘But do you think –’

‘I think nothing. If anyone had chanced to look this morning before his return, and seen it there, it would have been a valuable point in his favour. That is all.’

John looked perplexed.

‘Do not worry,’ said Poirot smoothly. ‘I assure you that you need not let it trouble you. Since you are so kind, let us go and have some breakfast.’

Everyone was assembled in the dining-room. Under the circumstances, we were naturally not a cheerful party. The reaction after a shock is always trying, and I think we were suffering from it. Decorum and good breeding naturally enjoined that our demeanour should be much as usual, yet I could not help wondering if this self-control were really a matter of great difficulty. There were no red eyes, no signs of secretly indulged grief. I felt that I was right in my opinion that Dorcas was the person most affected by the personal side of the tragedy.

I pass over Alfred Inglethorp, who acted the bereaved widower in a manner that I felt to be disgusting in its hypocrisy. Did he know that we suspected him, I wondered. Surely he could not be unaware of the fact, conceal it as we would. Did he feel some secret stirring of fear, or was he confident that his crime would go unpunished? Surely the suspicion in the atmosphere must warn him that he was already a marked man.

But did everyone suspect him? What about Mrs Cavendish? I watched her as she sat at the head of the table, graceful, composed, enigmatic. In her soft grey frock, with white ruffles at the wrists falling over her slender hands, she looked very beautiful. When she chose, however, her face could be sphinx-like in its inscrutability. She was very silent, hardly opening her lips, and yet in some queer way I felt that the great strength of her personality was dominating us all.

And little Cynthia? Did she suspect? She looked very tired and ill, I thought. The heaviness and languor of her manner were very marked. I asked her if she were feeling ill, and she answered frankly:

‘Yes, I’ve got the most beastly headache.’

‘Have another cup of coffee, mademoiselle?’ said Poirot solicitously. ‘It will revive you. It is unparalleled for the *mal de te^te*.’ He jumped up and took her cup.

‘No sugar,’ said Cynthia, watching him, as he picked up the sugar-tongs.

‘No sugar? You abandon it in the war-time, eh?’

‘No, I never take it in coffee.’

‘*Sacré!*’ murmured Poirot to himself, as he brought back the replenished cup.

Only I heard him, and glancing up curiously at the little man I saw that his face was working with suppressed excitement, and his eyes were as green as a cat’s. He had heard or seen something that had affected him strongly—but what was it? I do not usually label myself as dense, but I must confess that nothing out of the ordinary had attracted *my* attention.

In another moment, the door opened and Dorcas appeared. ‘Mr Wells to see you, sir,’ she said to John.

I remembered the name as being that of the lawyer to whom Mrs Inglethorp had written the night before.

John rose immediately.

‘Show him into my study.’ Then he turned to us. ‘My mother’s lawyer,’ he explained. And in a lower voice: ‘He is also Coroner—you understand. Perhaps you would like to come with me?’

We acquiesced and followed him out of the room. John strode on ahead and I took the opportunity of whispering to Poirot:

‘There will be an inquest then?’

Poirot nodded absently. He seemed absorbed in thought; so much so that my curiosity was aroused.

‘What is it? You are not attending to what I say.’

‘It is true, my friend. I am much worried.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Mademoiselle Cynthia does not take sugar in her coffee.’

‘What? You cannot be serious?’

‘But I am most serious. Ah, there is something there that I do not understand. My instinct was right.’

‘What instinct?’

‘The instinct that led me to insist on examining those coffee cups. *Chut!* no more now!’

We followed John into his study, and he closed the door behind us.

Mr Wells was a pleasant man of middle-age, with keen eyes, and the typical lawyer’s mouth. John introduced us both, and explained the reason of our presence.

‘You will understand, Wells,’ he added, ‘that this is all strictly private. We are still hoping that there will turn out to be no need for investigation of any kind.’

‘Quite so, quite so,’ said Mr Wells soothingly. ‘I wish we could have spared you the pain and publicity of an inquest, but, of course, it’s quite unavoidable in the absence of a doctor’s certificate.’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘Clever man, Bauerstein. Great authority on toxicology, I believe.’

‘Indeed,’ said John with a certain stiffness in his manner. Then he added rather hesitatingly: ‘Shall we have to appear as witnesses—all of us, I mean?’

‘You, of course—and ah—er—Mr—er—Inglethorp.’

A slight pause ensued before the lawyer went on in his soothing manner:

‘Any other evidence will be simply confirmatory, a mere matter of form.’

‘I see.’

A faint expression of relief swept over John’s face. It puzzled me, for I saw no occasion for it.

‘If you know of nothing to the contrary,’ pursued Mr Wells, ‘I had thought of Friday. That will give us plenty of time for the doctor’s report. The post-mortem is to take place tonight, I believe?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then the arrangement will suit you?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘I need not tell you, my dear Cavendish, how distressed I am at this most tragic affair.’

‘Can you give us no help in solving it, monsieur?’ interposed Poirot, speaking for the first time since we had entered the room.

‘I?’

‘Yes, we heard that Mrs Inglethorp wrote to you last night. You should have received the letter this morning.’

‘I did, but it contains no information. It is merely a note asking me to call upon her this morning, as she wanted my advice on a matter of great importance.’

‘She gave you no hint as to what that matter might be?’

‘Unfortunately, no.’

‘That is a pity,’ said John.

‘A great pity,’ agreed Poirot gravely.

There was a silence. Poirot remained lost in thought for a few minutes. Finally he turned to the lawyer again.

‘Mr Wells, there is one thing I should like to ask you—that is, if it is not against professional etiquette. In the event of Mrs Inglethorp’s death, who would inherit her money?’

The lawyer hesitated a moment, and then replied:

‘The knowledge will be public property very soon, so if Mr Cavendish does not object –’

‘Not at all,’ interpolated John.

‘I do not see any reason why I should not answer your question. By her last will, dated August of last year, after various unimportant legacies to servants, etc., she gave her entire fortune to her stepson, Mr John Cavendish.’

‘Was not that—pardon the question, Mr Cavendish—rather unfair to her other stepson, Mr Lawrence Cavendish?’

‘No, I do not think so. You see, under the terms of their father’s will, while John inherited the property, Lawrence, at his stepmother’s death, would come into a considerable sum of money. Mrs Inglethorp left her money to her elder stepson, knowing that he would have to keep up Styles. It was, to my mind, a very fair and equitable distribution.’

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

‘I see. But I am right in saying, am I not, that by your English law that will was automatically revoked when Mrs Inglethorp remarried?’

Mr Wells bowed his head.

‘As I was about to proceed, Monsieur Poirot, that document is now null and void.’

‘*Hein!*’ said Poirot. He reflected for a moment, and then asked: ‘Was Mrs Inglethorp herself aware of that fact?’

‘I do not know. She may have been.’

‘She was,’ said John unexpectedly. ‘We were discussing the matter of wills being revoked by marriage only yesterday.’

‘Ah! One more question, Mr Wells. You say “her last will”. Had Mrs Inglethorp, then, made several former wills?’

‘On an average, she made a new will at least once a year,’ said Mr Wells imperturbably. ‘She was given to changing her mind as to her testamentary dispositions, now benefiting one, now another member of her family.’

‘Suppose,’ suggested Poirot, ‘that, unknown to you, she had made a new will in favour of someone who was not, in any sense of the word, a member of the family—we will say Miss Howard, for instance—would you be surprised?’

‘Not in the least.’

‘Ah!’ Poirot seemed to have exhausted his questions.

I drew close to him, while John and the lawyer were debating the question of going through Mrs Inglethorp’s papers.

‘Do you think Mrs Inglethorp made a will leaving all her money to Miss Howard?’ I asked in a low voice, with some curiosity.

Poirot smiled.

‘No.’

‘Then why did you ask?’

‘Hush!’

John Cavendish had turned to Poirot.

‘Will you come with us, Monsieur Poirot? We are going through my mother’s papers. Mr Inglethorp is quite willing to leave it entirely to Mr Wells and myself.’

‘Which simplifies matters very much,’ murmured the lawyer. ‘As technically, of course, he was entitled –’ He did not finish the sentence.

‘We will look through the desk in the boudoir first,’ explained John, ‘and go up to her bedroom afterwards. She kept her most important papers in a purple despatch-case, which we must look through carefully.’

‘Yes,’ said the lawyer, ‘it is quite possible that there may be a later will than the one in my possession.’

‘There *is* a later will.’ It was Poirot who spoke.

‘What?’ John and the lawyer looked at him startled.

‘Or rather,’ pursued my friend imperturbably, ‘there *was* one.’

‘What do you mean—there was one? Where is it now?’

‘Burnt!’

‘Burnt?’

‘Yes. See here.’ He took out the charred fragment we had found in the grate in Mrs Inglethorp’s room, and handed it to the lawyer with a brief explanation of when and where he had found it.

‘But possibly this is an old will?’

‘I do not think so. In fact I am almost certain that it was made no earlier than yesterday afternoon.’

‘What?’ ‘Impossible!’ broke simultaneously from both men.

Poirot turned to John.

‘If you will allow me to send for your gardener, I will prove it to you.’

‘Oh, of course—but I don’t see –’

Poirot raised his hand.

‘Do as I ask you. Afterwards you shall question as much as you please.’

‘Very well.’ He rang the bell.

Dorcas answered it in due course.

‘Dorcas, will you tell Manning to come round and speak to me here.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Dorcas withdrew.

We waited in a tense silence. Poirot alone seemed perfectly at his ease, and dusted a forgotten corner of the bookcase.

The clumping of hobnailed boots on the gravel outside proclaimed the approach of Manning. John looked questioningly at Poirot. The latter nodded.

‘Come inside, Manning,’ said John, ‘I want to speak to you.’

Manning came slowly and hesitatingly through the french window, and stood as near it as he could. He held his cap in his hands, twisting it very carefully round and round. His back was much bent, though he was probably not as old as he looked, but his eyes were sharp and intelligent, and belied his slow and rather cautious speech.

‘Manning,’ said John, ‘this gentleman will put some questions to you which I want you to answer.’

‘Yessir,’ mumbled Manning.

Poirot stepped forward briskly. Manning's eye swept over him with a faint contempt.

'You were planting a bed of begonias round by the south side of the house yesterday afternoon, were you not, Manning?'

'Yes, sir, me and Willum.'

'And Mrs Inglethorp came to the window and called you, did she not?'

'Yes, sir, she did.'

'Tell me in your own words exactly what happened after that.'

'Well, sir, nothing much. She just told Willum to go on his bicycle down to the village, and bring back a form of will, or such-like—I don't know what exactly—she wrote it down for him.'

'Well?'

'Well, he did, sir.'

'And what happened next?'

'We went on with the begonias, sir.'

'Did not Mrs Inglethorp call you again?'

'Yes, sir, both me and Willum, she called.'

'And then?'

'She made us come right in, and sign our names at the bottom of a long paper—under where she'd signed.'

'Did you see anything of what was written above her signature?' asked Poirot sharply.

'No, sir, there was a bit of blotting paper over that part.'

‘And you signed where she told you?’

‘Yes, sir, first me and then Willum.’

‘What did she do with it afterwards?’

‘Well, sir, she slipped it into a long envelope, and put it inside a sort of purple box that was standing on the desk.’

‘What time was it when she first called you?’

‘About four, I should say, sir.’

‘Not earlier? Couldn’t it have been about half-past three?’

‘No, I shouldn’t say so, sir. It would be more likely to be a bit after four —not before it.’

‘Thank you, Manning, that will do,’ said Poirot pleasantly.

The gardener glanced at his master, who nodded, where-upon Manning lifted a finger to his forehead with a low mumble, and backed cautiously out of the window.

We all looked at each other.

‘Good heavens!’ murmured John. ‘What an extraordinary coincidence.’

‘How—a coincidence?’

‘That my mother should have made a will on the very day of her death!’

Mr Wells cleared his throat and remarked drily:

‘Are you so sure it is a coincidence, Cavendish?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Your mother, you tell me, had a violent quarrel with—someone yesterday afternoon –’

‘What do you mean?’ cried John again. There was a tremor in his voice, and he had gone very pale.

‘In consequence of that quarrel, your mother very suddenly and hurriedly makes a new will. The contents of that will we shall never know. She told no one of its provisions. This morning, no doubt, she would have consulted me on the subject—but she had no chance. The will disappears, and she takes its secret with her to her grave. Cavendish, I much fear there is no coincidence there. Monsieur Poirot, I am sure you agree with me that the facts are very suggestive.’

‘Suggestive, or not,’ interrupted John, ‘we are most grateful to Monsieur Poirot for elucidating the matter. But for him, we should never have known of this will. I suppose I may not ask you, monsieur, what first led you to suspect the fact?’

Poirot smiled and answered:

‘A scribbled-over old envelope, and a freshly planted bed of begonias.’

John, I think, would have pressed his questions further, but at that moment the loud purr of a motor was audible, and we all turned to the window as it swept past.

‘Evie!’ cried John. ‘Excuse me, Wells.’ He went hurriedly out into the hall.

Poirot looked inquiringly at me.

‘Miss Howard,’ I explained.

‘Ah, I am glad she has come. There is a woman with a head and a heart too, Hastings. Though the good God gave her no beauty!’

I followed John’s example, and went out into the hall, where Miss Howard was endeavouring to extricate herself from the voluminous mass of

veils that enveloped her head. As her eyes fell on me, a sudden pang of guilt shot through me. This was the woman who had warned me so earnestly, and to whose warning I had, alas, paid no heed! How soon, and how contemptuously, I had dismissed it from my mind. Now that she had been proved justified in so tragic a manner, I felt ashamed. She had known Alfred Inglethorp only too well. I wondered whether, if she had remained at Styles, the tragedy would have taken place, or would the man have feared her watchful eyes?

I was relieved when she shook me by the hand, with her well remembered painful grip. The eyes that met mine were sad, but not reproachful; that she had been crying, bitterly, I could tell by the redness of her eyelids, but her manner was unchanged from its old blunt gruffness.

‘Started the moment I got the wire. Just come off night duty. Hired car. Quickest way to get here.’

‘Have you had anything to eat this morning, Evie?’ asked John.

‘No.’

‘I thought not. Come along, breakfast’s not cleared away yet, and they’ll make you some fresh tea.’ He turned to me. ‘Look after her, Hastings, will you? Wells is waiting for me. Oh, here’s Monsieur Poirot. He’s helping us, you know, Evie.’

Miss Howard shook hands with Poirot, but glanced suspiciously over her shoulder at John.

‘What do you mean—helping us?’

‘Helping us to investigate.’

‘Nothing to investigate. Have they taken him to prison yet?’

‘Taken who to prison?’

‘Who? Alfred Inglethorp, of course!’

‘My dear Evie, do be careful. Lawrence is of the opinion that my mother died from heart seizure.’

‘More fool, Lawrence!’ retorted Miss Howard. ‘Of course Alfred Inglethorp murdered poor Emily—as I always told you he would.’

‘My dear Evie, don’t shout so. Whatever we may think or suspect, it is better to say as little as possible for the present. The inquest isn’t until Friday.’

‘Not until fiddlesticks!’ The snort Miss Howard gave was truly magnificent. ‘You’re all off your heads. The man will be out of the country by then. If he’s any sense, he won’t stay here tamely and wait to be hanged.’

John Cavendish looked at her helplessly.

‘I know what it is,’ she accused him, ‘you’ve been listening to the doctors. Never should. What do they know? Nothing at all—or just enough to make them dangerous. I ought to know—my own father was a doctor. That little Wilkins is about the greatest fool that even I have ever seen. Heart seizure! Sort of thing he would say. Anyone with any sense could see at once that her husband had poisoned her. I always said he’d murder her in her bed, poor soul. Now he’s done it. And all you can do is to murmur silly things about “heart seizure” and “inquest on Friday”. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, John Cavendish.’

‘What do you want me to do?’ asked John, unable to help a faint smile. ‘Dash it all, Evie, I can’t haul him down to the local police station by the scruff of his neck.’

‘Well, you might do something. Find out how he did it. He’s a crafty beggar. Dare say he soaked fly papers. Ask Cook if she’s missed any.’

It occurred to me very forcibly at that moment that to harbour Miss Howard and Alfred Inglethorp under the same roof, and keep the peace between them, was likely to prove a Herculean task, and I did not envy John. I could see by the expression of his face that he fully appreciated the

difficulty of the position. For the moment, he sought refuge in retreat, and left the room precipitately.

Dorcas brought in fresh tea. As she left the room, Poirot came over from the window where he had been standing, and sat down facing Miss Howard.

‘Mademoiselle,’ he said gravely, ‘I want to ask you something.’

‘Ask away,’ said the lady, eyeing him with some disfavour.

‘I want to be able to count upon your help.’

‘I’ll help you to hang Alfred with pleasure,’ she replied gruffly. ‘Hanging’s too good for him. Ought to be drawn and quartered, like in good old times.’

‘We are at one then,’ said Poirot, ‘for I, too, want to hang the criminal.’

‘Alfred Inglethorp?’

‘Him, or another.’

‘No question of another. Poor Emily was never murdered until *he* came along. I don’t say she wasn’t surrounded by sharks—she was. But it was only her purse they were after. Her life was safe enough. But along comes Mr Alfred Inglethorp—and within two months—hey presto!’

‘Believe me, Miss Howard,’ said Poirot very earnestly, ‘if Mr Inglethorp is the man, he shall not escape me. On my honour, I will hang him as high as Haman!’

‘That’s better,’ said Miss Howard more enthusiastically.

‘But I must ask you to trust me. Now your help may be very valuable to me. I will tell you why. Because, in all this house of mourning, yours are the only eyes that have wept.’

Miss Howard blinked, and a new note crept into the gruffness of her voice.

‘If you mean that I was fond of her—yes, I was. You know, Emily was a selfish old woman in her way. She was very generous, but she always wanted a return. She never let people forget what she had done for them—and, that way, she missed love. Don’t think she ever realized it, though, or felt the lack of it. Hope not, anyway. I was on a different footing. I took my stand from the first. “So many pounds a year I’m worth to you. Well and good. But not a penny piece besides—not a pair of gloves, nor a theatre ticket.” She didn’t understand—was very offended sometimes. Said I was foolishly proud. It wasn’t that—but I couldn’t explain. Anyway, I kept my self-respect. And so, out of the whole bunch, I was the only one who could allow myself to be fond of her. I watched over her. I guarded her from the lot of them. And then a glib-tongued scoundrel comes along, and pooh! all my years of devotion go for nothing.’

Poirot nodded sympathetically.

‘I understand, mademoiselle, I understand all you feel. It is most natural. You think that we are lukewarm—that we lack fire and energy—but trust me, it is not so.’

John stuck his head in at this juncture, and invited us both to come up to Mrs Inglethorp’s room, as he and Mr Wells had finished looking through the desk in the boudoir.

As we went up the stairs, John looked back to the dining-room, and lowered his voice confidentially:

‘Look here, what’s going to happen when these two meet?’

I shook my head helplessly.

‘I’ve told Mary to keep them apart if she can.’

‘Will she be able to do so?’

‘The Lord only knows. There’s one thing, Inglethorp himself won’t be too keen on meeting her.’

‘You’ve got the keys still, haven’t you, Poirot?’ I asked, as we reached the door of the locked room.

Taking the keys from Poirot, John unlocked it, and we all passed in. The lawyer went straight to the desk, and John followed him.

‘My mother kept most of her important papers in this despatch-case, I believe,’ he said.

Poirot drew out the small bunch of keys.

‘Permit me. I locked it, out of precaution, this morning.’

‘But it’s not locked now.’

‘Impossible!’

‘See.’ And John lifted the lid as he spoke.

‘*Mille tonnerres!*’ cried Poirot, dumbfounded. ‘And I—who have both the keys in my pocket!’ He flung himself upon the case. Suddenly he stiffened. ‘*En voilà une affaire!* This lock has been forced!’

‘What?’

Poirot laid down the case again.

‘But who forced it? Why should they? When? But the door was locked!’ These exclamations burst from us disjointedly.

Poirot answered them categorically—almost mechanically.

‘Who? That is the question. Why? Ah, if I only knew. When? Since I was here an hour ago. As to the door being locked, it is a very ordinary lock. Probably any other of the doorkeys in this passage would fit it.’

We stared at one another blankly. Poirot had walked over to the mantelpiece. He was outwardly calm, but I noticed his hands, which from long force of habit were mechanically straightening the spill vases on the mantelpiece, were shaking violently.

‘See here, it was like this,’ he said at last. ‘There was something in that case—some piece of evidence, slight in itself perhaps, but still enough of a clue to connect the murderer with the crime. It was vital to him that it should be destroyed before it was discovered and its significance appreciated. Therefore, he took the risk, the great risk, of coming in here. Finding the case locked, he was obliged to force it, thus betraying his presence. For him to take that risk, it must have been something of great importance.’

‘But what was it?’

‘Ah!’ cried Poirot, with a gesture of anger. ‘That, I do not know! A document of some kind, without doubt, possibly the scrap of paper Dorcas saw in her hand yesterday afternoon. And I’—his anger burst forth freely —‘miserable animal that I am! I guessed nothing! I have behaved like an imbecile! I should never have left that case here. I should have carried it away with me. Ah, triple pig! And now it is gone. It is destroyed—but is it destroyed? Is there not yet a chance—we must leave no stone unturned –’

He rushed like a madman from the room, and I followed him as soon as I had sufficiently recovered my wits. But, by the time I had reached the top of the stairs, he was out of sight.

Mary Cavendish was standing where the staircase branched, staring down into the hall in the direction in which he had disappeared.

‘What has happened to your extraordinary little friend, Mr Hastings? He has just rushed past me like a mad bull.’

‘He’s rather upset about something,’ I remarked feebly. I really did not know how much Poirot would wish me to disclose. As I saw a faint smile gather on Mrs Cavendish’s expressive mouth, I endeavoured to try and turn the conversation by saying: ‘They haven’t met yet, have they?’

‘Who?’

‘Mr Inglethorp and Miss Howard.’

She looked at me in rather a disconcerting manner.

‘Do you think it would be such a disaster if they did meet?’

‘Well, don’t you?’ I said, rather taken aback.

‘No.’ She was smiling in her quiet way. ‘I should like to see a good flare up. It would clear the air. At present we are all thinking so much, and saying so little.’

‘John doesn’t think so,’ I remarked. ‘He’s anxious to keep them apart.’

‘Oh, John!’

Something in her tone fired me, and I blurted out:

‘Old John’s an awfully good sort.’

She studied me curiously for a minute or two, and then said, to my great surprise:

‘You are loyal to your friend. I like you for that.’

‘Aren’t you my friend, too?’

‘I am a very bad friend.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because it is true. I am charming to my friends one day, and forget all about them the next.’

I don’t know what impelled me, but I was nettled, and I said foolishly and not in the best of taste:

‘Yet you seem to be invariably charming to Dr Bauerstein!’

Instantly I regretted my words. Her face stiffened. I had the impression of a steel curtain coming down and blotting out the real woman. Without a word, she turned and went swiftly up the stairs, whilst I stood like an idiot gaping after her.

I was recalled to other matters by a frightful row going on below. I could hear Poirot shouting and expounding. I was vexed to think that my diplomacy had been in vain. The little man appeared to be taking the whole house into his confidence, a proceeding of which I, for one, doubted the wisdom. Once again I could not help regretting that my friend was so prone to lose his head in moments of excitement. I stepped briskly down the stairs. The sight of me calmed Poirot almost immediately. I drew him aside.

‘My dear fellow,’ I said, ‘is this wise? Surely you don’t want the whole house to know of this occurrence? You are actually playing into the criminal’s hands.’

‘You think so, Hastings?’

‘I am sure of it.’

‘Well, well, my friend, I will be guided by you.’

‘Good. Although, unfortunately, it is a little too late now.’

‘True.’

He looked so crestfallen and abashed that I felt quite sorry, though I still thought my rebuke a just and wise one.

‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘let us go, *mon ami*.’

‘You have finished here?’

‘For the moment, yes. You will walk back with me to the village?’

‘Willingly.’

He picked up his little suitcase, and we went out through the open window in the drawing-room. Cynthia Murdoch was just coming in, and Poirot stood aside to let her pass.

‘Excuse me, mademoiselle, one minute.’

‘Yes?’ she turned inquiringly.

‘Did you ever make up Mrs Inglethorp’s medicines?’

A slight flush rose in her face, as she answered rather constrainedly:

‘No.’

‘Only her powders?’

The flush deepened as Cynthia replied:

‘Oh, yes, I did make up some sleeping powders for her once.’

‘These?’

Poirot produced the empty box which had contained powders.

She nodded.

‘Can you tell me what they were? Sulphonal? Veronal?’

‘No, they were bromide powders.’

‘Ah! Thank you, mademoiselle; good morning.’

As we walked briskly away from the house, I glanced at him more than once. I had often before noticed that, if anything excited him, his eyes turned green like a cat’s. They were shining like emeralds now.

‘My friend,’ he broke out at last, ‘I have a little idea, a very strange, and probably utterly impossible idea. And yet—it fits in.’

I shrugged my shoulders. I privately thought that Poirot was rather too much given to these fantastic ideas. In this case, surely, the truth was only too plain and apparent.

‘So that is the explanation of the blank label on the box,’ I remarked. ‘Very simple, as you said. I really wonder that I did not think of it myself.’

Poirot did not appear to be listening to me.

‘They have made one more discovery, *là-bas*,’ he observed, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Styles. ‘Mr Wells told me as we were going upstairs.’

‘What was it?’

‘Locked up in the desk in the boudoir, they found a will of Mrs Inglethorp’s, dated before her marriage, leaving her fortune to Alfred Inglethorp. It must have been made just at the time they were engaged. It came quite as a surprise to Wells—and to John Cavendish also. It was written on one of those printed will forms, and witnessed by two of the servants—not Dorcas.’

‘Did Mr Inglethorp know of it?’

‘He says not.’

‘One might take that with a grain of salt,’ I remarked sceptically. ‘All these wills are very confusing. Tell me, how did those scribbled words on the envelope help you to discover that a will was made yesterday afternoon?’

Poirot smiled.

‘*Mon ami*, have you ever, when writing a letter, been arrested by the fact that you did not know how to spell a certain word?’

‘Yes, often. I suppose everyone has.’

‘Exactly. And have you not, in such a case, tried the word once or twice on the edge of the blotting-paper, or a spare scrap of paper, to see if it looked right? Well, that is what Mrs Inglethorp did. You will notice that the word “possessed” is spelt first with one “s” and subsequently with two—correctly. To make sure, she had further tried it in a sentence, thus: “I am possessed.” Now, what did that tell me? It told me that Mrs Inglethorp had been writing the word “possessed” that afternoon, and, having the fragment of paper found in the grate fresh in my mind, the possibility of a will—a document almost certain to contain that word—occurred to me at once. This possibility was confirmed by a further circumstance. In the general confusion, the boudoir had not been swept that morning, and near the desk were several traces of brown mould and earth. The weather had been perfectly fine for some days, and no ordinary boots would have left such a heavy deposit.

‘I strolled to the window, and saw at once that the begonia beds had been newly planted. The mould in the beds was exactly similar to that on the floor of the boudoir, and also I learnt from you that they *had* been planted yesterday afternoon. I was now sure that one, or possibly both of the gardeners—for there were two sets of footprints in the bed—had entered the boudoir, for if Mrs Inglethorp had merely wished to speak to them she would in all probability have stood at the window, and they would not have come into the room at all. I was now quite convinced that she had made a fresh will, and had called the two gardeners in to witness her signature. Events proved that I was right in my supposition.’

‘That was very ingenious,’ I could not help admitting. ‘I must confess that the conclusions I drew from those few scribbled words were quite erroneous.’

He smiled.

‘You gave too much rein to your imagination. Imagination is a good servant, and a bad master. The simplest explanation is always the most likely.’

‘Another point—how did you know that the key of the despatch-case had been lost?’

‘I did not know it. It was a guess that turned out to be correct. You observed that it had a piece of twisted wire through the handle. That suggested to me at once that it had possibly been wrenched off a flimsy key-ring. Now, if it had been lost and recovered, Mrs Inglethorp would at once have replaced it on her bunch; but on her bunch I found what was obviously the duplicate key, very new and bright, which led me to the hypothesis that somebody else had inserted the original key in the lock of the despatch-case.’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘Alfred Inglethorp, without a doubt.’

Poirot looked at me curiously.

‘You are very sure of his guilt?’

‘Well, naturally. Every fresh circumstance seems to establish it more clearly.’

‘On the contrary,’ said Poirot quietly, ‘there are several points in his favour.’

‘Oh, come now!’

‘Yes.’

‘I see only one.’

‘And that?’

‘That he was not in the house last night.’

‘“Bad shot!” as you English say! You have chosen the one point that to my mind tells against him.’

‘How is that?’

‘Because if Mr Inglethorp knew that his wife would be poisoned last night, he would certainly have arranged to be away from the house. His excuse was an obviously trumped up one. That leaves us two possibilities:

either he knew what was going to happen or he had a reason of his own for his absence.'

'And that reason?' I asked sceptically.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'How should I know? Discreditable, without doubt. This Mr Inglethorp, I should say, is somewhat of a scoundrel—but that does not of necessity make him a murderer.'

I shook my head, unconvinced.

'We do not agree, eh?' said Poirot. 'Well, let us leave it. Time will show which of us is right. Now let us turn to other aspects of the case. What do you make of the fact that all the doors of the bedroom were bolted on the inside?'

'Well –' I considered. 'One must look at it logically.'

'True.'

'I should put it this way. The doors *were* bolted—our own eyes have told us that—yet the presence of the candle grease on the floor, and the destruction of the will, prove that during the night someone entered the room. You agree so far?'

'Perfectly. Put with admirable clearness. Proceed.'

'Well,' I said, encouraged, 'as the person who entered did not do so by the window, nor by miraculous means, it follows that the door must have been opened from inside by Mrs Inglethorp herself. That strengthens the conviction that the person in question was her husband. She would naturally open the door to her own husband.'

Poirot shook his head.

'Why should she? She had bolted the door leading into his room—a most unusual proceeding on her part—she had had a most violent quarrel

with him that very afternoon. No, he was the last person she would admit.'

'But you agree with me that the door must have been opened by Mrs Inglethorp herself ?'

'There is another possibility. She may have forgotten to bolt the door into the passage when she went up to bed, and have got up later, towards morning, and bolted it then.'

'Poirot, is that seriously your opinion?'

'No, I do not say it is so, but it might be. Now, turn to another feature, what do you make of the scrap of conversation you overheard between Mrs Cavendish and her mother-in-law?'

'I had forgotten that,' I said thoughtfully. 'That is as enigmatical as ever. It seems incredible that a woman like Mrs Cavendish, proud and reticent to the last degree, should interfere so violently in what was certainly not her affair.'

'Precisely. It was an astonishing thing for a woman of her breeding to do.'

'It is certainly curious,' I agreed. 'Still, it is unimportant, and need not be taken into account.'

A groan burst from Poirot.

'What have I always told you? Everything must be taken into account. If the fact will not fit the theory—let the theory go.'

'Well, we shall see,' I said, nettled.

'Yes, we shall see.'

We had reached Leastways Cottage, and Poirot ushered me upstairs to his own room. He offered me one of the tiny Russian cigarettes he himself occasionally smoked. I was amused to notice that he stowed away the used

matches most carefully in a little china pot. My momentary annoyance vanished.

Poirot had placed our two chairs in front of the open window which commanded a view of the village street. The fresh air blew in warm and pleasant. It was going to be a hot day.

Suddenly my attention was arrested by a weedylooking young man rushing down the street at a great pace. It was the expression on his face that was extraordinary—a curious mingling of terror and agitation.

‘Look, Poirot!’ I said.

He leant forward. ‘*Tiens!*’ he said. ‘It is Mr Mace, from the chemist’s shop. He is coming here.’

The young man came to a halt before Leastways Cottage, and, after hesitating a moment, pounded vigorously at the door.

‘A little minute,’ cried Poirot from the window. ‘I come.’

Motioning to me to follow him, he ran swiftly down the stairs and opened the door. Mr Mace began at once.

‘Oh, Mr Poirot, I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but I heard that you’d just come back from the Hall?’

‘Yes, we have.’

The young man moistened his dry lips. His face was working curiously.

‘It’s all over the village about old Mrs Inglethorp dying so suddenly. They do say –’ he lowered his voice cautiously—‘that it’s poison?’

Poirot’s face remained quite impassive.

‘Only the doctors can tell us that, Mr Mace.’

‘Yes, exactly—of course –’ The young man hesitated, and then his agitation was too much for him. He clutched Poirot by the arm, and sank his voice to a whisper: ‘Just tell me this, Mr Poirot, it isn’t—it isn’t strychnine, is it?’

I hardly heard what Poirot replied. Something evidently of a non-committal nature. The young man departed, and as he closed the door Poirot’s eyes met mine.

‘Yes,’ he said, nodding gravely. ‘He will have evidence to give at the inquest.’

We went slowly upstairs again. I was opening my lips, when Poirot stopped me with a gesture of his hand.

‘Not now, not now, *mon ami*. I have need of reflection. My mind is in some disorder—which is not well.’

For about ten minutes he sat in dead silence, perfectly still, except for several expressive motions of his eyebrows, and all the time his eyes grew steadily greener. At last he heaved a deep sigh.

‘It is well. The bad moment has passed. Now all is arranged and classified. One must never permit confusion. The case is not clear yet—no. For it is of the most complicated! It puzzles *me*. Me, Hercule Poirot! There are two facts of significance.’

‘And what are they?’

‘The first is the state of the weather yesterday. That is very important.’

‘But it was a glorious day!’ I interrupted. ‘Poirot, you’re pulling my leg!’

‘Not at all. The thermometer registered 80° in the shade. Do not forget that, my friend. It is the key to the whole riddle!’

‘And the second point?’ I asked.

‘The important fact that Monsieur Inglethorp wears very peculiar clothes, has a black beard, and uses glasses.’

‘Poirot, I cannot believe you are serious.’

‘I am absolutely serious, my friend.’

‘But this is childish!’

‘No, it is very momentous.’

‘And supposing the Coroner’s jury returns a verdict of Wilful Murder against Alfred Inglethorp. What becomes of your theories, then?’

‘They would not be shaken because twelve stupid men had happened to make a mistake! But that will not occur. For one thing, a country jury is not anxious to take responsibility upon itself, and Mr Inglethorp stands practically in the position of local squire. Also,’ he added placidly, ‘*I* should not allow it!’

‘*You* would not allow it?’

‘No.’

I looked at the extraordinary little man, divided between annoyance and amusement. He was so tremendously sure of himself. As though he read my thoughts, he nodded gently.

‘Oh, yes, *mon ami*, I would do what I say.’ He got up and laid his hand on my shoulder. His physiognomy underwent a complete change. Tears came into his eyes. ‘In all this, you see, I think of the poor Mrs Inglethorp who is dead. She was not extravagantly loved—no. But she was very good to us Belgians—I owe her a debt.’

I endeavoured to interrupt, but Poirot swept on.

‘Let me tell you this, Hastings. She would never forgive me if I let Alfred Inglethorp, her husband, be arrested *now*—when a word from me could save him!’

Chapter 6

The Inquest

In the interval before the inquest, Poirot was unfailing in his activity. Twice he was closeted with Mr Wells. He also took long walks into the country. I rather resented his not taking me into his confidence, the more so as I could not in the least guess what he was driving at.

It occurred to me that he might have been making inquiries at Raikes's farm; so, finding him out when I called at Leastways Cottage on Wednesday evening, I walked over there by the fields, hoping to meet him. But there was no sign of him, and I hesitated to go right up to the farm itself. As I walked away, I met an aged rustic, who leered at me cunningly.

'You'm from the Hall, bain't you?' he asked.

'Yes. I'm looking for a friend of mine whom I thought might have walked this way.'

'A little chap? As waves his hands when he talks? One of them Belgies from the village?'

'Yes,' I said eagerly. 'He has been here, then?'

'Oh, ay, he's been here, right enough. More'n once too. Friend of yours, is he? Ah, you gentlemen from the Hall—you'm a pretty lot!' And he leered more jocosely than ever.

'Why, do the gentlemen from the Hall come here often?' I asked, as carelessly as I could.

He winked at me knowingly.

'*One* does, mister. Naming no names, mind. And a very liberal gentleman too! Oh, thank you, sir, I'm sure.'

I walked on sharply. Evelyn Howard had been right then, and I experienced a sharp twinge of disgust, as I thought of Alfred Inglethorp's liberality with another woman's money. Had that piquant gipsy face been at the bottom of the crime, or was it the base mainspring of money? Probably a judicious mixture of both.

On one point, Poirot seemed to have a curious obsession. He once or twice observed to me that he thought Dorcas must have made an error fixing the time of the quarrel. He suggested to her repeatedly that it was four-thirty, and not four o'clock when she heard the voices.

But Dorcas was unshaken. Quite an hour, or even more, had elapsed between the time when she had heard the voices and five o'clock, when she had taken tea to her mistress.

The inquest was held on Friday at the Stylites Arms in the village. Poirot and I sat together, not being required to give evidence.

The preliminaries were gone through. The jury viewed the body, and John Cavendish gave evidence of identification.

Further questioned, he described his awakening in the early hours of the morning, and the circumstances of his mother's death.

The medical evidence was next taken. There was a breathless hush, and every eye was fixed on the famous London specialist, who was known to be one of the greatest authorities of the day on the subject of toxicology.

In a few brief words, he summed up the result of the post-mortem. Shorn of its medical phraseology and technicalities, it amounted to the fact that Mrs Inglethorp had met her death as a result of strychnine poisoning. Judging from the quantity recovered, she must have taken not less than three-quarters of a grain of strychnine, but probably one grain or slightly over.

'Is it possible that she could have swallowed the poison by accident?' asked the Coroner.

‘I should consider it very unlikely. Strychnine is not used for domestic purposes, as some poisons are, and there are restrictions placed on its sale.’

‘Does anything in your examination lead you to determine how the poison was administered?’

‘No.’

‘You arrived at Styles before Dr Wilkins, I believe?’

‘That is so. The motor met me just outside the lodge gates, and I hurried there as fast as I could.’

‘Will you relate to us exactly what happened next?’

‘I entered Mrs Inglethorp’s room. She was at that moment in a typical tetanic convulsion. She turned towards me, and gasped out: “Alfred—Alfred –”’

‘Could the strychnine have been administered in Mrs Inglethorp’s after-dinner coffee which was taken to her by her husband?’

‘Possibly, but strychnine is a fairly rapid drug in its action. The symptoms appear from one to two hours after it has been swallowed. It is retarded under certain conditions, none of which, however, appear to have been present in this case. I presume Mrs Inglethorp took the coffee after dinner about eight o’clock, whereas the symptoms did not manifest themselves until the early hours of the morning, which, on the face of it, points to the drug having been taken much later in the evening.’

‘Mrs Inglethorp was in the habit of drinking a cup of cocoa in the middle of the night. Could the strychnine have been administered in that?’

‘No, I myself took a sample of the cocoa remaining in the saucepan and had it analysed. There was no strychnine present.’

I heard Poirot chuckle softly beside me.

‘How did you know?’ I whispered.

‘Listen.’

‘I should say’—the doctor was continuing—‘that I would have been considerably surprised at any other result.’

‘Why?’

‘Simply because strychnine has an unusually bitter taste. It can be detected in a solution of 1 in 70,000, and can only be disguised by some strongly flavoured substance. Cocoa would be quite powerless to mask it.’

One of the jury wanted to know if the same objection applied to coffee.

‘No. Coffee has a bitter taste of its own which would probably cover the taste of the strychnine.’

‘Then you consider it more likely that the drug was administered in the coffee, but that for some unknown reason its action was delayed?’

‘Yes, but, the cup being completely smashed, there is no possibility of analysing its contents.’

This concluded Dr Bauerstein’s evidence. Dr Wilkins corroborated it on all points. Sounded as to the possibility of suicide, he repudiated it utterly. The deceased, he said, suffered from a weak heart, but otherwise enjoyed perfect health, and was of a cheerful and well-balanced disposition. She would be one of the last people to take her own life.

Lawrence Cavendish was next called. His evidence was quite unimportant, being a mere repetition of that of his brother. Just as he was about to step down, he paused, and said rather hestitatingly:

‘I should like to make a suggestion if I may?’

He glanced deprecatingly at the Coroner, who replied briskly:

‘Certainly, Mr Cavendish, we are here to arrive at the truth of this matter, and welcome anything that may lead to further elucidation.’

‘It is just an idea of mine,’ explained Lawrence. ‘Of course I may be quite wrong, but it still seems to me that my mother’s death might be accounted for by natural means.’

‘How do you make that out, Mr Cavendish?’

‘My mother, at the time of her death, and for some time before it, was taking a tonic containing strychnine.’

‘Ah!’ said the Coroner.

The jury looked up, interested.

‘I believe,’ continued Lawrence, ‘that there have been cases where the cumulative effect of the drug, administered for some time, has ended by causing death. Also, is it not possible that she may have taken an overdose of her medicine by accident?’

‘This is the first we have heard of the deceased taking strychnine at the time of her death. We are much obliged to you, Mr Cavendish.’

Dr Wilkins was recalled and ridiculed the idea.

‘What Mr Cavendish suggests is quite impossible. Any doctor would tell you the same. Strychnine is, in a certain sense, a cumulative poison, but it would be quite impossible for it to result in sudden death in this way. There would have to be a long period of chronic symptoms which would at once have attracted my attention. The whole thing is absurd.’

‘And the second suggestion? That Mrs Inglethorp may have inadvertently taken an overdose?’

‘Three, or even four doses, would not have resulted in death. Mrs Inglethorp always had an extra large amount of medicine made up at a time, as she dealt with Coot’s, the Cash Chemists in Tadminster. She would have had to take very nearly the whole bottle to account for the amount of strychnine found at the post-mortem.’

‘Then you consider that we may dismiss the tonic as not being in any way instrumental in causing her death?’

‘Certainly. The supposition is ridiculous.’

The same juryman who had interrupted before here suggested that the chemist who made up the medicine might have committed an error.

‘That, of course, is always possible,’ replied the doctor.

But Dorcas, who was the next witness called, dispelled even that possibility. The medicine had not been newly made up. On the contrary, Mrs Inglethorp had taken the last dose on the day of her death.

So the question of the tonic was finally abandoned, and the Coroner proceeded with his task. Having elicited from Dorcas how she had been awakened by the violent ringing of her mistress’s bell, and had subsequently roused the household, he passed to the subject of the quarrel on the preceding afternoon.

Dorcas’s evidence on this point was substantially what Poirot and I had already heard, so I will not repeat it here.

The next witness was Mary Cavendish. She stood very upright, and spoke in a low, clear, and perfectly composed voice. In answer to the Coroner’s question, she told how, her alarm clock having aroused her at four-thirty as usual, she was dressing, when she was startled by the sound of something heavy falling.

‘That would have been the table by the bed?’ commented the Coroner.

‘I opened my door,’ continued Mary, ‘and listened. In a few minutes a bell rang violently, Dorcas came running down and woke my husband, and we all went to my mother-in-law’s room, but it was locked –’

The Coroner interrupted her.

‘I really do not think we need trouble you further on that point. We know all that can be known of the subsequent happenings. But I should be

obliged if you would tell us all you overheard of the quarrel the day before.'

'I?'

There was a faint insolence in her voice. She raised her hand and adjusted the ruffle of lace at her neck, turning her head a little as she did so. And quite spontaneously the thought flashed across my mind: 'She is gaining time!'

'Yes. I understand,' continued the Coroner deliberately, 'that you were sitting reading on the bench just outside the long window of the boudoir. That is so, is it not?'

This was news to me and glancing sideways at Poirot, I fancied that it was news to him as well.

There was the faintest pause, the mere hesitation of a moment, before she answered:

'Yes, that is so.'

'And the boudoir window was open, was it not?'

Surely her face grew a little paler as she answered:

'Yes.'

'Then you cannot have failed to hear the voices inside, especially as they were raised in anger. In fact, they would be more audible where you were than in the hall.'

'Possibly.'

'Will you repeat to us what you overheard of the quarrel?'

'I really do not remember hearing anything.'

'Do you mean to say you did not hear voices?'

‘Oh, yes, I heard the voices, but I did not hear what they said.’ A faint spot of colour came into her cheek. ‘I am not in the habit of listening to private conversations.’

The Coroner persisted.

‘And you remember nothing at all?*Nothing*, Mrs Cavendish? Not one stray word or phrase to make you realize that it *was* a private conversation?’

She paused, and seemed to reflect, still outwardly as calm as ever.

‘Yes; I remember, Mrs Inglethorp said something—I do not remember exactly what—about causing scandal between husband and wife.’

‘Ah!’ The Coroner leant back satisfied. ‘That corresponds with what Dorcas heard. But excuse me, Mrs Cavendish, although you realized it was a private conversation, you did not move away? You remained where you were?’

I caught the momentary gleam of her tawny eyes as she raised them. I felt certain that at that moment she would willingly have torn the little lawyer, with his insinuations, into pieces, but she replied quietly enough:

‘No. I was very comfortable where I was. I fixed my mind on my book.’

‘And that is all you can tell us?’

‘That is all.’

The examination was over, though I doubted if the Coroner was entirely satisfied with it. I think he suspected that Mary Cavendish could tell more if she chose.

Amy Hill, shop assistant, was next called, and deposed to having sold a will form on the afternoon of the 17th to William Earl, under-gardener at Styles.

William Earl and Manning succeeded her, and testified to witnessing a document. Manning fixed the time ataboutfour-thirty, William was of the

opinion that it was rather earlier.

Cynthia Murdoch came next. She had, however, little to tell. She had known nothing of the tragedy, until awakened by Mrs Cavendish.

‘You did not hear the table fall?’

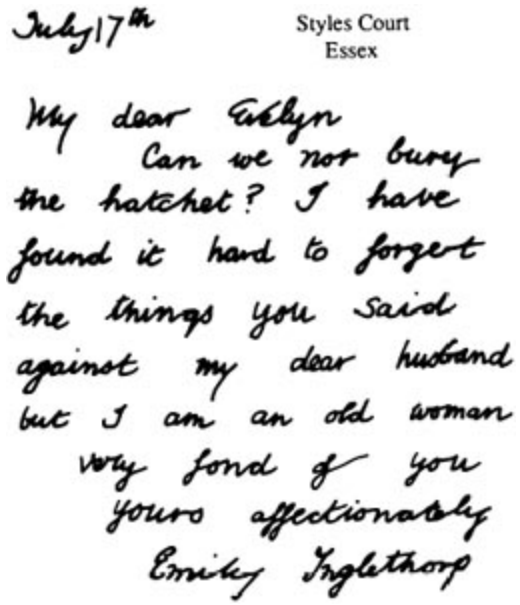
‘No. I was fast asleep.’

The Coroner smiled.

‘A good conscience makes a sound sleeper,’ he observed. ‘Thank you, Miss Murdoch, that is all.’

‘Miss Howard.’

Miss Howard produced the letter written to her by Mrs Inglethorp on the evening of the 17th. Poirot and I had, of course, already seen it. It added nothing to our knowledge of the tragedy. The following is a facsimile: It was handed to the jury who scrutinized it attentively.



July 17th

Styles Court
Essex

My dear Evelyn
Can we not bury
the hatchet? I have
found it hard to forget
the things you said
against my dear husband
but I am an old woman
very fond of you
Yours affectionately
Emily Inglethorp

‘I fear it does not help us much,’ said the Coroner, with a sigh. ‘There is no mention of any of the events of that afternoon.’

‘Plain as a pikestaff to me,’ said Miss Howard shortly. ‘It shows clearly enough that my poor old friend had just found out she’d been made a fool of !’

‘It says nothing of the kind in the letter,’ the Coroner pointed out.

‘No, because Emily never could bear to put herself in the wrong. But *I* know her. She wanted me back. But she wasn’t going to own that I’d been right. She went round about. Most people do. Don’t believe in it myself.’

Mr Wells smiled faintly. So, I noticed, did several of the jury. Miss Howard was obviously quite a public character.

‘Anyway, all this tomfoolery is a great waste of time,’ continued the lady, glancing up and down the jury disparagingly. ‘Talk—talk—talk! When all the time we know perfectly well –’

The Coroner interrupted her in an agony of apprehension:

‘Thank you, Miss Howard, that is all.’

I fancy he breathed a sigh of relief when she complied.

Then came the sensation of the day. The Coroner called Albert Mace, chemist’s assistant.

It was our agitated young man of the pale face. In answer to the Coroner’s questions, he explained that he was a qualified pharmacist, but had only recently come to this particular shop, as the assistant formerly there had just been called up for the army.

These preliminaries completed, the Coroner proceeded to business.

‘Mr Mace, have you lately sold strychnine to any unauthorized person?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘When was this?’

‘Last Monday night.’

‘Monday? Not Tuesday?’

‘No, sir, Monday, the 16th.’

‘Will you tell us to whom you sold it?’

You could have heard a pin drop.

‘Yes, sir. It was Mr Inglethorp.’

Every eye turned simultaneously to where Alfred Inglethorp was sitting, impassive and wooden. He started slightly, as the damning words fell from the young man’s lips. I half thought he was going to rise from his chair, but he remained seated, although a remarkably well acted expression of astonishment rose on his face.

‘You are sure of what you say?’ asked the Coroner sternly.

‘Quite sure, sir.’

‘Are you in the habit of selling strychnine indiscriminately over the counter?’

The wretched young man wilted visibly under the Coroner’s frown.

‘Oh, no, sir—of course not. But, seeing it was Mr Inglethorp of the Hall, I thought there was no harm in it. He said it was to poison a dog.’

Inwardly I sympathized. It was only human nature to endeavour to please ‘The Hall’—especially when it might result in custom being transferred from Coot’s to the local establishment.

‘Is it not customary for anyone purchasing poison to sign a book?’

‘Yes, sir, Mr Inglethorp did so.’

‘Have you got the book here?’

‘Yes, sir.’

It was produced; and, with a few words of stern censure, the Coroner dismissed the wretched Mr Mace.

Then, amidst a breathless silence, Alfred Inglethorp was called. Did he realize, I wondered, how closely the halter was being drawn around his neck?

The Coroner went straight to the point.

‘On Monday evening last, did you purchase strychnine for the purpose of poisoning a dog?’

Inglethorp replied with perfect calmness:

‘No, I did not. There is no dog at Styles, except an outdoor sheepdog, which is in perfect health.’

‘You deny absolutely having purchased strychnine from Albert Mace on Monday last?’

‘I do.’

‘Do you also deny *this*?’

The Coroner handed him the register in which his signature was inscribed.

‘Certainly I do. The handwriting is quite different from mine. I will show you.’

He took an old envelope out of his pocket, and wrote his name on it, handing it to the jury. It was certainly utterly dissimilar.

‘Then what is your explanation of Mr Mace’s statement?’

Alfred Inglethorp replied imperturbably:

‘Mr Mace must have been mistaken.’

The Coroner hesitated for a moment, and then said:

‘Mr Inglethorp, as a mere matter of form, would you mind telling us where you were on the evening of Monday, July 16th?’

‘Really—I cannot remember.’

‘That is absurd, Mr Inglethorp,’ said the Coroner sharply. ‘Think again.’

Inglethorp shook his head.

‘I cannot tell you. I have an idea that I was out walking.’

‘In what direction?’

‘I really can’t remember.’

The Coroner’s face grew graver.

‘Were you in company with anyone?’

‘No.’

‘Did you meet anyone on your walk?’

‘No.’

‘That is a pity,’ said the Coroner dryly. ‘I am to take it then that you decline to say where you were at the time that Mr Mace positively recognized you as entering the shop to purchase strychnine?’

‘If you like to take it that way, yes.’

‘Be careful, Mr Inglethorp.’

Poirot was fidgeting nervously.

‘*Sacré!*’ he murmured. ‘Does this imbecile of a man *want* to be arrested?’

Inglethorp was indeed creating a bad impression. His futile denials would not have convinced a child. The Coroner, however, passed briskly to the next point, and Poirot drew a deep breath of relief.

‘You had a discussion with your wife on Tuesday afternoon?’

‘Pardon me,’ interrupted Alfred Inglethorp, ‘you have been misinformed. I had no quarrel with my dear wife. The whole story is absolutely untrue. I was absent from the house the entire afternoon.’

‘Have you anyone who can testify to that?’

‘You have my word,’ said Inglethorp haughtily.

The Coroner did not trouble to reply.

‘There are two witnesses who will swear to having heard your disagreement with Mrs Inglethorp.’

‘Those witnesses were mistaken.’

I was puzzled. The man spoke with such quiet assurance that I was staggered. I looked at Poirot. There was an expression of exultation on his face which I could not understand. Was he at last convinced of Alfred Inglethorp’s guilt?

‘Mr Inglethorp,’ said the Coroner, ‘you have heard your wife’s dying words repeated here. Can you explain them in any way?’

‘Certainly I can.’

‘You can?’

‘It seems very simple. The room was dimly lighted. Dr Bauerstein is much of my height and build, and, like me, wears a beard. In the dim light, and suffering as she was, my poor wife mistook him for me.’

‘Ah!’ murmured Poirot to himself. ‘But it is an idea, that!’

‘You think it is true?’ I whispered.

‘I do not say that. But it is truly an ingenious supposition.’

‘You read my wife’s last words as an accusation’—Inglethorp was continuing—‘they were, on the contrary, an appeal to me.’

The Coroner reflected a moment, then he said:

‘I believe, Mr Inglethorp, that you yourself poured out the coffee, and took it to your wife that evening?’

‘I poured it out, yes. But I did not take it to her. I meant to do so, but I was told that a friend was at the hall door, so I laid down the coffee on the hall table. When I came through the hall again a few minutes later, it was gone.’

This statement might, or might not, be true, but it did not seem to me to improve matters much for Inglethorp. In any case, he had had ample time to introduce the poison.

At that point, Poirot nudged me gently, indicating two men who were sitting together near the door. One was a little, sharp, dark, ferret-faced man, the other was tall and fair.

I questioned Poirot mutely. He put his lips to my ear.

‘Do you know who that little man is?’

I shook my head.

‘That is Detective-Inspector James Japp of Scotland Yard—Jimmy Japp. The other man is from Scotland Yard, too. Things are moving quickly, my friend.’

I stared at the two men intently. There was certainly nothing of the policeman about them. I should never have suspected them of being official

personages.

I was still staring, when I was startled and recalled by the verdict being given:

‘Wilful Murder against some person or persons unknown.’

Chapter 7

Poirot Pays his Debts

As we came out of the Stylites Arms, Poirot drew me aside by a gentle pressure of the arm. I understood his object. He was waiting for the Scotland Yard men.

In a few moments, they emerged, and Poirot at once stepped forward, and accosted the shorter of the two.

‘I fear you do not remember me, Inspector Japp.’

‘Why, if it isn’t Mr Poirot!’ cried the Inspector. He turned to the other man. ‘You’ve heard me speak of Mr Poirot? It was in 1904 he and I worked together—the Abercrombie forgery case—you remember, he was run down in Brussels. Ah, those were great days, Moosier. Then, do you remember “Baron” Altara? There was a pretty rogue for you! He eluded the clutches of half the police in Europe. But we nailed him in Antwerp—thanks to Mr Poirot here.’

As these friendly reminiscences were being indulged in, I drew nearer, and was introduced to Detective-Inspector Japp, who in his turn introduced us both to his companion, Superintendent Summerhaye.

‘I need hardly ask what you are doing here, gentlemen,’ remarked Poirot.

Japp closed one eye knowingly.

‘No, indeed. Pretty clear case I should say.’

But Poirot answered gravely:

‘There I differ from you.’

‘Oh, come!’ said Summerhaye, opening his lips for the first time. ‘Surely the whole thing is clear as daylight. The man’s caught red-handed. How he could be such a fool beats me!’

But Japp was looking attentively at Poirot.

‘Hold your fire, Summerhaye,’ he remarked jocularly.

‘Me and Moosier here have met before—and there’s no man’s judgement I’d sooner take than his. If I’m not greatly mistaken, he’s got something up his sleeve. Isn’t that so, Moosier?’

Poirot smiled.

‘I have drawn certain conclusions—yes.’

Summerhaye was still looking rather sceptical, but Japp continued his scrutiny of Poirot.

‘It’s this way,’ he said, ‘so far, we’ve only seen the case from the outside. That’s where the Yard’s at a disadvantage in a case of this kind, where the murder’s only out, so to speak, after the inquest. A lot depends on being on the spot first thing, and that’s where Mr Poirot’s had the start of us. We shouldn’t have been here as soon as this even, if it hadn’t been for the fact that there was a smart doctor on the spot, who gave us the tip through the Coroner. But you’ve been on the spot from the first, and you may have picked up some little hints. From the evidence at the inquest, Mr Inglethorp murdered his wife as sure as I stand here, and if anyone but you hinted the contrary I’d laugh in his face. I must say I was surprised the jury didn’t bring it in Wilful Murder against him right off. I think they would have, if it hadn’t been for the Coroner—he seemed to be holding them back.’

‘Perhaps, though, you have a warrant for his arrest in your pocket now,’ suggested Poirot.

A kind of wooden shutter of officialdom came down over Japp’s expressive countenance.

‘Perhaps I have, and perhaps I haven’t,’ he remarked dryly.

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully.

‘I am very anxious, Messieurs, that he should not be arrested.’

‘I dare say,’ observed Summerhaye sarcastically.

Japp was regarding Poirot with comical perplexity.

‘Can’t you go a little further, Mr Poirot? A wink’s as good as a nod—from you. You’ve been on the spot —and the Yard doesn’t want to make any mistakes, you know.’

Poirot nodded gravely.

‘That is exactly what I thought. Well, I will tell you this. Use your warrant: Arrest Mr Inglethorp. But it will bring you no kudos—the case against him will be dismissed at once!*Comme ça!*’ And he snapped his fingers expressively.

Japp’s face grew grave, though Summerhaye gave an incredulous snort.

As for me, I was literally dumb with astonishment. I could only conclude that Poirot was mad.

Japp had taken out a handkerchief, and was gently dabbing his brow.

‘I daren’t do it, Mr Poirot. I’d take your word, but there’s others over me who’ll be asking what the devil I mean by it. Can’t you give me a little more to go on?’

Poirot reflected a moment.

‘It can be done,’ he said at last. ‘I admit I do not wish it. It forces my hand. I would have preferred to work in the dark just for the present, but what you say is very just—the word of a Belgian policeman, whose day is past, is not enough! And Alfred Inglethorp must not be arrested. That I have

sworn, as my friend Hastings here knows. See, then, my good Japp, you go at once to Styles?'

'Well, in about half an hour. We're seeing the Coroner and the doctor first.'

'Good. Call for me in passing—the last house in the village. I will go with you. At Styles, Mr Inglethorp will give you, or if he refuses—as is probable—I will give you such proofs that shall satisfy you that the case against him could not possibly be sustained. Is that a bargain?'

'That's a bargain,' said Japp heartily. 'And, on behalf of the Yard, I'm much obliged to you, though I'm bound to confess I can't at present see the faintest possible loophole in the evidence, but you always were a marvel! So long, then, Moosier.'

The two detectives strode away, Summerhaye with an incredulous grin on his face.

'Well, my friend,' cried Poirot, before I could get in a word, 'what do you think?*Mon dieu!* I had some warm moments in that court; I did not figure to myself that the man would be so pig-headed as to refuse to say anything at all. Decidedly, it was the policy of an imbecile.'

'H'm! There are other explanations besides that of imbecility,' I remarked. 'For, if the case against him is true, how could he defend himself except by silence?'

'Why, in a thousand ingenious ways,' cried Poirot. 'See; say that it is I who have committed this murder, I can think of seven most plausible stories! Far more convincing than Mr Inglethorp's stony denials!'

I could not help laughing.

'My dear Poirot, I am sure you are capable of thinking of seventy! But, seriously, in spite of what I heard you say to the detectives, you surely cannot still believe in the possibility of Alfred Inglethorp's innocence?'

‘Why not now as much as before? Nothing has changed.’

‘But the evidence is so conclusive.’

‘Yes, too conclusive.’

We turned in at the gate of Leastways Cottage, and proceeded up the now familiar stairs.

‘Yes, yes, too conclusive,’ continued Poirot, almost to himself. ‘Real evidence is usually vague and unsatisfactory. It has to be examined—sifted. But here the whole thing is cut and dried. No, my friend, this evidence has been very cleverly manufactured—so cleverly that it has defeated its own ends.’

‘How do you make that out?’

‘Because, so long as the evidence against him was vague and intangible, it was very hard to disprove. But, in his anxiety, the criminal has drawn the net so closely that one cut will set Inglethorp free.’

I was silent. And in a minute or two, Poirot continued:

‘Let us look at the matter like this. Here is a man, let us say, who sets out to poison his wife. He has lived by his wits as the saying goes. Presumably, therefore, he has some wits. He is not altogether a fool. Well, how does he set about it? He goes boldly to the village chemist’s and purchases strychnine under his own name, with a trumped-up story about a dog which is bound to be proved absurd. He does not employ the poison that night. No, he waits until he has had a violent quarrel with her, of which the whole household is cognizant, and which naturally directs their suspicions upon him. He prepares no defence—no shadow of an alibi, yet he knows the chemist’s assistant must necessarily come forward with the facts. Bah! Do not ask me to believe that any man could be so idiotic! Only a lunatic, who wished to commit suicide by causing himself to be hanged, would act so!’

‘Still—I do not see –’ I began.

‘Neither do I see. I tell you, *mon ami*, it puzzles me. *Me*—Hercule Poirot!’

‘But if you believe him innocent, how do you explain his buying the strychnine?’

‘Very simply. He did *not* buy it.’

‘But Mace recognized him!’

‘I beg your pardon, he saw a man with a black beard like Mr Inglethorp’s, and wearing glasses like Mr Inglethorp, and dressed in Mr Inglethorp’s rather noticeable clothes. He could not recognize a man whom he had probably only seen in the distance, since, you remember, he himself had only been in the village a fortnight, and Mrs Inglethorp dealt principally with Coot’s in Tadminster.’

‘Then you think –’

‘*Mon ami*, do you remember the two points I laid stress upon? Leave the first one for the moment, what was the second?’

‘The important fact that Alfred Inglethorp wears peculiar clothes, has a black beard, and uses glasses,’ I quoted.

‘Exactly. Now suppose anyone wished to pass himself off as John or Lawrence Cavendish. Would it be easy?’

‘No,’ I said thoughtfully. ‘Of course an actor –’

But Poirot cut me short ruthlessly.

‘And why would it not be easy? I will tell you, my friend: Because they are both clean-shaven men. To make up successfully as one of these two in broad daylight, it would need an actor of genius, and a certain initial facial resemblance. But in the case of Alfred Inglethorp, all that is changed. His clothes, his beard, the glasses which hide his eyes—those are the salient points about his personal appearance. Now, what is the first instinct of the criminal? To divert suspicion from himself, is it not so? And how can he

best do that? By throwing it on someone else. In this instance, there was a man ready to his hand. Everybody was predisposed to believe in Mr Inglethorp's guilt. It was a foregone conclusion that he would be suspected; but, to make it a sure thing there must be tangible proof—such as the actual buying of the poison, and that, with a man of the peculiar appearance of Mr Inglethorp, was not difficult. Remember, this young Mace had never actually spoken to Mr Inglethorp. How should he doubt that the man in his clothes, with his beard and his glasses, was not Alfred Inglethorp?'

'It may be so,' I said, fascinated by Poirot's eloquence. 'But, if that was the case, why does he not say where he was at six o'clock on Monday evening?'

'Ah, why indeed?' said Poirot, calming down. 'If he were arrested, he probably would speak, but I do not want it to come to that. I must make him see the gravity of his position. There is, of course, something discreditable behind his silence. If he did not murder his wife, he is, nevertheless, a scoundrel, and has something of his own to conceal, quite apart from the murder.'

'What can it be?' I mused, won over to Poirot's views for the moment, although still retaining a faint conviction that the obvious deduction was the correct one.

'Can you not guess?' asked Poirot, smiling.

'No, can you?'

'Oh, yes, I had a little idea some time ago—and it has turned out to be correct.'

'You never told me,' I said reproachfully.

Poirot spread out his hands apologetically.

'Pardon me, *mon ami*, you were not precisely *sympathique*.' He turned to me earnestly. 'Tell me—you see now that he must not be arrested?'

‘Perhaps,’ I said doubtfully, for I was really indifferent to the fate of Alfred Inglethorp, and thought that a good fright would do him no harm.

Poirot, who was watching me intently, gave a sigh.

‘Come, my friend,’ he said changing the subject, ‘apart from Mr Inglethorp, how did the evidence at the inquest strike you?’

‘Oh, pretty much what I expected.’

‘Did nothing strike you as peculiar about it?’

My thoughts flew to Mary Cavendish, and I hedged:

‘In what way?’

‘Well, Mr Lawrence Cavendish’s evidence for instance?’

I was relieved.

‘Oh, Lawrence! No, I don’t think so. He’s always a nervous chap.’

‘His suggestion that his mother might have been poisoned accidentally by means of the tonic she was taking, that did not strike you as strange – *hein?*’

‘No, I can’t say it did. The doctors ridiculed it of course. But it was quite a natural suggestion for a layman to make.’

‘But Monsieur Lawrence is not a layman. You told me yourself that he had started by studying medicine, and that he had taken his degree.’

‘Yes, that’s true. I never thought of that.’ I was rather startled. ‘It *is* odd.’

Poirot nodded.

‘From the first, his behaviour has been peculiar. Of all the household, he alone would be likely to recognize the symptoms of strychnine poisoning,

and yet we find him the only member of the family to uphold strenuously the theory of death from natural causes. If it had been Monsieur John, I could have understood it. He has no technical knowledge, and is by nature unimaginative. But Monsieur Lawrence—no! And now, today, he puts forward a suggestion that he himself must have known was ridiculous. There is food for thought in this, *mon ami!'*

'It's very confusing,' I agreed.

'Then there is Mrs Cavendish,' continued Poirot. 'That is another who is not telling all she knows! What do you make of her attitude?'

'I don't know what to make of it. It seems inconceivable that she should be shielding Alfred Inglethorp. Yet that is what it looks like.'

Poirot nodded reflectively.

'Yes, it is queer. One thing is certain, she overheard a good deal more of that "private conversation" than she was willing to admit.'

'And yet she is the last person one would accuse of stooping to eavesdrop!'

'Exactly. One thing her evidence *has* shown me. I made a mistake. Dorcas was quite right. The quarrel did take place earlier in the afternoon, about four o'clock, as she said.'

I looked at him curiously. I had never understood his insistence on that point.

'Yes, a good deal that was peculiar came out today,' continued Poirot. 'Dr Bauerstein, now, what was *he* doing up and dressed at that hour in the morning? It is astonishing to me that no one commented on the fact.'

'He has insomnia, I believe,' I said doubtfully.

'Which is a very good, or a very bad explanation,' remarked Poirot. 'It covers everything, and explains nothing. I shall keep my eye on our clever Dr Bauerstein.'

‘Any more faults to find with the evidence?’ I inquired satirically.

‘*Mon ami*,’ replied Poirot gravely, ‘when you find that people are not telling you the truth—look out! Now, unless I am much mistaken, at this inquest today only one—at most, two persons were speaking the truth without reservation or subterfuge.’

‘Oh, come now, Poirot! I won’t cite Lawrence, or Mrs Cavendish. But there’s John—and Miss Howard, surely they were speaking the truth?’

‘Both of them, my friend? One, I grant you, but both –!’

His words gave me an unpleasant shock. Miss Howard’s evidence, unimportant as it was, had been given in such a downright straightforward manner that it had never occurred to me to doubt her sincerity. Still, I had a great respect for Poirot’s sagacity—except on the occasions when he was what I described to myself as ‘foolishly pig-headed’.

‘Do you really think so?’ I asked. ‘Miss Howard had always seemed to me so essentially honest—almost uncomfortably so.’

Poirot gave me a curious look, which I could not quite fathom. He seemed about to speak, and then checked himself.

‘Miss Murdoch too,’ I continued, ‘there’s nothing untruthful about *her*.’

‘No. But it was strange that she never heard a sound, sleeping next door; whereas Mrs Cavendish, in the other wing of the building, distinctly heard the table fall.’

‘Well, she’s young. And she sleeps soundly.’

‘Ah, yes, indeed! She must be a famous sleeper, that one!’

I did not quite like the tone of his voice, but at that moment a smart knock reached our ears, and looking out of the window we perceived the two detectives waiting for us below.

Poirot seized his hat, gave a ferocious twist to his moustache, and, carefully brushing an imaginary speck of dust from his sleeve, motioned me to precede him down the stairs; there we joined the detectives and set out for Styles.

I think the appearance of the two Scotland Yard men was rather a shock—especially to John, though, of course, after the verdict, he had realized that it was only a matter of time. Still, the presence of the detectives brought the truth home to him more than anything else could have done.

Poirot had conferred with Japp in a low tone on the way up, and it was the latter functionary who requested that the household, with the exception of the servants, should be assembled together in the drawing-room. I realized the significance of this. It was up to Poirot to make his boast good.

Personally, I was not sanguine. Poirot might have excellent reasons for his belief in Inglethorp's innocence, but a man of the type of Summerhaye would require tangible proofs, and these I doubted if Poirot could supply.

Before very long we had all trooped into the drawing-room, the door of which Japp closed. Poirot politely set chairs for everyone. The Scotland Yard men were the cynosure of all eyes. I think that for the first time we realized that the thing was not a bad dream, but a tangible reality. We had read of such things—now we ourselves were actors in the drama. Tomorrow the daily papers, all over England, would blazon out the news in staring headlines:

MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY IN ESSEX
WEALTHY LADY POISONED

There would be pictures of Styles, snap-shots of 'The family leaving the Inquest'—the village photographer had not been idle! All the things that one had read a hundred times—things that happen to other people, not to oneself. And now, in this house, a murder had been committed. In front of us were 'the detectives in charge of the case'. The well-known glib phraseology passed rapidly through my mind in the interval before Poirot opened the proceedings.

I think everyone was a little surprised that it should be he and not one of the official detectives who took the initiative.

‘*Mesdames* and *messieurs*,’ said Poirot, bowing as though he were a celebrity about to deliver a lecture, ‘I have asked you to come here all together, for a certain object. That object, it concerns Mr Alfred Inglethorp.’

Inglethorp was sitting a little by himself—I think, unconsciously, everyone had drawn his chair slightly away from him—and he gave a faint start as Poirot pronounced his name.

‘Mr Inglethorp,’ said Poirot, addressing him directly, ‘a very dark shadow is resting on this house—the shadow of murder.’

Inglethorp shook his head sadly.

‘My poor wife,’ he murmured. ‘Poor Emily! It is terrible.’

‘I do not think, monsieur,’ said Poirot pointedly, ‘that you quite realize how terrible it may be—for you.’ And as Inglethorp did not appear to understand, he added: ‘Mr Inglethorp, you are standing in very grave danger.’

The two detectives fidgeted. I saw the official caution ‘Anything you say will be used in evidence against you,’ actually hovering on Summerhaye’s lips. Poirot went on:

‘Do you understand now, monsieur?’

‘No. What do you mean?’

‘I mean,’ said Poirot deliberately, ‘that you are suspected of poisoning your wife.’

A little gasp ran round the circle at this plain speaking.

‘Good heavens!’ cried Inglethorp, starting up. ‘What a monstrous idea! I—poison my dearest Emily!’

‘I do not think’—Poirot watched him narrowly—‘that you quite realize the unfavourable nature of your evidence at the inquest. Mr Inglethorp, knowing what I have now told you, do you still refuse to say where you were at six o’clock on Monday afternoon?’

With a groan, Alfred Inglethorp sank down again and buried his face in his hands. Poirot approached and stood over him.

‘Speak!’ he cried menacingly.

With an effort, Inglethorp raised his face from his hands. Then, slowly and deliberately, he shook his head.

‘You will not speak?’

‘No. I do not believe that anyone could be so monstrous as to accuse me of what you say.’

Poirot nodded thoughtfully, like a man whose mind is made. ‘*Soit!*’ he said. ‘Then I must speak for you.’

Alfred Inglethorp sprang up again.

‘You? How can you speak? You do not know –’ he broke off abruptly.

Poirot turned to face us. ‘*Mesdames* and *messieurs!* I speak!Listen!I, Hercule Poirot, affirm that the man who entered the chemist’s shop, and purchased strychnine at six o’clock on Monday last, was not Mr Inglethorp, for at six o’clock on that day Mr Inglethorp was escorting Mrs Raikes back to her home from a neighbouring farm. I can produce no less than five witnesses to swear to having seen them together, either at six or just after and, as you may know, the Abbey Farm, Mrs Raikes’s home, is at least two and a half miles distant from the village. There is absolutely no question as to the alibi!’

Chapter 8

Fresh Suspicions

There was a moment's stupefied silence. Japp, who was the least surprised of any of us, was the first to speak.

'My word,' he cried, 'you're the goods! And no mistake, Mr Poirot! These witnesses of yours are all right, I suppose?'

'*Voilà!* I have prepared a list of them—names and addresses. You must see them, of course. But you will find it all right.'

'I'm sure of that.' Japp lowered his voice. 'I'm much obliged to you. A pretty mare's nest arresting him would have been.' He turned to Inglethorp. 'But, if you'll excuse me, sir, why couldn't you say all this at the inquest?'

'I will tell you why,' interrupted Poirot. 'There was a certain rumour –'

'A most malicious and utterly untrue one,' interrupted Alfred Inglethorp in an agitated voice.

'And Mr Inglethorp was anxious to have no scandal revived just at present. Am I right?'

'Quite right.' Inglethorp nodded. 'With my poor Emily not yet buried, can you wonder I was anxious that no more lying rumours should be started?'

'Between you and me, sir,' remarked Japp, 'I'd sooner have any amount of rumours than be arrested for murder. And I venture to think that your poor lady would have felt the same. And, if it hadn't been for Mr Poirot here, arrested you would have been, as sure as eggs is eggs!'

'I was foolish, no doubt,' murmured Inglethorp.

‘But you do not know, inspector, how I have been persecuted and maligned.’ And he shot a baleful glance at Evelyn Howard.

‘Now, sir,’ said Japp, turning briskly to John, ‘I should like to see the lady’s bedroom, please, and after that I’ll have a little chat with the servants. Don’t you bother about anything. Mr Poirot, here, will show me the way.’

As they all went out of the room, Poirot turned and made me a sign to follow him upstairs. There he caught me by the arm, and drew me aside.

‘Quick, go to the other wing. Stand there—just this side of the baize door. Do not move till I come.’ Then, turning rapidly, he rejoined the two detectives.

I followed his instructions, taking up my position by the baize door, and wondering what on earth lay behind the request. Why was I to stand in this particular spot on guard? I looked thoughtfully down the corridor in front of me. An idea struck me. With the exception of Cynthia Murdoch’s, every room was in this left wing. Had that anything to do with it? Was I to report who came or went? I stood faithfully at my post. The minutes passed. Nobody came. Nothing happened.

It must have been quite twenty minutes before Poirot rejoined me.

‘You have not stirred?’

‘No, I’ve stuck here like a rock. Nothing’s happened.’

‘Ah!’ Was he pleased, or disappointed? ‘You’ve seen nothing at all?’

‘No.’

‘But you have probably heard something? A big bump—eh, *mon ami*?’

‘No.’

‘Is it possible? Ah, but I am vexed with myself ! I am not usually clumsy. I made but a slight gesture’—I know Poirot’s gestures—‘with the

left hand, and over went the table by the bed!'

He looked so childishly vexed and crestfallen that I hastened to console him.

'Never mind, old chap. What does it matter? Your triumph downstairs excited you. I can tell you, that was a surprise to us all. There must be more in this affair of Inglethorp's with Mrs Raikes than we thought, to make him hold his tongue so persistently. What are you going to do now? Where are the Scotland Yard fellows?'

'Gone down to interview the servants. I showed them all our exhibits. I am disappointed in Japp. He has no method!'

'Hullo!' I said, looking out of the window. 'Here's Dr Bauerstein. I believe you're right about that man, Poirot. I don't like him.'

'He is clever,' observed Poirot meditatively.

'Oh, clever as the devil! I must say I was overjoyed to see him in the plight he was in on Tuesday. You never saw such a spectacle!' And I described the doctor's adventure. 'He looked a regular scarecrow! Plastered with mud from head to foot.'

'You saw him, then?'

'Yes. Of course, he didn't want to come in—it was just after dinner—but Mr Inglethorp insisted.'

'What?' Poirot caught me violently by the shoulders.

'Was Dr Bauerstein here on Tuesday evening? Here? And you never told me? Why did you not tell me? Why? Why?'

He appeared to be in an absolute frenzy.

'My dear Poirot,' I expostulated, 'I never thought it would interest you. I didn't know it was of any importance.'

‘Importance? It is of the first importance! So Dr Bauerstein was here on Tuesday night—the night of the murder. Hastings, do you not see? That alters everything—everything!’

I had never seen him so upset. Loosening his hold of me, he mechanically straightened a pair of candlesticks, still murmuring to himself: ‘Yes, that alters everything—everything.’

Suddenly he seemed to come to a decision.

‘*Allons!*’ he said. ‘We must act at once. Where is Mr Cavendish?’

John was in the smoking-room. Poirot went straight to him.

‘Mr Cavendish, I have some important business in Tadminster. A new clue. May I take your motor?’

‘Why, of course. Do you mean at once?’

‘If you please.’

John rang the bell, and ordered round the car. In another ten minutes, we were racing down the park and along the high road to Tadminster.

‘Now, Poirot,’ I remarked resignedly, ‘perhaps you will tell me what all this is about?’

‘Well, *mon ami*, a good deal you can guess for yourself. Of course, you realize that, now Mr Inglethorp is out of it, the whole position is greatly changed. We are face to face with an entirely new problem. We know now that there is one person who did not buy the poison. We have cleared away the manufactured clues. Now for the real ones. I have ascertained that anyone in the household, with the exception of Mrs Cavendish, who was playing tennis with you, could have personated Mr Inglethorp on Monday evening. In the same way, we have his statement that he put the coffee down in the hall. No one took much notice of that at the inquest—but now it has a very different significance. We must find out who did take that coffee to Mrs Inglethorp eventually, or who passed through the hall whilst it

was standing there. From your account, there are only two people whom we can positively say did not go near the coffee—Mrs Cavendish, and Mademoiselle Cynthia.'

'Yes, that is so.' I felt an inexpressible lightening of the heart. Mary Cavendish could certainly not rest under suspicion.

'In clearing Alfred Inglethorp,' continued Poirot, 'I have been obliged to show my hand sooner than I intended. As long as I might be thought to be pursuing him, the criminal would be off his guard. Now, he will be doubly careful. Yes—doubly careful.' He turned to me abruptly. 'Tell me, Hastings, you yourself—have you no suspicions of anybody?'

I hesitated. To tell the truth, an idea, wild and extravagant in itself, had once or twice that morning flashed through my brain. I had rejected it as absurd, nevertheless it persisted.

'You couldn't call it a suspicion,' I murmured. 'It's so utterly foolish.'

'Come now,' urged Poirot encouragingly. 'Do not fear. Speak your mind. You should always pay attention to your instincts.'

'Well then,' I blurted out, 'it's absurd—but I suspect Miss Howard of not telling all she knows!'

'Miss Howard?'

'Yes—you'll laugh at me –'

'Not at all. Why should I?'

'I can't help feeling,' I continued blunderingly, 'that we've rather left her out of the possible suspects, simply on the strength of her having been away from the place. But, after all, she was only fifteen miles away. A car would do it in half an hour. Can we say positively that she was away from Styles on the night of the murder?'

'Yes, my friend,' said Poirot unexpectedly, 'we can. One of my first actions was to ring up the hospital where she was working.'

‘Well?’

‘Well, I learnt that Miss Howard had been on afternoon duty on Tuesday, and that—a convoy coming in unexpectedly—she had kindly offered to remain on night duty, which offer was gratefully accepted. That disposes of that.’

‘Oh!’ I said, rather nonplussed. ‘Really,’ I continued, ‘It’s her extraordinary vehemence against Inglethorp that started me off suspecting her. I can’t help feeling she’d do anything against him. And I had an idea she might know something about the destroying of the will. She might have burnt the new one, mistaking it for the earlier one in his favour. She is so terribly bitter against him.’

‘You consider her vehemence unnatural?’

‘Y—es. She is so very violent. I wonder really whether she is quite sane on that point.’

Poirot shook his head energetically.

‘No, no, you are on a wrong track there. There is nothing weak-minded or degenerate about Miss Howard. She is an excellent specimen of well balanced English beef and brawn. She is sanity itself.’

‘Yet her hatred of Inglethorp seems almost a mania. My idea was—a very ridiculous one, no doubt—that she had intended to poison him—and that, in some way, Mrs Inglethorp got hold of it by mistake. But I don’t at all see how it could have been done. The whole thing is absurd and ridiculous to the last degree.’

‘Still you are right in one thing. It is always wise to suspect everybody until you can prove logically, and to your own satisfaction, that they are innocent. Now, what reasons are there against Miss Howard’s having deliberately poisoned Mrs Inglethorp?’

‘Why, she was devoted to her!’ I exclaimed.

‘Tcha! Tcha!’ cried Poirot irritably. ‘You argue like a child. If Miss Howard were capable of poisoning the old lady, she would be quite equally capable of simulating devotion. No, we must look elsewhere. You are perfectly correct in your assumption that her vehemence against Alfred Inglethorp is too violent to be natural; but you are quite wrong in the deduction you draw from it. I have drawn my own deductions, which I believe to be correct, but I will not speak of them at present.’ He paused a minute, then went on. ‘Now, to my way of thinking, there is one insuperable objection to Miss Howard’s being the murderess.’

‘And that is?’

‘That in no possible way could Mrs Inglethorp’s death benefit Miss Howard. Now there is no murder without a motive.’

I reflected.

‘Could not Mrs Inglethorp have made a will in her favour?’

Poirot shook his head.

‘But you yourself suggested that possibility to Mr Wells?’

Poirot smiled.

‘That was for a reason. I did not want to mention the name of the person who was actually in my mind. Miss Howard occupied very much the same position, so I used her name instead.’

‘Still, Mrs Inglethorp might have done so. Why, that will made on the afternoon of her death may –’

But Poirot’s shake of the head was so energetic that I stopped.

‘No, my friend. I have certain little ideas of my own about that will. But I can tell you this much—it was not in Miss Howard’s favour.’

I accepted his assurance, though I did not really see how he could be so positive about the matter.

‘Well,’ I said, with a sigh, ‘we will acquit Miss Howard, then. It is partly your fault that I ever came to suspect her. It was what you said about her evidence at the inquest that set me off.’

Poirot looked puzzled.

‘What did I say about her evidence at the inquest?’

‘Don’t you remember? When I cited her and John Cavendish as being above suspicion?’

‘Oh—ah—yes.’ He seemed a little confused, but recovered himself. ‘By the way, Hastings, there is something I want you to do for me.’

‘Certainly. What is it?’

‘Next time you happen to be alone with Lawrence Cavendish, I want you to say this to him. “I have a message for you from Poirot. He says: ‘Find the extra coffee-cup, and you can rest in peace!’” Nothing more. Nothing less.’

‘“Find the extra coffee-cup, and you can rest in peace!” Is that right?’ I asked, much mystified.

‘Excellent.’

‘But what does it mean?’

‘Ah, that I will leave you to find out. You have access to the facts. Just say that to him, and see what he says.’

‘Very well—but it’s all extremely mysterious.’

We were running into Tadminster now, and Poirot directed the car to the ‘Analytical Chemist’.

Poirot hopped down briskly, and went inside. In a few minutes he was back again.

‘There,’ he said. ‘That is all my business.’

‘What were you doing there?’ I asked in lively curiosity.

‘I left something to be analysed.’

‘Yes, but what?’

‘The sample of cocoa I took from the saucepan in the bedroom.’

‘But that has already been tested!’ I cried, stupefied. ‘Dr Bauerstein had it tested, and you yourself laughed at the possibility of there being strychnine in it.’

‘I know Dr Bauerstein had it tested,’ replied Poirot quietly.

‘Well, then?’

‘Well, I have a fancy for having it analysed again, that is all.’

And not another word on the subject could I drag out of him.

This proceeding of Poirot’s, in respect of the cocoa, puzzled me intensely. I could see neither rhyme nor reason in it. However, my confidence in him, which at one time had rather waned, was fully restored since his belief in Alfred Inglethorp’s innocence had been so triumphantly vindicated.

The funeral of Mrs Inglethorp took place the following day, and on Monday, as I came down to a late breakfast, John drew me aside, and informed me that Mr Inglethorp was leaving that morning, to take up his quarters at the Stylites Arms, until he should have completed his plans.

‘And really it’s a great relief to think he’s going, Hastings,’ continued my honest friend. ‘It was bad enough before, when we thought he’d done it, but I’m hanged if it isn’t worse now, when we all feel guilty for having been so down on the fellow. The fact is, we’ve treated him abominably. Of course, things did look black against him. I don’t see how anyone could blame us for jumping to the conclusions we did. Still, there it is, we were in

the wrong, and now there's a beastly feeling that one ought to make amends; which is difficult, when one doesn't like the fellow a bit better than one did before. The whole thing's damned awkward! And I'm thankful he's had the tact to take himself off. It's a good thing Styles wasn't the mater's to leave to him. Couldn't bear to think of the fellow lording it here. He's welcome to her money.'

'You'll be able to keep up the place all right?' I asked.

'Oh, yes. There are the death duties, of course, but half my father's money goes with the place, and Lawrence will stay with us for the present, so there is his share as well. We shall be pinched at first, of course, because, as I once told you, I am in a bit of a hole financially myself. Still, the Johnnies will wait now.'

In the general relief at Inglethorp's approaching departure, we had the most genial breakfast we had experienced since the tragedy. Cynthia, whose young spirits were naturally buoyant, was looking quite her pretty self again, and we all, with the exception of Lawrence, who seemed unalterably gloomy and nervous, were quietly cheerful, at the opening of a new and hopeful future.

The papers, of course, had been full of the tragedy. Glaring headlines, sandwiched biographies of every member of the household, subtle innuendoes, the usual familiar tag about the police having a clue. Nothing was spared us. It was a slack time. The war was momentarily inactive, and the newspapers seized with avidity on this crime in fashionable life: 'The Mysterious Affair at Styles' was the topic of the moment.

Naturally it was very annoying for the Cavendishes. The house was constantly besieged by reporters, who were consistently denied admission, but who continued to haunt the village and the grounds, where they lay in wait with cameras, for any unwary members of the household. We all lived in a blast of publicity. The Scotland Yard men came and went, examining, questioning, lynx-eyed and reserved of tongue. Towards what end they were working, we did not know. Had they any clue, or would the whole thing remain in the category of undiscovered crimes?

After breakfast, Dorcas came up to me rather mysteriously, and asked if she might have a few words with me.

‘Certainly. What is it, Dorcas?’

‘Well, it’s just this, sir. You’ll be seeing the Belgian gentleman today perhaps?’ I nodded. ‘Well, sir, you know how he asked me so particular if the mistress, or anyone else, had a green dress?’

‘Yes, yes. You have found one?’ My interest was aroused.

‘No, not that, sir. But since then I’ve remembered what the young gentlemen’—John and Lawrence were still the ‘young gentlemen’ to Dorcas—‘call the “dressing-up box”. It’s up in the front attic, sir. A great chest, full of old clothes and fancy dresses, and what not. And it came to me sudden like that there might be a green dress amongst them. So, if you’d tell the Belgian gentleman –’

‘I will tell him, Dorcas,’ I promised.

‘Thank you very much, sir. A very nice gentleman he is, sir. And quite a different class from them two detectives from London, what goes prying about, and asking questions. I don’t hold with foreigners as a rule, but from what the newspapers says I make out as how these brave Belgies isn’t the ordinary run of foreigners and certainly he’s a most polite spoken gentleman.’

Dear old Dorcas! As she stood there, with her honest face upturned to mine, I thought what a fine specimen she was of the old-fashioned servant that is so fast dying out.

I thought I might as well go down to the village at once, and look up Poirot; but I met him half-way, coming up to the house, and at once gave him Dorcas’s message.

‘Ah, the brave Dorcas! We will look at the chest, although—but no matter—we will examine it all the same.’

We entered the house by one of the windows. There was no one in the hall, and we went straight up to the attic.

Sure enough, there was the chest, a fine old piece, all studded with brass nails, and full to overflowing with every imaginable type of garment.

Poirot bundled everything out on the floor with scant ceremony. There were one or two green fabrics of varying shades; but Poirot shook his head over them all. He seemed somewhat apathetic in the search, as though he expected no great results from it. Suddenly he gave an exclamation.

'What is it?'

'Look!'

The chest was nearly empty, and there, reposing right at the bottom, was a magnificent black beard.

'*Ohó!*' said Poirot. '*Ohó!*' He turned it over in his hands, examining it closely. 'New,' he remarked. 'Yes, quite new.'

After a moment's hesitation, he replaced it in the chest, heaped all the other things on top of it as before, and made his way briskly downstairs. He went straight to the pantry, where we found Dorcas busily polishing her silver.

Poirot wished her good morning with Gallic politeness, and went on:

'We have been looking through that chest, Dorcas. I'm much obliged to you for mentioning it. There is, indeed, a fine collection there. Are they often used, may I ask?'

'Well, sir, not very often nowadays, though from time to time we do have what the young gentlemen call "a dress-up night". And very funny it is sometimes, sir. Mr Lawrence, he's wonderful. Most comic! I shall never forget the night he came down as the Char of Persia, I think he called it—a sort of Eastern King it was. He had the big paper knife in his hand, and "Mind, Dorcas," he says, "you'll have to be very respectful. This is my

specially sharpened scimitar, and it's off with your head if I'm at all displeased with you!" Miss Cynthia, she was what they call an Apache, or some such name—a Frenchified sort of cut-throat, I take it to be. A real sight she looked. You'd never have believed a pretty young lady like that could have made herself into such a ruffian. Nobody would have known her.'

'These evenings must have been great fun,' said Poirot genially. 'I suppose Mr Lawrence wore that fine black beard in the chest upstairs, when he was Shah of Persia?'

'He did have a beard, sir,' replied Dorcas, smiling. 'And well I know it, for he borrowed two skeins of my black wool to make it with! And I'm sure it looked wonderfully natural at a distance. I didn't know as there was a beard up there at all. It must have been got quite lately, I think. There was a red wig, I know, but nothing else in the way of hair. Burnt corks they use mostly—though 'tis messy getting it off again. Miss Cynthia was a Negress once, and, oh, the trouble she had.'

'So Dorcas knows nothing about that black beard,' said Poirot thoughtfully, as we walked out into the hall again.

'Do you think it is *the* one?' I whispered eagerly.

Poirot nodded.

'I do. You noticed it had been trimmed?'

'No.'

'Yes. It was cut exactly the shape of Mr Inglethorp's and I found one or two snipped hairs. Hastings, this affair is very deep.'

'Who put it in the chest, I wonder?'

'Someone with a good deal of intelligence,' remarked Poirot drily. 'You realize that he chose the one place in the house to hide it where its presence would not be remarked? Yes, he is intelligent. But we must be more

intelligent. We must be so intelligent that he does not suspect us of being intelligent at all.'

I acquiesced.

'There, *mon ami*, you will be of great assistance to me.'

I was pleased with the compliment. There had been times when I hardly thought that Poirot appreciated me at my true worth.

'Yes,' he continued, staring at me thoughtfully, 'you will be invaluable.'

This was naturally gratifying, but Poirot's next words were not so welcome.

'I must have an ally in the house,' he observed reflectively.

'You have me,' I protested.

'True, but you are not sufficient.'

I was hurt, and showed it. Poirot hurried to explain himself.

'You do not quite take my meaning. You are known to be working with me. I want somebody who is not associated with us in any way.'

'Oh, I see. How about John?'

'No, I think not.'

'The dear fellow isn't perhaps very bright,' I said thoughtfully.

'Here comes Miss Howard,' said Poirot suddenly. 'She is the very person. But I am in her black books, since I cleared Mr Inglethorp. Still, we can but try.'

With a nod that was barely civil, Miss Howard assented to Poirot's request for a few minutes' conversation.

We went into the little morning-room, and Poirot closed the door.

‘Well, Monsieur Poirot,’ said Miss Howard impatiently, ‘what is it? Out with it. I’m busy.’

‘Do you remember, mademoiselle, that I once asked you to help me?’

‘Yes, I do.’ The lady nodded. ‘And I told you I’d help you with pleasure—to hang Alfred Inglethorp.’

‘Ah!’ Poirot studied her seriously. ‘Miss Howard, I will ask you one question. I beg of you to reply to it truthfully.’

‘Never tell lies,’ replied Miss Howard.

‘It is this. Do you still believe that Mrs Inglethorp was poisoned by her husband?’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked sharply. ‘You needn’t think your pretty explanations influence me in the slightest. I’ll admit that it wasn’t he who bought strychnine at the chemist’s shop. What of that? I dare say he soaked fly paper, as I told you at the beginning.’

‘That is arsenic—not strychnine,’ said Poirot mildly.

‘What does that matter? Arsenic would put poor Emily out of the way just as well as strychnine. If I’m convinced he did it, it doesn’t matter a jot to me *how* he did it.’

‘Exactly. If you are convinced he did it,’ said Poirot quietly. ‘I will put my question in another form. Did you ever in your heart of hearts believe that Mrs Inglethorp was poisoned by her husband?’

‘Good heavens!’ cried Miss Howard. ‘Haven’t I always told you the man is a villian? Haven’t I always told you he would murder her in her bed? Haven’t I always hated him like poison?’

‘Exactly,’ said Poirot. ‘That bears out my little idea entirely.’

‘What little idea?’

‘Miss Howard, do you remember a conversation that took place on the day of my friend’s arrival here? He repeated it to me, and there is a sentence of yours that has impressed me very much. Do you remember affirming that if a crime had been committed, and anyone you loved had been murdered, you felt certain that you would know by instinct who the criminal was, even if you were quite unable to prove it?’

‘Yes, I remember saying that. I believe it, too. I suppose you think it nonsense?’

‘Not at all.’

‘And yet you will pay no attention to my instinct against Alfred Inglethorp?’

‘No,’ said Poirot curtly. ‘Because your instinct is not against Mr Inglethorp.’

‘What?’

‘No. You wish to believe he committed the crime. You believe him capable of committing it. But your instinct tells you he did not commit it. It tells you more—shall I go on?’

She was staring at him, fascinated, and made a slight affirmative movement of the hand.

‘Shall I tell you why you have been so vehement against Mr Inglethorp? It is because you have been trying to believe what you wish to believe. It is because you are trying to drown and stifle your instinct, which tells you another name –’

‘No, no, no!’ cried Miss Howard, wildly, flinging up her hands. ‘Don’t say it! Oh, don’t say it! It isn’t true! It can’t be true. I don’t know what put such a wild—such a dreadful—idea into my head!’

‘I am right, am I not?’ asked Poirot.

‘Yes, yes; you must be a wizard to have guessed. But it can’t be so—it’s so monstrous, too impossible. It *must* be Alfred Inglethorp.’

Poirot shook his head gravely.

‘Don’t ask me about it,’ continued Miss Howard, ‘because I shan’t tell you. I won’t admit it, even to myself. I must be mad to think of such a thing.’

Poirot nodded, as if satisfied.

‘I will ask you nothing. It is enough for me that it is as I thought. And I —I, too, have an instinct. We are working together towards a common end.’

‘Don’t askme to help you, because I won’t. I wouldn’t lift a finger to—to –’ She faltered.

‘You will help me in spite of yourself. I ask you nothing—but you will be my ally. You will not be able to help yourself. You will do the only thing that I want of you.’

‘And that is?’

‘You will watch!’

Evelyn Howard bowed her head.

‘Yes, I can’t help doing that. I am always watching—always hoping I shall be proved wrong.’

‘If we are wrong, well and good,’ said Poirot. ‘No one will be more pleased than I shall. But, if we are right? If we are right, Miss Howard, on whose side are you then?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t know –’

‘Come now.’

‘It could be hushed up.’

‘There must be no hushing up.’

‘But Emily herself –’ She broke off.

‘Miss Howard,’ said Poirot gravely, ‘this is unworthy of you.’

Suddenly she took her face from her hands.

‘Yes,’ she said quietly, ‘that was not Evelyn Howard who spoke!’ She flung her head up proudly. ‘*This* is Evelyn Howard! And she is on the side of Justice! Let the cost be what it may.’ And with these words, she walked firmly out of the room.

‘There,’ said Poirot, looking after her, ‘goes a very valuable ally. That woman, Hastings, has got brains as well as a heart.’

I did not reply.

‘Instinct is a marvellous thing,’ mused Poirot. ‘It can neither be explained nor ignored.’

‘You and Miss Howard seem to know what you are talking about,’ I observed coldly. ‘Perhaps you don’t realize that I am still in the dark.’

‘Really? Is that so, *mon ami?*’

‘Yes. Enlighten me, will you?’

Poirot studied me attentively for a moment or two. Then, to my intense surprise, he shook his head decidedly.

‘No, my friend.’

‘Oh, look here, why not?’

‘Two is enough for a secret.’

‘Well, I think it is very unfair to keep back facts from me.’

‘I am not keeping back facts. Every fact that I know is in your possession. You can draw your own deductions from them. This time it is a question of ideas.’

‘Still, it would be interesting to know.’

Poirot looked at me very earnestly, and again shook his head.

‘You see,’ he said sadly, ‘*you* have no instincts.’

‘It was intelligence you were requiring just now,’ I pointed out.

‘The two often go together,’ said Poirot enigmatically.

The remark seemed so utterly irrelevant that I did not even take the trouble to answer it. But I decided that if I made any interesting and important discoveries —as no doubt I should—I would keep them to myself, and surprise Poirot with the ultimate result.

There are times when it is one’s duty to assert oneself.

Chapter 9

Dr Bauerstein

I had no opportunity as yet of passing on Poirot's message to Lawrence. But now, as I strolled out on the lawn, still nursing a grudge against my friend's high-handedness, I saw Lawrence on the croquet lawn, aimlessly knocking a couple of very ancient balls about, with a still more ancient mallet.

It struck me that it would be a good opportunity to deliver my message. Otherwise, Poirot himself might relieve me of it. It was true that I did not quite gather its purport, but I flattered myself that by Lawrence's reply, and perhaps a little skilful cross-examination on my part, I should soon perceive its significance. Accordingly I accosted him.

'I've been looking for you,' I remarked untruthfully.

'Have you?'

'Yes. The truth is, I've got a message for you—from Poirot.'

'Yes?'

'He told me to wait until I was alone with you,' I said, dropping my voice significantly, and watching him intently out of the corner of my eye. I have always been rather good at what is called, I believe, creating an atmosphere.

'Well?'

There was no change of expression in the dark melancholic face. Had he any idea of what I was about to say?

'This is the message.'I dropped my voice still lower.

'"Find the extra coffee-cup, and you can rest in peace."'

‘What on earth does he mean?’ Lawrence stared at me in quite unaffected astonishment.

‘Don’t you know?’

‘Not in the least. Do you?’

I was compelled to shake my head.

‘What extra coffee-cup?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He’d better ask Dorcas, or one of the maids, if he wants to know about coffee-cups. It’s their business, not mine. I don’t know anything about the coffee-cups, except that we’ve got some that are never used, which are a perfect dream! Old Worcester. You’re not a connoisseur, are you, Hastings?’

I shook my head.

‘You miss a lot. A really perfect bit of old china—it’s pure delight to handle it, or even to look at it.’

‘Well, what am I to tell Poirot?’

‘Tell him I don’t know what he’s talking about. It’s double Dutch to me.’

‘All right.’

I was moving off towards the house again when he suddenly called me back.

‘I say, what was the end of that message? Say it over again, will you?’

‘“Find the extra coffee-cup, and you can rest in peace.” Are you sure you don’t know what it means?’ I asked him earnestly.

He shook his head.

‘No,’ he said musingly, ‘I don’t. I—I wish I did.’

The boom of the gong sounded from the house, and we went in together. Poirot had been asked by John to remain to lunch, and was already seated at the table.

By tacit consent, all mention of the tragedy was barred. We conversed on the war, and other outside topics. But after the cheese and biscuits had been handed round, and Dorcas had left the room, Poirot suddenly leant forward to Mrs Cavendish.

‘Pardon me, madame, for recalling unpleasant memories, but I have a little idea’—Poirot’s ‘little ideas’ were becoming a perfect byword—‘and would like to ask one or two questions.’

‘Of me? Certainly.’

‘You are too aimable, madame. What I want to ask is this: the door leading into Mrs Inglethorp’s room from that of Mademoiselle Cynthia, it was bolted, you say?’

‘Certainly it was bolted,’ replied Mary Cavendish, rather surprised. ‘I said so at the inquest.’

‘Bolted?’

‘Yes.’ She looked perplexed.

‘I mean,’ explained Poirot, ‘you are sure it was bolted, and not merely locked?’

‘Oh, I see what you mean. No, I don’t know. I said bolted, meaning that it was fastened, and I could not open it, but I believe all the doors were found bolted on the inside.’

‘Still, as far as you are concerned, the door might equally well have been locked?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘You yourself did not happen to notice, madame, when you entered Mrs Inglethorp’s room, whether that door was bolted or not?’

‘I—I believe it was.’

‘But you did not see it?’

‘No. I—never looked.’

‘But I did,’ interrupted Lawrence suddenly. ‘I happened to notice that it *was* bolted.’

‘Ah, that settles it.’ And Poirot looked crestfallen.

I could not help rejoicing that, for once, one of his ‘little ideas’ had come to naught.

After lunch Poirot begged me to accompany him home. I consented rather stiffly.

‘You are annoyed, is it not so?’ he asked anxiously, as we walked through the park.

‘Not at all,’ I said coldly.

‘That is well. That lifts a great load from my mind.’

This was not quite what I had intended. I had hoped that he would have observed the stiffness of my manner. Still, the fervour of his words went towards the appeasing of my just displeasure. I thawed.

‘I gave Lawrence your message,’ I said.

‘And what did he say? He was entirely puzzled?’

‘Yes. I am quite sure he had no idea of what you meant.’

I had expected Poirot to be disappointed; but, to my surprise, he replied that that was as he had thought, and that he was very glad. My pride forbade

me to ask any questions.

Poirot switched off on another tack.

‘Mademoiselle Cynthia was not at lunch today? How was that?’

‘She is at the hospital again. She resumed work today.’

‘Ah, she is an industrious little demoiselle. And pretty too. She is like pictures I have seen in Italy. I would rather like to see that dispensary of hers. Do you think she would show it to me?’

‘I am sure she would be delighted. It’s an interesting little place.’

‘Does she go there every day?’

‘She has all Wednesdays off, and comes back to lunch on Saturdays. Those are her only times off.’

‘I will remember. Women are doing great work nowadays, and Mademoiselle Cynthia is clever—oh, yes, she has brains, that little one.’

‘Yes. I believe she has passed quite a stiff exam.’

‘Without doubt. After all, it is very responsible work. I suppose they have very strong poisons there?’

‘Yes, she showed them to us. They are kept locked up in a little cupboard. I believe they have to be very careful. They always take out the key before leaving the room.’

‘Indeed. It is near the window, this cupboard?’

‘No, right the other side of the room. Why?’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘I wondered. That is all. Will you come in?’

We had reached the cottage.

‘No. I think I’ll be getting back. I shall go round the long way through the woods.’

The woods round Styles were very beautiful. After the walk across the open park, it was pleasant to saunter lazily through the cool glades. There was hardly a breath of wind, the very chirp of the birds was faint and subdued. I strolled on a little way, and finally flung myself down at the foot of a grand old beech-tree. My thoughts of mankind were kindly and charitable. I even forgave Poirot for his absurd secrecy. In fact, I was at peace with the world. Then I yawned.

I thought about the crime, and it struck me as being very unreal and far off.

I yawned again.

Probably, I thought, it really never happened. Of course, it was all a bad dream. The truth of the matter was that it was Lawrence who had murdered Alfred Inglethorp with a croquet mallet. But it was absurd of John to make such a fuss about it, and to go shouting out: ‘I tell you I won’t have it!’

I woke up with a start.

At once I realized that I was in a very awkward predicament. For, about twelve feet away from me, John and Mary Cavendish were standing facing each other, and they were evidently quarrelling. And, quite as evidently, they were unaware of my vicinity, for before I could move or speak John repeated the words which had aroused me from my dream.

‘I tell you, Mary, I won’t have it.’

Mary’s voice came, cool and liquid:

‘Have *you* any right to criticize my actions?’

‘It will be the talk of the village! My mother was only buried on Saturday, and here you are gadding about with the fellow.’

‘Oh,’ she shrugged her shoulders, ‘if it is only village gossip that you mind!’

‘But it isn’t. I’ve had enough of the fellow hanging about. He’s a Polish Jew, anyway.’

‘A tinge of Jewish blood is not a bad thing. It leavens the’—she looked at him—‘stolid stupidity of the ordinary Englishman.’

Fire in her eyes, ice in her voice. I did not wonder that the blood rose to John’s face in a crimson tide.

‘Mary!’

‘Well?’ Her tone did not change.

The pleading died out of his voice.

‘Am I to understand that you will continue to see Bauerstein against my express wishes?’

‘If I choose.’

‘You defy me?’

‘No, but I deny your right to criticize my actions. Have *you* no friends of whom I should disapprove?’

John fell back a pace. The colour ebbed slowly from his face.

‘What do you mean?’ he said, in an unsteady voice.

‘You see!’ said Mary quietly. ‘You *do* see, don’t you, that *you* have no right to dictate to *me* as to the choice of my friends?’

John glanced at her pleadingly, a stricken look in his face.

‘No right? Have I *no* right, Mary?’ he said unsteadily. He stretched out his hands. ‘Mary –’

For a moment, I thought she wavered. A softer expression came over her face, then suddenly she turned almost fiercely away.

‘None!’

She was walking away when John sprang after her, and caught her by the arm.

‘Mary’—his voice was very quiet now—‘are you in love with this fellow Bauerstein?’

She hesitated, and suddenly there swept across her face a strange expression, old as the hills, yet with something eternally young about it. So might some Egyptian sphinx have smiled.

She freed herself quietly from his arm, and spoke over her shoulder.

‘Perhaps,’ she said; and then swiftly passed out of the little glade, leaving John standing there as though he had been turned to stone.

Rather ostentatiously, I stepped forward, crackling some dead branches with my feet as I did so. John turned. Luckily, he took it for granted that I had only just come upon the scene.

‘Hullo, Hastings. Have you seen the little fellow safely back to his cottage? Quaint little chap! Is he any good, though, really?’

‘He was considered one of the finest detectives of his day.’

‘Oh, well, I suppose there must be something in it, then. What a rotten world it is, though!’

‘You find it so?’ I asked.

‘Good Lord, yes! There’s this terrible business to start with. Scotland Yard men in and out of the house like a jack-in-the-box! Never know where they won’t turn up next. Screaming headlines in every paper in the country —damn all journalists, I say! Do you know there was a whole crowd staring

in at the lodge gates this morning. Sort of Madame Tussaud's chamber of horrors business that can be seen for nothing. Pretty thick, isn't it?'

'Cheer up, John!' I said soothingly. 'It can't last for ever.'

'Can't it, though? It can last long enough for us never to be able to hold up our heads again.'

'No, no, you're getting morbid on the subject.'

'Enough to make a man morbid, to be stalked by beastly journalists and stared at by gaping moon-faced idiots, wherever he goes! But there's worse than that.'

'What?'

John lowered his voice:

'Have you ever thought, Hastings—it's a nightmare to me—who did it? I can't help feeling sometimes it must have been an accident. Because—because—who could have done it? Now Inglethorp's out of the way, there's no one else; no one, I mean, except—one of us.'

Yes, indeed, that was nightmare enough for any man! One of us? Yes, surely it must be so, unless –

A new idea suggested itself to my mind. Rapidly, I considered it. The light increased. Poirot's mysterious doings, his hints—they all fitted in. Fool that I was not to have thought of this possibility before, and what a relief for us all.

'No, John,' I said, 'it isn't one of us. How could it be?'

'I know, but, still, who else is there?'

'Can't you guess?'

'No.'

I looked cautiously round, and lowered my voice.

‘Dr Bauerstein!’ I whispered.

‘Impossible!’

‘Not at all.’

‘But what earthly interest could he have in mother’s death?’

‘That I don’t see,’ I confessed, ‘but I’ll tell you this: Poirot thinks so.’

‘Poirot? Does he? How do you know?’

I told him of Poirot’s intense excitement on hearing that Dr Bauerstein had been at Styles on the fatal night, and added:

‘He said twice: “That alters everything.” And I’ve been thinking. You know Inglethorp said he had put down the coffee in the hall? Well, it was just then that Bauerstein arrived. Isn’t is possible that, as Inglethorp brought him through the hall, the doctor dropped something into the coffee in passing?’

‘H’m,’ said John. ‘It would have been very risky.’

‘Yes, but it was possible.’

‘And then, how could he know it was her coffee? No, old fellow, I don’t think that will wash.’

But I had remembered something else.

‘You’re quite right. That wasn’t how it was done. Listen.’ And then I told him of the cocoa sample which Poirot had taken to be analysed.

John interrupted just as I had done.

‘But, look here, Bauerstein had had it analysed already?’

‘Yes, yes, that’s the point. I didn’t see it either until now. Don’t you understand? Bauerstein had it analysed—that’s just it! If Bauerstein’s the murderer, nothing could be simpler than for him to substitute some ordinary cocoa for his sample, and send that to be tested. And of course they would find no strychnine! But no one would dream of suspecting Bauerstein, or think of taking another sample—except Poirot,’ I added, with belated recognition.

‘Yes, but what about the bitter taste that cocoa won’t disguise?’

‘Well, we’ve only his word for that. And there are other possibilities. He’s admittedly one of the world’s greatest toxicologists –’

‘One of the world’s greatest what? Say it again.’

‘He knows more about poisons than almost anybody,’ I explained. ‘Well, my idea is, that perhaps he’s found some way of making strychnine tasteless. Or it may not have been strychnine at all, but some obscure drug no one has ever heard of, which produces much the same symptoms.’

‘H’m, yes, that might be,’ said John. ‘But look here, how could he have got at the cocoa? That wasn’t downstairs?’

‘No, it wasn’t,’ I admitted reluctantly.

And then, suddenly, a dreadful possibility flashed through my mind. I hoped and prayed it would not occur to John also. I glanced sideways at him. He was frowning perplexedly, and I drew a deep breath of relief, for the terrible thought that had flashed across my mind was this: that Dr Bauerstein might have had an accomplice.

Yet surely it could not be! Surely no woman as beautiful as Mary Cavendish could be a murderess. Yet beautiful women had been known to poison.

And suddenly I remembered that first conversation at tea on the day of my arrival, and the gleam in her eyes as she had said that poison was a woman’s weapon. How agitated she had been on that fatal Tuesday

evening! Had Mrs Inglethorp discovered something between her and Bauerstein, and threatened to tell her husband? Was it to stop that denunciation that the crime had been committed?

Then I remembered that enigmatical conversation between Poirot and Evelyn Howard. Was this what they had meant? Was this the monstrous possibility that Evelyn had tried not to believe?

Yes, it all fitted in.

No wonder Miss Howard has suggested ‘hushing it up’. Now I understood that unfinished sentence of hers: ‘Emily herself –’ And in my heart I agreed with her. Would not Mrs Inglethorp have preferred to go unavenged rather than have such terrible dishonour fall upon the name of Cavendish?

‘There’s another thing,’ said John suddenly, and the unexpected sound of his voice made me start guiltily. ‘Something which makes me doubt if what you say can be true.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked, thankful that he had gone away from the subject of how the poison could have been introduced into the cocoa.

‘Why, the fact that Bauerstein demanded a postmortem. He needn’t have done so. Little Wilkins would have been quite content to let it go at heart disease.’

‘Yes,’ I said doubtfully. ‘But we don’t know. Perhaps he thought it safer in the long run. Someone might have talked afterwards. Then the Home Office might have ordered exhumation. The whole thing would have come out, then, and he would have been in an awkward position, for no one would have believed that a man of his reputation could have been deceived into calling it heart disease.’

‘Yes, that’s possible,’ admitted John. ‘Still,’ he added, ‘I’m blest if I can see what his motive could have been.’

I trembled.

‘Look here,’ I said, ‘I may be altogether wrong. And, remember, all this is in confidence.’

‘Oh, of course—that goes without saying.’

We had walked, as we talked, and now we passed through the little gate into the garden. Voices rose near at hand, for tea was spread out under the sycamore-tree, as it had been on the day of my arrival.

Cynthia was back from the hospital, and I placed my chair beside her, and told her of Poirot’s wish to visit the dispensary.

‘Of course! I’d love him to see it. He’d better come to tea there one day. I must fix it up with him. He’s such a dear little man! But he *is* funny. He made me take the brooch out of my tie the other day, and put it in again, because he said it wasn’t straight.’

I laughed.

‘It’s quite a mania with him.’

‘Yes, isn’t it?’

We were silent for a minute or two, and then, glancing in the direction of Mary Cavendish, and dropping her voice, Cynthia said:

‘Mr Hastings.’

‘Yes?’

‘After tea, I want to talk to you.’

Her glance at Mary had set me thinking. I fancied that between these two there existed very little sympathy. For the first time, it occurred to me to wonder about the girl’s future. Mrs Inglethorp had made no provision of any kind for her, but I imagined that John and Mary would probably insist on her making her home with them—at any rate until the end of the war. John, I knew, was very fond of her, and would be sorry to let her go.

John, who had gone into the house, now reappeared. His good-natured face wore an unaccustomed frown of anger.

‘Confound those detectives! I can’t think what they’re after! They’ve been in every room in the house—turning things inside out, and upside down. It really is too bad! I suppose they took advantage of our all being out. I shall go for that fellow Japp, when I next see him!’

‘Lot of Paul Prys,’ grunted Miss Howard.

Lawrence opined that they had to make a show of doing something.

Mary Cavendish said nothing.

After tea, I invited Cynthia to come for a walk, and we sauntered off into the woods together.

‘Well?’ I inquired, as soon as we were protected from prying eyes by the leafy screen.

With a sigh, Cynthia flung herself down, and tossed off her hat. The sunlight, piercing through the branches, turned the auburn of her hair to quivering gold.

‘Mr Hastings—you are always so kind, and you know such a lot.’

It struck me at this moment that Cynthia was really a very charming girl! Much more charming than Mary, who never said things of that kind.

‘Well?’ I asked benignantly, as she hesitated.

‘I want to ask your advice. What shall I do?’

‘Do?’

‘Yes. You see, Aunt Emily always told me I should be provided for. I suppose she forgot, or didn’t think she was likely to die—anyway, I am *not* provided for! And I don’t know what to do. Do you think I ought to go away from here at once?’

‘Good heavens, no! They don’t want to part with you, I’m sure.’

Cynthia hesitated a moment, plucking up the grass with her tiny hands. Then she said: ‘Mrs Cavendish does. She hates me.’

‘Hates you?’ I cried, astonished.

Cynthia nodded.

‘Yes. I don’t know why, but she can’t bear me and *he* can’t either.’

‘There I know you’re wrong,’ I said warmly. ‘On the contrary, John is very fond of you.’

‘Oh, yes –*John*. I meant Lawrence. Not, of course, that I care whether Lawrence hates me or not. Still, it’s rather horrid when no one loves you, isn’t it?’

‘But they do, Cynthia dear,’ I said earnestly. ‘I’m sure you are mistaken. Look, there is John—and Miss Howard –’

Cynthia nodded rather gloomily. ‘Yes, John likes me, I think, and of course Evie, for all her gruff ways, wouldn’t be unkind to a fly. But Lawrence never speaks to me if he can help it, and Mary can hardly bring herself to be civil to me. She wants Evie to stay on, is begging her to, but she doesn’t want me, and—and—I don’t know what to do.’ Suddenly the poor child burst out crying.

I don’t know what possessed me. Her beauty, perhaps, as she sat there, with the sunlight glinting down on her head; perhaps the sense of relief at encountering someone who so obviously could have no connection with the tragedy; perhaps honest pity for her youth and loneliness. Anyway, I leant forward, and taking her little hand, I said awkwardly:

‘Marry me, Cynthia.’

Unwittingly, I had hit upon a sovereign remedy for her tears. She sat up at once, drew her hand away, and said, with some asperity:

‘Don’t be silly!’

I was a little annoyed.

‘I’m not being silly. I am asking you to do me the honour of becoming my wife.’

To my intense surprise, Cynthia burst out laughing, and called me a ‘funny dear’.

‘It’s perfectly sweet of you,’ she said, ‘but you know you don’t want to!’

‘Yes, I do. I’ve got –’

‘Never mind what you’ve got. You don’t really want to—and I don’t either.’

‘Well, of course, that settles it,’ I said stiffly. ‘But I don’t see anything to laugh at. There’s nothing funny about a proposal.’

‘No, indeed,’ said Cynthia. ‘Somebody might accept you next time. Good-bye, you’ve cheered me up *very* much.’

And, with a final uncontrollable burst of merriment, she vanished through the trees.

Thinking over the interview, it struck me as being profoundly unsatisfactory.

It occurred to me suddenly that I would go down to the village, and look up Bauerstein. Somebody ought to be keeping an eye on the fellow. At the same time, it would be wise to allay any suspicions he might have as to his being suspected. I remembered how Poirot had relied on my diplomacy. Accordingly, I went to the little house with the ‘Apartments’ card inserted in the window, where I knew he lodged, and tapped on the door.

An old woman came and opened it.

‘Good afternoon,’ I said pleasantly. ‘Is Dr Bauerstein in?’

She stared at me.

‘Haven’t you heard?’

‘Heard what?’

‘About him.’

‘What about him?’

‘He’s took.’

‘Took? Dead?’

‘No, took by the perlice.’

‘By the police!’ I gasped. ‘Do you mean they’ve arrested him?’

‘Yes, that’s it, and –’

I waited to hear no more, but tore up the village to find Poirot.

Chapter 10

The Arrest

To my extreme annoyance, Poirot was not in, and the old Belgian who answered my knock informed me that he believed he had gone to London.

I was dumbfounded. What on earth could Poirot be doing in London? Was it a sudden decision on his part, or had he already made up his mind when he parted from me a few hours earlier?

I retraced my steps to Styles in some annoyance. With Poirot away, I was uncertain how to act. Had he foreseen this arrest? Had he not, in all probability, been the cause of it? Those questions I could not resolve. But in the meantime what was I to do? Should I announce the arrest openly at Styles, or not? Though I did not acknowledge it to myself, the thought of Mary Cavendish was weighing on me. Would it not be a terrible shock to her? For the moment, I set aside utterly any suspicions of her. She could not be implicated— otherwise I should have heard some hint of it.

Of course, there was no possibility of being able permanently to conceal Dr Bauerstein's arrest from her. It would be announced in every newspaper on the morrow. Still, I shrank from blurting it out. If only Poirot had been accessible, I could have asked his advice. What possessed him to go posting off to London in this unaccountable way?

In spite of myself, my opinion of his sagacity was immeasurably heightened. I would never have dreamt of suspecting the doctor, had not Poirot put it into my head. Yes, decidedly, the little man was clever.

After some reflecting, I decided to take John into my confidence, and leave him to make the matter public or not, as he thought fit.

He gave vent to a prodigious whistle, as I imparted the news.

'Great Scot! You *were* right, then. I couldn't believe it at the time.'

‘No, it is astonishing until you get used to the idea, and see how it makes everything fit in. Now, what are we to do? Of course, it will be generally known tomorrow.’

John reflected.

‘Never mind,’ he said at last, ‘we won’t say anything at present. There is no need. As you say, it will be known soon enough.’

But to my intense surprise, on getting down early the next morning, and eagerly opening the newspapers, there was not a word about the arrest! There was a column of mere padding about ‘The Styles Poisoning Case’, but nothing further. It was rather inexplicable, but I supposed that, for some reason or other, Japp wished to keep it out of the papers. It worried me just a little, for it suggested the possibility that there might be further arrests to come.

After breakfast, I decided to go down to the village, and see if Poirot had returned yet; but, before I could start, a well-known face blocked one of the windows, and the well-known voice said:

‘*Bonjour, mon ami!*’

‘Poirot,’ I exclaimed, with relief, and seizing him by both hands I dragged him into the room. ‘I was never so glad to see anyone. Listen, I have said nothing to anybody but John. Is that right?’

‘My friend,’ replied Poirot, ‘I do not know what you are talking about.’

‘Dr Bauerstein’s arrest, of course,’ I answered impatiently.

‘Is Bauerstein arrested, then?’

‘Did you not know it?’

‘Not the least in the world.’ But, pausing a moment, he added: ‘Still, it does not surprise me. After all, we are only four miles from the coast.’

‘The coast?’ I asked, puzzled. ‘What has that got to do with it?’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘Surely, it is obvious!’

‘Not to me. No doubt I am very dense, but I cannot see what the proximity of the coast has got to do with the murder of Mrs Inglethorp.’

‘Nothing at all, of course,’ replied Poirot, smiling. ‘But we were speaking of the arrest of Dr Bauerstein.’

‘Well, he is arrested for the murder of Mrs Inglethorp –’

‘What?’ cried Poirot, in apparently lively astonishment. ‘Dr Bauerstein arrested for the murder of Mrs Inglethorp?’

‘Yes.’

‘Impossible! That would be too good a farce! Who told you that, my friend?’

‘Well no one exactly told me,’ I confessed. ‘But he is arrested.’

‘Oh, yes, very likely. But for espionage, *mon ami*.’

‘Espionage?’ I gasped.

‘Precisely.’

‘Not for poisoning Mrs Inglethorp?’

‘Not unless our friend Japp has taken leave of his senses,’ replied Poirot placidly.

‘But—but I thought you thought so too?’

Poirot gave me one look, which conveyed a wondering pity, and his full sense of the utter absurdity of such an idea.

‘Do you mean to say,’ I asked, slowly adapting myself to the new idea, ‘that Dr Bauerstein is a spy?’

Poirot nodded.

‘Have you never suspected it?’

‘It never entered my head.’

‘It did not strike you as peculiar that a famous London doctor should bury himself in a little village like this, and should be in the habit of walking about at all hours of the night, fully dressed?’

‘No,’ I confessed, ‘I never thought of such a thing.’

‘He is, of course, a German by birth,’ said Poirot thoughtfully, ‘though he has practised so long in this country that nobody thinks of him as anything but an Englishman. He was naturalized about fifteen years ago. A very clever man—a Jew of course.’

‘The blackguard!’ I cried indignantly.

‘Not at all. He is, on the contrary, a patriot. Think what he stands to lose. I admire the man myself.’

But I could not look at it in Poirot’s philosophical way.

‘And this is the man with whom Mrs Cavendish has been wandering about all over the country!’ I cried indignantly.

‘Yes. I should fancy he had found her very useful,’ remarked Poirot. ‘So long as gossip busied itself in coupling their names together, any other vagaries of the doctor’s passed unobserved.’

‘Then you think he never really cared for her?’ I asked eagerly—rather too eagerly, perhaps, under the circumstances.

‘That, of course, I cannot say, but—shall I tell you my own private opinion, Hastings?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, it is this: that Mrs Cavendish does not care, and never has cared one little jot about Dr Bauerstein!’

‘Do you really think so?’ I could not disguise my pleasure.

‘I am quite sure of it. And I will tell you why.’

‘Yes?’

‘Because she cares for someone else, *mon ami*.’

‘Oh!’ What did he mean? In spite of myself, an agreeable warmth spread over me. I am not a vain man where women are concerned, but I remembered certain evidences, too lightly thought of at the time, perhaps, but which certainly seemed to indicate –

My pleasing thoughts were interrupted by the sudden entrance of Miss Howard. She glanced round hastily to make sure there was no one else in the room, and quickly produced an old sheet of brown paper. This she handed to Poirot, murmuring as she did so the cryptic words:

‘On top of the wardrobe.’ Then she hurriedly left the room.

Poirot unfolded the sheet of paper eagerly, and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. He spread it out on the table.

‘Come here, Hastings. Now tell me, what is that initial—J. Or L.?’

It was a medium-sized sheet of paper, rather dusty, as though it had lain by for some time. But it was the label that was attracting Poirot’s attention. At the top, it bore the printed stamp of Messrs Parkson’s, the well-known theatrical costumiers, and it was addressed to ‘—(the debatable initial) Cavendish, Esq., Styles Court, Styles St Mary, Essex.’

‘It might be T. Or it might be L.,’ I said, after studying the thing for a minute or two. ‘It certainly isn’t a J.’

‘Good,’ replied Poirot, folding up the paper again. ‘I, also, am of your way of thinking. It is an L., depend upon it!’

‘Where did it come from?’ I asked curiously. ‘Is it important?’

‘Moderately so. It confirms a surmise of mine. Having deduced its existence, I set Miss Howard to search for it, and, as you see, she has been successful.’

‘What did she mean by “On top of the wardrobe”?’

‘She meant,’ replied Poirot promptly, ‘that she found it on top of a wardrobe.’

‘A funny place for a piece of brown paper,’ I mused.

‘Not at all. The top of a wardrobe is an excellent place for brown paper and cardboard boxes. I have kept them there myself. Neatly arranged, there is nothing to offend the eye.’

‘Poirot,’ I asked earnestly, ‘have you made up your mind about this crime?’

‘Yes—that is to say, I believe I know how it was committed.’

‘Ah!’

‘Unfortunately, I have no proof beyond my surmise, unless –’ With sudden energy, he caught me by the arm, and whirled me down the hall, calling out in French in his excitement: ‘Mademoiselle Dorcas, Mademoiselle Dorcas, *un moment, s’il vous plaît!*’

Dorcas, quite flurried by the noise, came hurrying out of the pantry.

‘My good Dorcas, I have an idea—a little idea—if it should prove justified, what magnificent chance! Tell me, on Monday, not Tuesday, Dorcas, but Monday, the day before the tragedy, did anything go wrong with Mrs Inglethorp’s bell?’

Dorcas looked very surprised.

‘Yes, sir, now you mention it, it did; though I don’t know how you came to hear of it. A mouse, or some such, must have nibbled the wire through. The man came and put it right on Tuesday morning.’

With a long-drawn exclamation of ecstasy, Poirot led the way back to the morning-room.

‘See you, one should not ask for outside proof—no, reason should be enough. But the flesh is weak, it is consolation to find that one is on the right track. Ah, my friend, I am like a giant refreshed. I run! I leap!’

And, in very truth, run and leap he did, gambolling wildly down the stretch of lawn outside the long window.

‘What is your remarkable little friend doing?’ asked a voice behind me, and I turned to find Mary Cavendish at my elbow.

She smiled, and so did I. ‘What is it all about?’

‘Really, I can’t tell you. He asked Dorcas some question about a bell, and appeared so delighted with her answer that he is capering about as you see!’

Mary laughed.

‘How ridiculous! He’s going out of the gate. Isn’t he coming back today?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve given up trying to guess what he’ll do next.’

‘Is he quite mad, Mr Hastings?’

‘I honestly don’t know. Sometimes, I feel sure he is as mad as a hatter; and then, just as he is at his maddest, I find there is method in his madness.’

‘I see.’

In spite of her laugh, Mary was looking thoughtful this morning. She seemed grave, almost sad.

It occurred to me that it would be a good opportunity to tackle her on the subject of Cynthia. I began rather tactfully, I thought, but I had not gone far before she stopped me authoritatively.

‘You are an excellent advocate, I have no doubt, Mr Hastings, but in this case your talents are quite thrown away. Cynthia will run no risk of encountering any unkindness from me.’

I began to stammer feebly that I hoped she hadn’t thought—But again she stopped me, and her words were so unexpected that they quite drove Cynthia, and her troubles, out of my mind.

‘Mr Hastings,’ she said, ‘do you think I and my husband are happy together?’

I was considerably taken aback, and murmured something about it not being my business to think anything of the sort.

‘Well,’ she said quietly, ‘whether it is your business or not, I will tell you that we are *not* happy.’

I said nothing, for I saw that she had not finished.

She began slowly, walking up and down the room, her head a little bent, and that slim, supple figure of hers swaying gently as she walked. She stopped suddenly, and looked up at me.

‘You don’t know anything about me, do you?’ she asked. ‘Where I come from, who I was before I married John—anything, in fact? Well, I will tell you. I will make a father confessor of you. You are kind, I think—yes, I am sure you are kind.’

Somehow, I was not quite as elated as I might have been. I remembered that Cynthia had begun her confidences in much the same way. Besides, a father confessor should be elderly, it is not at all the rôle for a young man.

‘My father was English,’ said Mrs Cavendish, ‘but my mother was a Russian.’

‘Ah,’ I said, ‘now I understand –’

‘Understand what?’

‘A hint of something foreign—different—that there has always been about you.’

‘My mother was very beautiful, I believe. I don’t know, because I never saw her. She died when I was quite a little child. I believe there was some tragedy connected with her death—she took an overdose of some sleeping draught by mistake. However that may be, my father was broken-hearted. Shortly afterwards, he went into the Consular Service. Everywhere he went, I went with him. When I was twenty-three, I had been nearly all over the world. It was a splendid life—I loved it.’

There was a smile on her face, and her head was thrown back. She seemed living in the memory of those old glad days.

‘Then my father died. He left me very badly off. I had to go and live with some old aunts in Yorkshire.’ She shuddered. ‘You will understand me when I say that it was a deadly life for a girl brought up as I had been. The narrowness, the deadly monotony of it, almost drove me mad.’ She paused a minute, and added in a different tone: ‘And then I met John Cavendish.’

‘Yes?’

‘You can imagine that, from my aunts’ point of view, it was a very good match for me. But I can honestly say it was not this fact which weighed with me. No, he was simply a way of escape from the insufferable monotony of my life.’

I said nothing, and after a moment, she went on:

‘Don’t misunderstand me. I was quite honest with him. I told him, what was true, that I liked him very much, that I hoped to come to like him more,

but that I was not in any way what the world calls “in love” with him. He declared that that satisfied him, and so—we were married.’

She waited a long time, a little frown had gathered on her forehead. She seemed to be looking back earnestly into those past days.

‘I think—I am sure—he cared for me at first. But I suppose we were not well matched. Almost at once, we drifted apart. He—it is not a pleasant thing for my pride, but it is the truth—tired of me very soon.’ I must have made some murmur of dissent, for she went on quickly: ‘Oh, yes, he did! Not that it matters now—now that we’ve come to the parting of the ways.’

‘What do you mean?’

She answered quietly:

‘I mean that I am not going to remain at Styles.’

‘You and John are not going to live here?’

‘John may live here, but I shall not.’

‘You are going to leave him?’

‘Yes.’

‘But why?’

She paused a long time, and said at last:

‘Perhaps—because I want to be—free!’

And, as she spoke, I had a sudden vision of broad spaces, virgin tracts of forests, untrodden lands—and a realization of what freedom would mean to such a nature as Mary Cavendish. I seemed to see her for a moment as she was, a proud wild creature, as untamed by civilization as some shy bird of the hills. A little cry broke from her lips:

‘You don’t know, you don’t know, how this hateful place has been prison to me!’

‘I understand,’ I said, ‘but—but don’t do anything rash.’

‘Oh, rash!’ Her voice mocked at my prudence.

Then suddenly I said a thing I could have bitten out my tongue for:

‘You know that Dr Bauerstein has been arrested?’

An instant coldness passed like a mask over her face, blotting out all expression.

‘John was so kind as to break that to me this morning.’

‘Well, what do you think?’ I asked feebly.

‘Of what?’

‘Of the arrest?’

‘What should I think? Apparently he is a German spy; so the gardener had told John.’

Her face and voice were absolutely cold and expressionless. Did she care, or did she not?

She moved away a step or two, and fingered one of the flower vases. ‘These are quite dead. I must do them again. Would you mind moving—thank you, Mr Hastings.’ And she walked quietly past me out of the window, with a cool little nod of dismissal.

No, surely she could not care for Bauerstein. No woman could act her part with that icy unconcern.

Poirot did not make his appearance the following morning, and there was no sign of the Scotland Yard men.

But, at lunch-time, there arrived a new piece of evidence—or rather lack of evidence. We had vainly tried to trace the fourth letter which Mrs Inglethorp had written on the evening preceding her death. Our efforts having been in vain, we had abandoned the matter, hoping that it might turn up of itself one day. And this is just what did happen, in the shape of a communication, which arrived by the second post from a firm of French music publishers, acknowledging Mrs Inglethorp's cheque, and regretting they had been unable to trace a certain series of Russian folk-songs. So the last hope of solving the mystery, by means of Mrs Inglethorp's correspondence on the fatal evening, had to be abandoned.

Just before tea, I strolled down to tell Poirot of the new disappointment, but found, to my annoyance, that he was once more out.

'Gone to London again?'

'Oh, no, monsieur, he has but taken the train to Tadminster. "To see a young lady's dispensary," he said.'

'Silly ass!' I ejaculated. 'I told him Wednesday was the one day she wasn't there! Well, tell him to look us up tomorrow morning, will you?'

'Certainly, monsieur.'

But, on the following day, no sign of Poirot. I was getting angry. He was really treating us in the most cavalier fashion.

After lunch, Lawrence drew me aside, and asked if I was going down to see him.

'No, I don't think I shall. He can come up here if he wants to see us.'

'Oh!' Lawrence looked indeterminate. Something unusually nervous and excited in his manner roused my curiosity.

'What is it?' I asked. 'I could go if there's anything special.'

'It's nothing much, but—well, if you are going, will you tell him'—he dropped his voice to a whisper—'I think I've found the extra coffee-cup!'

I had almost forgotten that enigmatical message of Poirot's but now my curiosity was aroused afresh.

Lawrence would say no more, so I decided that I would descend from my high horse, and once more seek out Poirot at Leastways Cottage.

This time I was received with a smile. Monsieur Poirot was within. Would I mount? I mounted accordingly.

Poirot was sitting by the table, his head buried in his hands. He sprang up at my entrance.

'What is it?' I asked solicitously. 'You are not ill, I trust?'

'No, no, not ill. But I decide an affair of great moment.'

'Whether to catch the criminal or not?' I asked facetiously.

But to my great surprise, Poirot nodded gravely.

'"To speak or not to speak," as your so great Shakespeare says, "that is the question".'

I did not trouble to correct the quotation.

'You are not serious, Poirot?'

'I am of the most serious. For the most serious of all things hangs in the balance.'

'And that is?'

'A woman's happiness, *mon ami,*' he said gravely.

I did not quite know what to say.

'The moment has come,' said Poirot thoughtfully, 'and I do not know what to do. For, see you, it is a big stake for which I play. No one but I,

Hercule Poirot, would attempt it!' And he tapped himself proudly on the breast.

After pausing a few minutes respectfully, so as not to spoil his effect, I gave him Lawrence's message.

'Aha!' he cried. 'So he has found the extra coffee-cup. That is good. He has more intelligence than would appear, this long-faced Monsieur Lawrence of yours!'

I did not myself think very highly of Lawrence's intelligence; but I forbore to contradict Poirot, and gently took him to task for forgetting my instructions as to which were Cynthia's days off.

'It is true. I have the head of a sieve. However, the other young lady was most kind. She was sorry for my disappointment, and showed me everything in the kindest way.'

'Oh, well, that's all right, then, and you must go to tea with Cynthia another day.'

I told him about the letter.

'I am sorry for that,' he said. 'I always had hopes of that letter. But, no, it was not to be. This affair must all be unravelled from within.' He tapped his forehead. 'These little grey cells. It is "up to them"—as you say over here.' Then, suddenly, he asked: 'Are you a judge of finger-marks, my friend?'

'No,' I said, rather surprised, 'I know that there are no two finger-marks alike, but that's as far as my science goes.'

'Exactly.'

He unlocked a little drawer, and took out some photographs which he laid on the table.

'I have numbered them, 1, 2, 3. Will you describe them to me?'

I studied the proofs attentively.

‘All greatly magnified, I see. No. 1, I should say, are a man’s finger-prints; thumb and first finger. No. 2 are a lady’s; they are much smaller, and quite different in every way. No. 3’—I paused for some time—‘there seems to be a lot of confused finger-marks, but here, very distinctly, are No. 1’s.’

‘Overlapping the others?’

‘Yes.’

‘You recognize them beyond fail?’

‘Oh, yes; they are identical.’

Poirot nodded, and gently taking the photographs from me locked them up again.

‘I suppose,’ I said, ‘that as usual, you are not going to explain?’

‘On the contrary. No. 1 were the finger-prints of Monsieur Lawrence. No. 2 were those of Mademoiselle Cynthia. They are not important. I merely obtained them for comparison. No. 3 is a little more complicated.’

‘Yes?’

‘It is, as you see, highly magnified. You may have noticed a sort of blur extending all across the picture. I will not describe to you the special apparatus, dusting powder, etc., which I used. It is a well-known process to the police, and by means of it you can obtain a photograph of the finger-prints on any object in a very short space of time. Well, my friend, you have seen the finger-marks—it remains to tell you the particular object on which they had been left.’

‘Go on—I am really excited.’

‘*Eh bien!* Photo No. 3 represents the highly magnified surface of a tiny bottle in the top poison cupboard of the dispensary in the Red Cross Hospital at Tadminster—which sounds like the house that Jack built!’

‘Goodheavens!’I exclaimed.‘But what were Lawrence Cavendish’s finger-marks doing on it? He never went near the poison cupboard the day we were there?’

‘Oh, yes, he did!’

‘Impossible! We were all together the whole time.’

Poirot shook his head.

‘No, my friend, there was a moment when you were not all together. There was a moment when you could not have been all together, or it would not have been necessary to call to Monsieur Lawrence to come and join you on the balcony.’

‘I’d forgotten that,’ I admitted. ‘But it was only for a moment.’

‘Long enough.’

‘Long enough for what?’

Poirot’s smile became rather enigmatical.

‘Long enough for a gentleman who had once studied medicine to gratify a very natural interest and curiosity.’

Our eyes met. Poirot’s were pleasantly vague. He got up and hummed a little tune. I watched him suspiciously.

‘Poirot,’ I said, ‘what was in this particular little bottle?’

Poirot looked out of the window.

‘Hydro-chloride of strychnine,’ he said, over his shoulder, continuing to hum.

‘Good heavens!’ I said it quite quietly. I was not surprised. I had expected that answer.

‘They use the pure hydro-chloride of strychnine very little—only occasionally for pills. It is the official solution, Liq. Strychnine Hydro-clor. that is used in most medicines. That is why the finger-marks have remained undisturbed since then.’

‘How did you manage to take this photograph?’

‘I dropped my hat from the balcony,’ explained Poirot simply. ‘Visitors were not permitted below at that hour, so, in spite of my many apologies, Mademoiselle Cynthia’s colleague had to go down and fetch it for me.’

‘Then you knew what you were going to find?’

‘No, not at all. I merely realized that it was possible, from your story, for Monsieur Lawrence to go to the poison cupboard. The possibility had to be confirmed, or eliminated.’

‘Poirot,’ I said, ‘your gaiety does not deceive me. This is a very important discovery.’

‘I do not know,’ said Poirot. ‘But one thing does strike me. No doubt it has struck you too.’

‘What is that?’

‘Why, that there is altogether too much strychnine about this case. This is the third time we run up against it. There was strychnine in Mrs Inglethorp’s tonic. There is the strychnine sold across the counter at Styles St Mary by Mace. Now we have more strychnine, handled by one of the household. It is confusing; and, as you know, I do not like confusion.’

Before I could reply, one of the other Belgians opened the door and stuck his head in.

‘There is a lady below, asking for Mr Hastings.’

‘A lady?’

I jumped up. Poirot followed me down the stairs. Mary Cavendish was standing in the doorway.

‘I have been visiting an old woman in the village,’ she explained, ‘and as Lawrence told me you were with Monsieur Poirot I thought I would call for you.’

‘Alas, madame,’ said Poirot, ‘I thought you had come to honour me with a visit!’

‘I will some day, if you ask me,’ she promised him, smiling.

‘That is well. If you should need a father confessor, madame’—she started ever so slightly—‘remember, Papa Poirot is always at your service.’

She stared at him for a few minutes, as though seeking to read some deeper meaning into his words. Then she turned abruptly away.

‘Come, will you not walk back with us too, Monsieur Poirot?’

‘Enchanted, madame.’

All the way to Styles, Mary talked fast and feverishly. It struck me that in some way she was nervous of Poirot’s eyes.

The weather had broken, and the sharp wind was almost autumnal in its shrewishness. Mary shivered a little, and buttoned her black sports coat closer. The wind through the trees made a mournful noise, like some giant sighing.

We walked up to the great door of Styles, and at once the knowledge came to us that something was wrong.

Dorcas came running out to meet us. She was crying and wringing her hands. I was aware of other servants huddled together in the background, all eyes and ears.

‘Oh, m’am! Oh, m’am! I don’t know how to tell you –’

‘What is it, Dorcas?’ I asked impatiently. ‘Tell us at once.’

‘It’s those wicked detectives. They’ve arrested him—they’ve arrested Mr Cavendish!’

‘Arrested Lawrence?’ I gasped.

I saw a strange look come into Dorcas’s eyes.

‘No, sir. Not Mr Lawrence—Mr John.’

Behind me, with a wild cry, Mary Cavendish fell heavily against me, and as I turned to catch her I met the quiet triumph in Poirot’s eyes.

Chapter 11

The Case for the Prosecution

The trial of John Cavendish for the murder of his stepmother took place two months later.

Of the intervening weeks I will say little, but my admiration and sympathy went out unfeignedly to Mary Cavendish. She ranged herself passionately on her husband's side, scorning the mere idea of his guilt, and fought for him tooth and nail.

I expressed my admiration to Poirot, and he nodded thoughtfully. 'Yes, she is of those women who show at their best in adversity. It brings out all that is sweetest and truest in them. Her pride and her jealousy have –'

'Jealousy?' I queried.

'Yes. Have you not realized that she is an unusually jealous woman? As I was saying, her pride and jealousy have been laid aside. She thinks of nothing but her husband, and the terrible fate that is hanging over him.'

He spoke very feelingly, and I looked at him earnestly, remembering that last afternoon, when he had been deliberating whether or no to speak. With his tenderness for 'a woman's happiness', I felt glad that the decision had been taken out of his hands.

'Even now,' I said, 'I can hardly believe it. You see, up to the very last minute, I thought it was Lawrence!'

Poirot grinned.

'I know you did.'

'But John! My old friend John!'

‘Every murderer is probably somebody’s old friend,’ observed Poirot philosophically. ‘You cannot mix up sentiment and reason.’

‘I must say I think you might have given me a hint.’

‘Perhaps, *mon ami*, I did not do so, just because he *was* your old friend.’

I was rather disconcerted by this, remembering how I had busily passed on to John what I believed to be Poirot’s views concerning Bauerstein. He, by the way, had been acquitted of the charge brought against him. Nevertheless, although he had been too clever for them this time, and the charge of espionage could not be brought home to him, his wings were pretty well clipped for the future.

I asked Poirot whether he thought John would be condemned. To my intense surprise, he replied that, on the contrary, he was extremely likely to be acquitted.

‘But Poirot –’ I protested.

‘Oh, my friend, have I not said to you all along that I have no proofs. It is one thing to know that a man is guilty, it is quite another matter to prove him so. And, in this case, there is terribly little evidence. That is the whole trouble. I, Hercule Poirot, know, but I lack the last link in my chain. And unless I can find that missing link –’ He shook his head gravely.

‘When did you first suspect John Cavendish?’ I asked, after a minute or two.

‘Did you not suspect him at all?’

‘No, indeed.’

‘Not after that fragment of conversation you overheard between Mrs Cavendish and her mother-in-law, and her subsequent lack of frankness at the inquest?’

‘No.’

‘Did you not put two and two together, and reflect that if it was not Alfred Inglethorp who was quarrelling with his wife—and you remember, he strenuously denied it at the inquest—it must be either Lawrence or John? Now, if it was Lawrence, Mary Cavendish’s conduct was just as inexplicable. But if, on the other hand, it was John, the whole thing was explained quite naturally.’

‘So,’ I cried, a light breaking in upon me, ‘it was John who quarrelled with his mother that afternoon?’

‘Exactly.’

‘And you have known this all along?’

‘Certainly. Mrs Cavendish’s behaviour could only be explained that way.’

‘And yet you say he may be acquitted?’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘Certainly I do. At the police court proceedings, we shall hear the case for the prosecution, but in all probability his solicitors will advise him to reserve his defence. That will be sprung upon us at the trial. And—ah, by the way, I have a word of caution to give you, my friend. I must not appear in the case.’

‘What?’

‘No. Officially, I have nothing to do with it. Until I have found that last link in my chain, I must remain behind the scenes. Mrs Cavendish must think I am working for her husband, not against him.’

‘I say, that’s playing it a bit low down,’ I protested.

‘Not at all. We have to deal with a most clever and unscrupulous man, and we must use any means in our power—otherwise he will slip through our fingers. That is why I have been careful to remain in the background. All the discoveries have been made by Japp, and Japp will take all the

credit. If I am called upon to give evidence at all'—he smiled broadly—'it will probably be as witness for the defence.'

I could hardly believe my ears.

'It is quite *en règle*,' continued Poirot. 'Strangely enough, I can give evidence that will demolish one contention of the prosecution.'

'Which one?'

'The one that relates to the destruction of the will. John Cavendish did not destroy that will.'

Poirot was a true prophet. I will not go into the details of the police court proceedings, as it involves many tiresome repetitions. I will merely state baldly that John Cavendish reserved his defence, and was duly committed for trial.

September found us all in London. Mary took a house in Kensington, Poirot being included in the family party.

I myself had been given a job at the War Office, so was able to see them continually.

As the weeks went by, the state of Poirot's nerves grew worse and worse. That 'last link' he talked about was still lacking. Privately, I hoped it might remain so, for what happiness could there be for Mary, if John were not acquitted?

On September 15th John Cavendish appeared in the dock of the Old Bailey, charged with 'The Wilful Murder of Emily Agnes Inglethorp', and pleaded 'Not Guilty'.

Sir Ernest Heavywether, the famous K.C., had been engaged to defend him.

Mr Philips, K.C., opened the case for the Crown.

The murder, he said, was a most premeditated and cold-blooded one. It was neither more nor less than the deliberate poisoning of a fond and trusting woman by the stepson to whom she had been more than a mother. Ever since his boyhood, she had supported him. He and his wife had lived at Styles Court in every luxury, surrounded by her care and attention. She had been their kind and generous benefactress.

He proposed to call witnesses to show how the prisoner, a profligate and spendthrift, had been at the end of his financial tether, and had also been carrying on an intrigue with a certain Mrs Raikes, a neighbouring farmer's wife. This having come to his stepmother's ears, she taxed him with it on the afternoon before her death, and a quarrel ensued, part of which was overheard. On the previous day, the prisoner had purchased strychnine at the village chemist's shop, wearing a disguise by means of which he hoped to throw the onus of the crime upon another man—to wit, Mrs Inglethorp's husband, of whom he had been bitterly jealous. Luckily for Mr Inglethorp, he had been able to produce an unimpeachable alibi.

On the afternoon of July 17th, continued Counsel, immediately after the quarrel with her son, Mrs Inglethorp made a new will. This will was found destroyed in the grate of her bedroom the following morning, but evidence had come to light which showed that it had been drawn up in favour of her husband. Deceased had already made a will in his favour before her marriage, but—and Mr Philips wagged an expressive forefinger—the prisoner was not aware of that. What had induced the deceased to make a fresh will, with the old one still extant, he could not say. She was an old lady, and might possibly have forgotten the former one; or—this seemed to him more likely—she may have had an idea that it was revoked by her marriage, as there had been some conversation on the subject. Ladies were not always very well versed in legal knowledge. She had, about a year before, executed a will in favour of the prisoner. He would call evidence to show that it was the prisoner who ultimately handed his stepmother her coffee on the fatal night. Later in the evening, he had sought admission to her room, on which occasion, no doubt, he found an opportunity of destroying the will which, as far as he knew, would render the one in his favour valid.

The prisoner had been arrested in consequence of the discovery, in his room, by Detective-Inspector Japp—a most brilliant officer—of the identical phial of strychnine which had been sold at the village chemist's to the supposed Mr Inglethorp on the day before the murder. It would be for the jury to decide whether or no these damning facts constituted an overwhelming proof of the prisoner's guilt.

And, subtly implying that a jury which did not so decide was quite unthinkable, Mr Philips sat down and wiped his forehead.

The first witnesses for the prosecution were mostly those who had been called at the inquest, the medical evidence being again taken first.

Sir Ernest Heavywether, who was famous all over England for the unscrupulous manner in which he bullied witnesses, only asked two questions.

'I take it, Dr Bauerstein, that strychnine, as a drug, acts quickly?'

'Yes.'

'And that you are unable to account for the delay in this case?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you.'

Mr Mace identified the phial handed him by Counsel as that sold by him to 'Mr Inglethorp'. Pressed, he admitted that he only knew Mr Inglethorp by sight. He had never spoken to him. The witness was not cross-examined.

Alfred Inglethorp was called, and denied having purchased the poison. He also denied having quarrelled with his wife. Various witnesses testified to the accuracy of these statements.

The gardeners' evidence as to the witnessing of the will was taken, and then Dorcas was called.

Dorcas, faithful to her ‘young gentlemen’, denied strenously that it could have been John’s voice she heard, and resolutely declared, in the teeth of everything, that it was Mr Inglethorp who had been in the boudoir with her mistress. A rather wistful smile passed across the face of the prisoner in the dock. He knew only too well how useless her gallant defiance was, since it was not the object of the defence to deny this point. Mrs Cavendish, of course, could not be called upon to give evidence against her husband.

After various questions on other matters, Mr Philips asked:

‘In the month of June last, do you remember a parcel arriving for Mr Lawrence Cavendish from Parkson’s?’

Dorcas shook her head.

‘I don’t remember, sir. It may have done, but Mr Lawrence was away from home part of June.’

‘In the event of a parcel arriving for him whilst he was away, what would be done with it?’

‘It would either be put in his room or sent on after him.’

‘By you?’

‘No, sir, I should leave it on the hall table. It would be Miss Howard who would attend to anything like that.’

Evelyn Howard was called and, after being examined on other points, was questioned as to the parcel.

‘Don’t remember. Lots of parcels come. Can’t remember one special one.’

‘You do not know if it was sent after Mr Lawrence Cavendish to Wales, or whether it was put in his room?’

‘Don’t think it was sent after him. Should have remembered if it was.’

‘Supposing a parcel arrived addressed to Mr Lawrence Cavendish, and afterwards it disappeared, should you remark its absence?’

‘No, don’t think so. I should think someone had taken charge of it.’

‘I believe, Miss Howard, that it was you who found this sheet of brown paper?’ He held up the same dusty piece which Poirot and I had examined in the morning room at Styles.

‘Yes, I did.’

‘How did you come to look for it.’

‘The Belgian detective who was employed on the case asked me to search for it.’

‘Where did you eventually discover it?’

‘On the top of—of—a wardrobe.’

‘On the top of the prisoner’s wardrobe?’

‘I believe so.’

‘Did you not find it yourself ?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you must know where you found it?’

‘Yes, it was on the prisoner’s wardrobe.’

‘That is better.’

An assistant from Parkson’s, Theatrical Costumiers, testified that on June 29th they had supplied a black beard to Mr L. Cavendish, as requested. It was ordered by letter, and a postal order was enclosed. No, they had not kept the letter. All transactions were entered in their books. They had sent the beard, as directed, to ‘L. Cavendish, Esq., Styles Court.’

Sir Ernest Heavywether rose ponderously.

‘Where was the letter written from?’

‘From Styles Court.’

‘The same address to which you sent the parcel?’

‘Yes.’

Like a beast of prey, Heavywether fell upon him:

‘How do you know?’

‘I—I don’t understand.’

‘How do you know that letter came from Styles? Did you notice the postmark?’

‘No—but –’

‘Ah, you did *not* notice the postmark! And yet you affirm so confidently that it came from Styles. It might, in fact, have been any postmark?’

‘Y—es.’

‘In fact, the letter, though written on stamped notepaper, might have been posted from anywhere? From Wales, for instance?’

The witness admitted that such might be the case, and Sir Ernest signified that he was satisfied.

Elizabeth Wells, second housemaid at Styles, stated that after she had gone to bed she remembered that she had bolted the front door, instead of leaving it on the latch as Mr Inglethorp had requested. She had accordingly gone downstairs again to rectify her error. Hearing a slight noise in the West wing, she had peeped along the passage, and had seen Mr John Cavendish knocking at Mrs Inglethorp’s door.

Sir Ernest Heavywether made short work of her, and under his unmerciful bullying she contradicted herself hopelessly, and Sir Ernest sat down again with a satisfied smile on his face.

With the evidence of Annie, as to the candle grease on the floor, and as to seeing the prisoner take the coffee into the boudoir, the proceedings were adjourned until the following day.

As we went home, Mary Cavendish spoke bitterly against the prosecuting counsel.

‘That hateful man! What a net he has drawn around my poor John! How he twisted every little fact until he made it seem what it wasn’t!’

‘Well,’ I said consolingly, ‘it will be the other way about tomorrow.’

‘Yes,’ she said meditatively; then suddenly dropped her voice. ‘Mr Hastings, you do not think—surely it could not have been Lawrence—oh, no, that could not be!’

But I myself was puzzled, and as soon as I was alone with Poirot I asked him what he thought Sir Ernest was driving at.

‘Ah!’ said Poirot appreciatively. ‘He is a clever man, that Sir Ernest.’

‘Do you think he believes Lawrence guilty?’

‘I do not think he believes or cares anything! No, what he is trying for is to create such confusion in the minds of the jury that they are divided in their opinion as to which brother did it. He is endeavouring to make out that there is quite as much evidence against Lawrence as against John—and I am not at all sure that he will not succeed.’

Detective-Inspector Japp was the first witness called when the trial was reopened, and gave his evidence succinctly and briefly. After relating the earlier events, he proceeded:

‘Acting on information received, Superintendent Summerhaye and myself searched the prisoner’s room, during his temporary absence from the

house. In his chest of drawers, hidden beneath some underclothing, we found: first, a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez similar to those worn by Mr Inglethorp'—these were exhibited—'secondly, this phial.'

The phial was that already recognized by the chemist's assistant, a tiny bottle of blue glass, containing a few grains of a white crystalline powder, and labelled: 'Strychnine Hydro-chloride. POISON.'

A fresh piece of evidence discovered by the detectives since the police court proceedings was a long, almost new piece of blotting-paper. It had been found in Mrs Inglethorp's cheque book, and on being reversed at a mirror, showed clearly the words: '…everything of which I die possessed I leave to my beloved husband Alfred Ing…' This placed beyond question the fact that the destroyed will had been in favour of the deceased lady's husband. Japp then produced the charred fragment of paper recovered from the grate, and this, with the discovery of the beard in the attic, completed his evidence.

But Sir Ernest's cross-examination was yet to come.

'What day was it when you searched the prisoner's room?'

'Tuesday, the 24th of July.'

'Exactly a week after the tragedy?'

'Yes.'

'You found these two objects, you say, in the chest of drawers. Was the drawer unlocked?'

'Yes.'

'Does it not strike you as unlikely that a man who had committed a crime should keep the evidence of it in an unlocked drawer for anyone to find?'

'He might have stowed them there in a hurry.'

‘But you have just said it was a whole week since the crime. He would have had ample time to remove them and destroy them.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘There is no perhaps about it. Would he, or would he not have had plenty of time to remove and destroy them?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was the pile of underclothes under which the things were hidden heavy or light?’

‘Heavyish.’

‘In other words, it was winter underclothing. Obviously, the prisoner would not be likely to go to that drawer?’

‘Perhaps not.’

‘Kindly answer my question. Would the prisoner, in the hottest week of a hot summer, be likely to go to a drawer containing winter underclothing? Yes, or no?’

‘No.’

‘In that case, is it not possible that the articles in question might have been put there by a third person, and that the prisoner was quite unaware of their presence?’

‘I should not think it likely.’

‘But it is possible?’

‘Yes.’

‘That is all.’

More evidence followed. Evidence as to the financial difficulties in which the prisoner had found himself at the end of July. Evidence as to his intrigue with Mrs Raikes—poor Mary, that must have been bitter hearing for a woman of her pride. Evelyn Howard had been right in her facts, though her animosity against Alfred Inglethorp had caused her to jump to the conclusion that he was the person concerned.

Lawrence Cavendish was then put into the box. In a low voice, in answer to Mr Philips' questions, he denied having ordered anything from Parkson's in June. In fact, on June 29th, he had been staying away, in Wales.

Instantly, Sir Ernest's chin was shooting pugnaciously forward.

'You deny having ordered a black beard from Parkson's on June 29th?'

'I do.'

'Ah! In the event of anything happening to your brother, who will inherit Styles Court?'

The brutality of the question called a flush to Lawrence's pale face. The Judge gave vent to a faint murmur of disapprobation, and the prisoner in the dock leant forward angrily.

Heavywether cared nothing for his client's anger.

'Answer my question, if you please.'

'I suppose,' said Lawrence quietly, 'that I should.'

'What do you mean by you "suppose"? Your brother has no children. You *would* inherit it, wouldn't you?'

'Yes.'

'Ah, that's better,' said Heavywether, with ferocious geniality. 'And you'd inherit a good slice of money too, wouldn't you?'

‘Really, Sir Ernest,’ protested the Judge, ‘these questions are not relevant.’

Sir Ernest bowed, and having shot his arrow proceeded.

‘On Tuesday, the 17th July, you went, I believe, with another guest, to visit the dispensary at the Red Cross Hospital in Tadminster?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you—while you happened to be alone for a few seconds—unlock the poison cupboard, and examine some of the bottles?’

‘I—I—may have done so.’

‘I put it to you that you did so?’

‘Yes.’

Sir Ernest fairly shot the next question at him.

‘Did you examine one bottle in particular?’

‘No, I do not think so.’

‘Be careful, Mr Cavendish, I am referring to a little bottle of Hydro-chloride of Strychnine.’

Lawrence was turning a sickly greenish colour.

‘N—o—I am sure I didn’t.’

‘Then how do you account for the fact that you left the unmistakable impress of your finger-prints on it?’

The bullying manner was highly efficacious with a nervous disposition.

‘I—I suppose I must have taken up the bottle.’

‘I suppose so too! Did you abstract any of the contents of the bottle?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Then why did you take it up?’

‘I once studied to be a doctor. Such things naturally interest me.’

‘Ah! So poisons “naturally interest” you, do they? Still, you waited to be alone before gratifying that “interest” of yours?’

‘That was pure chance. If the others had been there, I should have done just the same.’

‘Still, as it happens, the others were not there?’

‘No, but –’

‘In fact, during the whole afternoon, you were only alone for a couple of minutes, and it happened—I say, it happened—to be during those two minutes that you displayed your “natural interest” in Hydro-chloride of Strychnine?’

Lawrence stammered pitiably.

‘I—I –’

With a satisfied and expressive countenance, Sir Ernest observed:

‘I have nothing more to ask you, Mr Cavendish.’

This bit of cross-examination had caused great excitement in court. The heads of the many fashionably attired women present were busily laid together, and their whispers became so loud that the Judge angrily threatened to have the court cleared if there was not immediate silence.

There was little more evidence. The handwriting experts were called upon for their opinion of the signature of ‘Alfred Inglethorp’ in the chemist’s poison register. They all declared unanimously that it was

certainly not his handwriting, and gave it as their view that it might be that of the prisoner disguised. Crossexamined, they admitted that it might be the prisoner's handwriting cleverly counterfeited.

Sir Ernest Heavywether's speech in opening the case for the defence was not a long one, but it was backed by the full force of his emphatic manner. Never, he said, in the course of his long experience, had he known a charge of murder rest on slighter evidence. Not only was it entirely circumstantial, but the greater part of it was practically unproved. Let them take the testimony they had heard and sift it impartially. The strychnine had been found in a drawer in the prisoner's room. That drawer was an unlocked one, as he had pointed out, and he submitted that there was no evidence to prove that it was the prisoner who had concealed the poison there. It was, in fact, a wicked and malicious attempt on the part of some third person to fix the crime on the prisoner. The prosecution had been unable to produce a shred of evidence in support of their contention that it was the prisoner who ordered the black beard from Parkson's. The quarrel which had taken place between the prisoner and his stepmother was freely admitted, but both it and his financial embarrassments had been grossly exaggerated.

His learned friend—Sir Ernest nodded carelessly at Mr Philips—had stated that if prisoner were an innocent man, he would have come forward at the inquest to explain that it was he, and not Mr Inglethorp, who had been the participator in the quarrel. He thought the facts had been misrepresented. What had actually occurred was this. The prisoner, returning to the house on Tuesday evening, had been authoritatively told that there had been a violent quarrel between Mr and Mrs Inglethorp. No suspicion had entered the prisoner's head that anyone could possibly have mistaken his voice for that of Mr Inglethorp. He naturally concluded that his stepmother had had two quarrels.

The prosecution averred that on Monday, July 16th, the prisoner had entered the chemist's shop in the village, disguised as Mr Inglethorp. The prisoner, on the contrary, was at that time at a lonely spot called Marston's Spinney, where he had been summoned by an anonymous note, couched in blackmailing terms, and threatening to reveal certain matters to his wife

unless he complied with its demands. The prisoner had, accordingly, gone to the appointed spot, and after waiting there vainly for half an hour had returned home. Unfortunately, he had met with no one on the way there or back who could vouch for the truth of his story, but luckily he had kept the note, and it would be produced as evidence.

As for the statement relating to the destruction of the will, the prisoner had formerly practised at the Bar, and was perfectly well aware that the will made in his favour a year before was automatically revoked by his stepmother's re-marriage. He would call evidence to show who did destroy the will, and it was possible that that might open up quite a new view of the case.

Finally, he would point out to the jury that there was evidence against other people besides John Cavendish. He would direct their attention to the fact that the evidence against Mr Lawrence Cavendish was quite as strong, if not stronger than that against his brother.

He would now call the prisoner.

John acquitted himself well in the witness-box. Under Sir Ernest's skilful handling, he told his tale credibly and well. The anonymous note received by him was produced, and handed to the jury to examine. The readiness with which he admitted his financial difficulties, and the disagreement with his stepmother, lent value to his denials.

At the close of his examination, he paused, and said:

'I should like to make one thing clear. I utterly reject and disapprove of Sir Ernest Heavywether's insinuations against my brother. My brother, I am convinced, had no more to do with the crime than I have.'

Sir Ernest merely smiled, and noted with a sharp eye that John's protest had produced a very favourable impression on the jury.

Then the cross-examination began.

‘I understand you to say that it never entered your head that the witnesses at the inquest could possibly have mistaken your voice for that of Mr Inglethorp. Is not that very surprising?’

‘No, I don’t think so. I was told there had been a quarrel between my mother and Mr Inglethorp, and it never occurred to me that such was not really the case.’

‘Not when the servant Dorcas repeated certain fragments of the conversation—fragments which you must have recognized?’

‘I did not recognize them.’

‘Your memory must be unusually short!’

‘No, but we were both angry, and, I think, said more than we meant. I paid very little attention to my mother’s actual words.’

Mr Philips’ incredulous sniff was a triumph of forensic skill. He passed on to the subject of the note.

‘You have produced this note very opportunely. Tell me, is there nothing familiar about the handwriting of it?’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘Do you not think that it bears a marked resemblance to your own handwriting—carelessly disguised?’

‘No, I do not think so.’

‘I put it to you that it is your handwriting!’

‘No.’

‘I put it to you that, anxious to prove an alibi, you conceived the idea of a fictitious and rather incredible appointment, and wrote this note yourself in order to bear out your statement!’

‘No.’

‘Is it not a fact that, at the time you claim to have been waiting about at a solitary and unfrequented spot, you were really in the chemist’s shop in Styles St Mary, where you purchased strychnine in the name of Alfred Inglethorp?’

‘No, that is a lie.’

‘I put it to you that, wearing a suit of Mr Inglethorp’s clothes, with a black beard trimmed to resemble his, you were there—and signed the register in his name!’

‘That is absolutely untrue.’

‘Then I will leave the remarkable similarity of handwriting between the note, the register, and your own, to the consideration of the jury,’ said Mr Philips, and sat down with the air of a man who had done his duty, but who was nevertheless horrified by such deliberate perjury.

After this, as it was growing late, the case was adjourned till Monday.

Poirot, I noticed, was looking profoundly discouraged. He had that little frown between the eyes that I knew so well.

‘What is it, Poirot?’ I inquired.

‘Ah, *mon ami*, things are going badly, badly.’

In spite of myself, my heart gave a leap of relief. Evidently there was a likelihood of John Cavendish being acquitted.

When we reached the house, my little friend waved aside Mary’s offer of tea.

‘No, I thank you, madame. I will mount to my room.’

I followed him. Still frowning, he went across to the desk and took out a small pack of patience cards. Then he drew up a chair to the table, and to

my utter amazement, began solemnly to build card houses!

My jaw dropped involuntarily, and he said at once:

‘No, *mon ami*, I am not in my second childhood! I steady my nerves, that is all. This employment requires precision of the fingers. With precision of the fingers goes precision of the brain. And never have I needed that more than now!’

‘What is the trouble?’ I asked.

With a great thump on the table, Poirot demolished his carefully built-up edifice.

‘It is this, *mon ami!* That I can build card houses seven stories high, but I cannot’—thump—‘find’—thump –

‘that last link of which I spoke to you.’

I could not quite tell what to say, so I held my peace, and he began slowly building up the cards again, speaking in jerks as he did so.

‘It is done—so! By placing—one card—on another—with mathematical —precision!’

I watched the card house rising under his hands, story by story. He never hesitated or faltered. It was really almost like a conjuring trick.

‘What a steady hand you’ve got,’ I remarked. ‘I believe I’ve only seen your hand shake once.’

‘On an occasion when I was enraged, without doubt,’ observed Poirot, with great placidity.

‘Yes, indeed! You were in a towering rage. Do you remember? It was when you discovered that the lock of the despatch-case in Mrs Inglethorp’s bedroom had been forced. You stood by the mantelpiece, twiddling the things on it in your usual fashion, and your hand shook like a leaf ! I must say –’

But I stopped suddenly. For Poirot, uttering a hoarse and inarticulate cry, again annihilated his masterpiece of cards, and putting his hands over his eyes swayed backwards, and forwards, apparently suffering the keenest agony.

‘Good heavens, Poirot!’ I cried. ‘What is the matter? Are you taken ill?’

‘No, no,’ he gasped. ‘It is—it is—that I have an idea!’

‘Oh!’ I exclaimed, much relieved. ‘One of your “little ideas”?’

‘Ah, *ma foi*, no!’ replied Poirot frankly. ‘This time it is an idea gigantic! Stupendous! And you –*you*, my friend, have given it to me!’

Suddenly clasping me in his arms, he kissed me warmly on both cheeks, and before I had recovered from my surprise ran headlong from the room.

Mary Cavendish entered at that moment.

‘What *is* the matter with Monsieur Poirot? He rushed past me crying out: “A garage! For the love of Heaven, direct me to a garage, madame!” And, before I could answer, he had dashed out into the street.’

I hurried to the window. True enough, there he was, tearing down the street, hatless, and gesticulating as he went. I turned to Mary with a gesture of despair.

‘He’ll be stopped by a policeman in another minute. There he goes, round the corner!’

Oureyes met, andwe stared helplessly at one another.

‘What can be the matter?’

I shook my head.

‘I don’t know. He was building card houses, when suddenly he said he had an idea, and rushed off as you saw.’

‘Well,’ said Mary, ‘I expect he will be back before dinner.’

But night fell, and Poirot had not returned.

Chapter 12

The Last Link

Poirot's abrupt departure had intrigued us all greatly. Sunday morning wore away, and still he did not reappear. But about three o'clock a ferocious and prolonged hooting outside drove us to the window, to see Poirot alighting from a car, accompanied by Japp and Summerhaye. The little man was transformed. He radiated an absurd complacency. He bowed with exaggerated respect to Mary Cavendish.

'Madame, I have your permission to hold a little *réunion* in the *salon?* It is necessary for every one to attend.'

Mary smiled sadly.

'You know, Monsieur Poirot, that you have *carte blanche* in every way.'

'You are too amiable, madame.'

Still beaming, Poirot marshalled us all into the drawing-room, bringing forward chairs as he did so.

'Miss Howard—here. Mademoiselle Cynthia. Monsieur Lawrence. The good Dorcas. And Annie. *Bien!* We must delay our proceedings a few minutes more until Mr Inglethorp arrives. I have sent him a note.'

Miss Howard rose immediately from her seat.

'If that man comes into the house, I leave it!'

'No, no!' Poirot went up to her and pleaded in a low voice.

Finally Miss Howard consented to return to her chair. A few minutes later Alfred Inglethorp entered the room.

The company once assembled, Poirot rose from his seat with the air of a popular lecturer, and bowed politely to his audience.

‘*Messieurs, mesdames*, as you all know, I was called in by Monsieur John Cavendish to investigate this case. I at once examined the bedroom of the deceased which, by the advice of the doctors, had been kept locked, and was consequently exactly as it had been when the tragedy occurred. I found: first, a fragment of green material; secondly, a stain on the carpet near the window, still damp; thirdly, an empty box of bromide powders.

‘To take the fragment of green material first, I found it caught in the bolt of the communicating door between that room and the adjoining one occupied by Mademoiselle Cynthia. I handed the fragment over to the police who did not consider it of much importance. Nor did they recognize it for what it was—a piece torn from a green land armlet.’

There was a little stir of excitement.

‘Now there was only one person at Styles who worked on the land—Mrs Cavendish. Therefore it must have been Mrs Cavendish who entered deceased’s room through the door communicating with Mademoiselle Cynthia’s room.’

‘But that door was bolted on the inside!’ I cried.

‘When I examined the room, yes. But in the first place we have only her word for it, since it was she who tried that particular door and reported it fastened. In the ensuing confusion she would have had ample opportunity to shoot the bolt across. I took an early opportunity of verifying my conjectures. To begin with, the fragment corresponds exactly with a tear in Mrs Cavendish’s armlet. Also, at the inquest, Mrs Cavendish declared that she had heard, from her own room, the fall of the table by the bed. I took an early opportunity of testing that statement by stationing my friend Monsieur Hastings, in the left wing of the building, just outside Mrs Cavendish’s door. I myself, in company with the police, went to the deceased’s room, and whilst there I, apparently accidentally, knocked over the table in question, but found that, as I had expected, Monsieur Hastings had heard no sound at all. This confirmed my belief that Mrs Cavendish was not speaking

the truth when she declared that she had been dressing in her room at the time of the tragedy. In fact, I was convinced that, far from having been in her own room, Mrs Cavendish was actually in the deceased's room when the alarm was given.'

I shot a quick glance at Mary. She was very pale, but smiling.

'I proceeded to reason on that assumption. Mrs Cavendish is in her mother-in-law's room. We will say that she is seeking for something and has not yet found it. Suddenly Mrs Inglethorp awakens and is seized with an alarming paroxysm. She flings out her arm, overturning the bed table, and then pulls desperately at the bell. Mrs Cavendish, startled, drops her candle, scattering the grease on the carpet. She picks it up, and retreats quickly to Mademoiselle Cynthia's room, closing the door behind her. She hurries out into the passage, for the servants must not find her where she is. But it is too late! Already footsteps are echoing along the gallery which connects the two wings. What can she do? Quick as thought, she hurries back to the young girl's room, and starts shaking her awake. The hastily aroused household come trooping down the passage. They are all busily battering at Mrs Inglethorp's door. It occurs to nobody that Mrs Cavendish has not arrived with the rest, but—and this is significant—I can find no one who saw her come from the other wing.' He looked at Mary Cavendish. 'Am I right, madame?'

She bowed her head.

'Quite right, monsieur. You understand that, if I had thought I would do my husband any good by revealing these facts, I would have done so. But it did not seem to me to bear upon the question of his guilt or innocence.'

'In a sense, that is correct, madame. But it cleared my mind of many misconceptions, and left me free to see other facts in their true significance.'

'The will!' cried Lawrence. 'Then it was you, Mary, who destroyed the will?'

She shook her head, and Poirot shook his also.

‘No,’ she said quietly. ‘There is only one person who could possibly have destroyed that will—Mrs Inglethorp herself !’

‘Impossible!’ I exclaimed. ‘She had only made it out that very afternoon!’

‘Nevertheless, *mon ami*, it was Mrs Inglethorp. Because, in no other way can you account for the fact that, on one of the hottest days of the year, Mrs Inglethorp ordered a fire to be lighted in her room.’

I gave a gasp. What idiots we had been never to think of that fire as being incongruous! Poirot was continuing.

‘The temperature on that day, messieurs, was 80° in the shade. Yet Mrs Inglethorp ordered a fire! Why? Because she wished to destroy something, and could think of no other way. You will remember that, in consequence of the War economies practised at Styles, no waste paper was thrown away. There was, therefore, no means of destroying a thick document such as a will. The moment I heard of a fire being lighted in Mrs Inglethorp’s room, I leaped to the conclusion that it was to destroy some important document—possibly a will. So the discovery of the charred fragment in the grate was no surprise to me. I did not, of course, know at the time that the will in question had only been made that afternoon, and I will admit that, when I learnt that fact, I fell into a grievous error. I came to the conclusion that Mrs Inglethorp’s determination to destroy her will arose as a direct consequence of the quarrel she had that afternoon, and that therefore the quarrel took place after, and not before, the making of the will.

‘Here, as we know, I was wrong, and I was forced to abandon the idea. I faced the problem from a new standpoint. Now, at four o’clock, Dorcas overheard her mistress saying angrily: “You need not think that any fear of publicity, or scandal between husband and wife will deter me.” I conjectured, and conjectured rightly, that these words were addressed, not to her husband, but to Mr John Cavendish. At five o’clock, an hour later, she uses almost the same words, but the standpoint is different. She admits to Dorcas, “I don’t know what to do; scandal between husband and wife is a dreadful thing.” At four o’clock she has been angry, but completely mistress

of herself. At five o’clock she is in violent distress, and speaks of having had “a great shock”.

‘Looking at the matter psychologically, I drew one deduction which I was convinced was correct. The second “scandal” she spoke of was not the same as the first—and it concerned herself !

‘Let us reconstruct. At four o’clock, Mrs Inglethorp quarrels with her son, and threatens to denounce him to his wife—who, by the way, overheard the greater part of the conversation. At four-thirty, Mrs Inglethorp, in consequence of a conversation on the validity of wills, makes a will in favour of her husband, which the two gardeners witness. At five o’clock, Dorcas finds her mistress in a state of considerable agitation, with a slip of paper—“a letter”, Dorcas thinks—in her hand, and it is then that she orders the fire in her room to be lighted. Presumably, then, between four-thirty and five o’clock, something has occurred to occasion a complete revolution of feeling, since she is now as anxious to destroy the will, as she was before to make it. What was that something?

‘As far as we know, she was quite alone during that half-hour. Nobody entered or left that boudoir. What then occasioned this sudden change of sentiment?

‘One can only guess, but I believe my guess to be correct. Mrs Inglethorp had no stamps in her desk. We know this, because later she asked Dorcas to bring her some. Now in the opposite corner of the room stood her husband’s desk—locked. She was anxious to find some stamps, and, according to my theory, she tried her own keys in the desk. That one of them fitted I know. She therefore opened the desk, and in searching for the stamps she came across something else—that slip of paper which Dorcas saw in her hand, and which assuredly was never meant for Mrs Inglethorp’s eyes. On the other hand, Mrs Cavendish believed that the slip of paper to which her mother-in-law clung so tenaciously was a written proof of her own husband’s infidelity. She demanded it from Mrs Inglethorp who assured her, quite truly, that it had nothing to do with that matter. Mrs Cavendish did not believe her. She thought that Mrs Inglethorp was shielding her stepson. Now Mrs Cavendish is a very resolute woman, and, behind her mask of reserve, she was madly jealous of her husband. She

determined to get hold of that paper at all costs, and in this resolution chance came to her aid. She happened to pick up the key of Mrs Inglethorp's despatch-case, which had been lost that morning. She knew that her mother-in-law invariably kept all important papers in this particular case.

'Mrs Cavendish, therefore, made her plans as only a woman driven desperate through jealousy could have done. Some time in the evening she unbolted the door leading into Mademoiselle Cynthia's room. Possibly she applied oil to the hinges, for I found that it opened quite noiselessly when I tried it. She put off her project until the early hours of the morning as being safer, since the servants were accustomed to hearing her move about her room at that time. She dressed completely in her land kit, and made her way quietly through Mademoiselle Cynthia's room into that of Mrs Inglethorp.'

He paused a moment, and Cynthia interrupted:

'But I should have woken up if anyone had come through my room?'

'Not if you were drugged, mademoiselle.'

'Drugged?'

'*Mais, oui!*'

'You remember'—he addressed us collectively again—'that through all the tumult and noise next door Mademoiselle Cynthia slept. That admitted of two possibilities. Either her sleep was feigned—which I did not believe—or her unconsciousness was induced by artificial means.

'With this latter idea in my mind, I examined all the coffee-cups most carefully, remembering that it was Mrs Cavendish who had brought Mademoiselle Cynthia her coffee the night before. I took a sample from each cup, and had them analysed—with no result. I had counted the cups carefully, in the event of one having been removed. Six persons had taken coffee, and six cups were duly found. I had to confess myself mistaken.

‘Then I discovered that I had been guilty of a very grave oversight. Coffee had been brought in for seven persons, not six, for Dr Bauerstein had been there that evening. This changed the face of the whole affair, for there was now one cup missing. The servants noticed nothing, since Annie, the housemaid, who took in the coffee, brought in seven cups, not knowing that Mr Inglethorp never drank it, whereas Dorcas, who cleared them away the following morning, found six as usual—or strictly speaking she found five, the sixth being the one found broken in Mrs Inglethorp’s room.

‘I was confident that the missing cup was that of Mademoiselle Cynthia. I had an additional reason for that belief in the fact that all the cups found contained sugar, which Mademoiselle Cynthia never took in her coffee. My attention was attracted by the story of Annie about some “salt” on the tray of cocoa which she took every night to Mrs Inglethorp’s room. I accordingly secured a sample of that cocoa, and sent it to be analysed.’

‘But that had already been done by Dr Bauerstein,’ said Lawrence quickly.

‘Not exactly. The analyst was asked by him to report whether strychnine was, or was not, present. He did not have it tested, as I did, for a narcotic.’

‘For a narcotic?’

‘Yes. Here is the analyst’s report. Mrs Cavendish administered a safe, but effectual, narcotic to both Mrs Inglethorp and Mademoiselle Cynthia. And it is possible that she had a *mauvais quart d’heure* in consequence! Imagine her feelings when her mother-in-law is suddenly taken ill and dies, and immediately after she hears the word “Poison”! She has believed that the sleeping draught she administered was perfectly harmless, but there is no doubt that for one terrible moment she must have feared that Mrs Inglethorp’s death lay at her door. She is seized with panic, and under its influence she hurries downstairs, and quickly drops the coffee-cup and saucer used by Mademoiselle Cynthia into a large brass vase, where it is discovered later by Monsieur Lawrence. The remains of the cocoa she dare not touch. Too many eyes are upon her. Guess at her relief when strychnine is mentioned, and she discovers that after all the tragedy is not her doing.

‘We are now able to account for the symptoms of strychnine poisoning being so long in making their appearance. A narcotic taken with strychnine will delay the action of the poison for some hours.’

Poirot paused. Mary looked up at him, the colour slowly rising in her face.

‘All you have said is quite true, Monsieur Poirot. It was the most awful hour of my life. I shall never forget it. But you are wonderful. I understand now –’

‘What I meant when I told you that you could safely confess to Papa Poirot, eh? But you would not trust me.’

‘I see everything now,’ said Lawrence. ‘The drugged cocoa, taken on top of the poisoned coffee, amply accounts for the delay.’

‘Exactly. But was the coffee poisoned, or was it not? We come to a little difficulty here, since Mrs Inglethorp never drank it.’

‘What?’ The cry of surprise was universal.

‘No. You will remember my speaking of a stain on the carpet in Mrs Inglethorp’s room? There were some peculiar points about that stain. It was still damp, it exhaled a strong odour of coffee, and imbedded in the nap of the carpet I found some little splinters of china. What had happened was plain to me, for not two minutes before I had placed my little case on the table near the window, and the table, tilting up, had deposited it upon the floor on precisely the identical spot. In exactly the same way, Mrs Inglethorp had laid down her cup of coffee on reaching her room the night before, and the treacherous table had played her the same trick.

‘What happened next is mere guesswork on my part, but I should say that Mrs Inglethorp picked up the broken cup and placed it on the table by the bed. Feeling in need of a stimulant of some kind, she heated up her cocoa, and drank it off then and there. Now we are faced with a new problem. We know the cocoa contained no strychnine. The coffee was never drunk. Yet the strychnine must have been administered between seven and

nine o’clock that evening. What third medium was there—a medium so suitable for disguising the taste of strychnine that it is extraordinary no one has thought of it?’ Poirot looked around the room, and then answered himself impressively. ‘Her medicine!’

‘Do you mean that the murderer introduced the strychnine into her tonic?’ I cried.

‘There was no need to introduce it. It was already there—in the mixture. The strychnine that killed Mrs Inglethorp was the identical strychnine prescribed by Dr Wilkins. To make that clear to you, I will read you an extract from a book on dispensing which I found in the Dispensary of the Red Cross Hospital at Tadminster:

‘The following prescription has become famous in textbooks:

Strychninae Sulph	gr. 1
Potass Bromide	3vi
Aqua ad	3viii
Fiat Mistura	

This solution deposits in a few hours the greater part of the strychnine salt as an insoluble bromide in transparent crystals. A lady in England lost her life by taking a similar mixture: the precipitated strychnine collected at the bottom, and in taking the last dose she swallowed nearly all of it!

Now there was, of course, no bromide in Dr Wilkins’ prescription, but you will remember that I mentioned an empty box of bromide powders. One or two of those powders introudced into the full bottle of medicine would effectually precipitate the strychnine, as the book describes, and cause it to be taken in the last dose. You will learn later that the person who usually poured out Mrs Inglethorp’s medicine was always extremely careful not to shake the bottle, but to leave the sediment at the bottom of it undisturbed.

‘Throughout the case, there have been evidences that the tragedy was intended to take place on Monday evening. On that day, Mrs Inglethorp’s bell wire was neatly cut, and on Monday evening Mademoiselle Cynthia was spending the night with friends, so that Mrs Inglethorp would have been quite alone in the right wing, completely shut off from help of any kind, and would have died, in all probability, before medical aid could have been summoned. But in her hurry to be in time for the village entertainment Mrs Inglethorp forgot to take her medicine, and the next day she lunched away from home, so that the last—and fatal—dose was actually taken twenty-four hours later than had been anticipated by the murderer; and it is owing to that delay that the final proof—the last link of the chain—is now in my hands.’

Amid breathless excitement, he held out three thin strips of paper.

‘A letter in the murderer’s own handwriting, *mes amis!* Had it been a little clearer in its terms, it is possible that Mrs Inglethorp, warned in time, would have escaped. As it was, she realized her danger, but not the manner of it.’

In the deathly silence, Poirot pieced together the slips of paper and, clearing his throat, read:

Dearest Evelyn,

You will be anxious at hearing nothing. It is all right—only it will be tonight instead of last night. You understand. There’s a good time coming once the old woman is dead and out of the way. No one can possibly bring home the crime to me. That idea of yours about the bromides was a stroke of genius! But we must be very circumspect. A false step –

‘Here, my friends, the letter breaks off. Doubtless the writer was interrupted; but there can be no question as to his identity. We all know his handwriting and –’

A howl that was almost a scream broke the silence.

‘You devil! How did you get it?’

A chair was overturned. Poirot skipped nimbly aside. A quick movement on his part, and his assailant fell with a crash.

‘*Messieurs, mesdames*,’ said Poirot, with a flourish, ‘let me introduce you to the murderer, Mr Alfred Inglethorp!’

Chapter 13

Poirot Explains

‘Poirot, you old villain,’ I said, ‘I’ve half a mind to strangle you! What do you mean by deceiving me as you have done?’

We were sitting in the library. Several hectic days lay behind us. In the room below, John and Mary were together once more, while Alfred Inglethorp and Miss Howard were in custody. Now at last, I had Poirot to myself, and could relieve my still burning curiosity.

Poirot did not answer me for a moment, but at last he said:

‘I did not deceive you, *mon ami*. At most, I permitted you to deceive yourself.’

‘Yes, but why?’

‘Well, it is difficult to explain. You see, my friend, you have a nature so honest, and a countenance so transparent, that –*enfin*, to conceal your feelings is impossible! If I had told you my ideas, the very first time you saw Mr Alfred Inglethorp that astute gentleman would have—in your so expressive idiom—“smelt a rat”! And then, *bonjour* to our chances of catching him!’

‘I think that I have more diplomacy than you give me credit for.’

‘My friend,’ besought Poirot, ‘I implore you, do not enrage yourself ! Your help has been of the most invaluable. It is but the extremely beautiful nature that you have which made me pause.’

‘Well,’ I grumbled, a little mollified, ‘I still think you might have given me a hint.’

‘But I did, my friend. Several hints. You would not take them. Think now, did I ever say to you that I believed John Cavendish guilty? Did I not, on the contrary, tell you that he would almost certainly be acquitted?’

‘Yes, but –’

‘And did I not immediately afterwards speak of the difficulty of bringing the murderer to justice? Was it not plain to you that I was speaking of two entirely different persons?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘it was not plain to me!’

‘Then again,’ continued Poirot, ‘at the beginning, did I not repeat to you several times that I didn’t want Mr Inglethorp arrested *now*? That should have conveyed something to you.’

‘Do you mean to say you suspected him as long ago as that?’

‘Yes. To begin with, whoever else might benefit by Mrs Inglethorp’s death, her husband would benefit the most. There was no getting away from that. When I went up to Styles with you that first day, I had no idea as to how the crime had been committed, but from what I knew of Mr Inglethorp I fancied that it would be very hard to find anything to connect him with it. When I arrived at the cha^teau, I realized at once that it was Mrs Inglethorp who had burnt the will; and there, by the way, you cannot complain, my friend, for I tried my best to force on you the significance of that bedroom fire in midsummer.’

‘Yes, yes,’ I said impatiently. ‘Go on.’

‘Well, my friend, as I say, my views as to Mr Inglethorp’s guilt were very much shaken. There was, in fact, so much evidence against him that I was inclined to believe that he had not done it.’

‘When did you change your mind?’

‘When I found that the more efforts I made to clear him, the more efforts he made to get himself arrested. Then, when I discovered that

Inglethorp had nothing to do with Mrs Raikes, and that in fact it was John Cavendish who was interested in that quarter, I was quite sure.'

'But why?'

'Simply this. If it had been Inglethorp who was carrying on an intrigue with Mrs Raikes, his silence was perfectly comprehensible. But, when I discovered that it was known all over the village that it was John who was attracted by the farmer's pretty wife, his silence bore quite a different interpretation. It was nonsense to pretend that he was afraid of the scandal, as no possible scandal could attach to him. This attitude of his gave me furiously to think, and I was slowly forced to the conclusion that Alfred Inglethorp wanted to be arrested. *Eh bien!* from that moment, I was equally determined that he should not be arrested.'

'Wait a moment. I don't see why he wished to be arrested?'

'Because, *mon ami*, it is the law of your country that a man once acquitted can never be tried again for the same offence. Aha! but it was clever—his idea! Assuredly, he is a man of method. See here, he knew that in his position he was bound to be suspected, so he conceived the exceedingly clever idea of preparing a lot of manufactured evidence against himself. He wished to be suspected. He wished to be arrested. He would then produce his irreproachable alibi—and, hey presto, he was safe for life!'

'But I still don't see how he managed to prove his alibi, and yet go to the chemist's shop?'

Poirot stared at me in surprise.

'Is it possible? My poor friend! You have not yet realized that it was Miss Howard who went to the chemist's shop?'

'Miss Howard?'

'But, certainly. Who else? It was most easy for her. She is of a good height, her voice is deep and manly; moreover, remember, she and Inglethorp are cousins, and there is a distinct resemblance between them,

especially in their gait and bearing. It was simplicity itself. They are a clever pair!'

'I am still a little fogged as to how exactly the bromide business was done,' I remarked.

'*Bon!* I will reconstruct for you as far as possible. I am inclined to think that Miss Howard was the master mind in that affair. You remember her once mentioning that her father was a doctor? Possibly she dispensed his medicines for him, or she may have taken the idea from one of the many books lying about when Mademoiselle Cynthia was studying for her exam. Anyway, she was familiar with the fact that the addition of a bromide to a mixture containing strychnine would cause the precipitation of the latter. Probably the idea came to her quite suddenly. Mrs Inglethorp had a box of bromide powders, which she occasionally took at night. What could be more easier than quietly to dissolve one or more of those powders in Mrs Inglethorp's large-sized bottle of medicine when it came from Coot's? The risk is practically nil. The tragedy will not take place until nearly a fortnight later. If anyone has seen either of them touching the medicine, they will have forgotten it by that time. Miss Howard will have engineered her quarrel, and departed from the house. The lapse of time, and her absence, will defeat all suspicion. Yes, it was a clever idea! If they had left it alone, it is possible the crime might never have been brought home to them. But they were not satisfied. They tried to be too clever—and that was their undoing.'

Poirot puffed at his tiny cigarette, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

'They arranged a plan to throw suspicion on John Cavendish, by buying strychnine at the village chemist's, and signing the register in his handwriting.

'On Monday Mrs Inglethorp will take the last dose of her medicine. On Monday, therefore, at six o'clock, Alfred Inglethorp arranges to be seen by a number of people at a spot far removed from the village. Miss Howard has previously made up a cock-and-bull story about him and Mrs Raikes to account for his holding his tongue afterwards. At six o'clock, Miss Howard, disguised as Alfred Inglethorp, enters the chemist's shop, with her story

about a dog, obtains the strychnine, and writes the name of Alfred Inglethorp in John's handwriting, which she had previously studied carefully.

'But, as it will never do if John, too, can prove an alibi, she writes him an anonymous note—still copying his handwriting—which takes him to a remote spot where it is exceedingly unlikely that anyone will see him.

'So far, all goes well. Miss Howard goes back to Middlingham. Alfred Inglethorp returns to Styles. There is nothing that can compromise him in any way, since it is Miss Howard who has the strychnine, which, after all, is only wanted as a blind to throw suspicion on John Cavendish.

'But now a hitch occurs. Mrs Inglethorp does not take her medicine that night. The broken bell, Cynthia's absence—arranged by Inglethorp through his wife—all these are wasted. And then—he makes his slip.

'Mrs Inglethorp is out, and he sits down to write to his accomplice, who, he fears, may be in a panic at the non-success of their plan. It is probable that Mrs Inglethorp returned earlier than he expected. Caught in the act, and somewhat flurried, he hastily shuts and locks his desk. He fears that if he remains in the room he may have to open it again, and that Mrs Inglethorp might catch sight of the letter before he could snatch it up. So he goes out and walks in the woods, little dreaming that Mrs Inglethorp will open his desk, and discover the incriminating document.

'But this, as we know, is what happened. Mrs Inglethorp reads it, and becomes aware of the perfidy of her husband and Evelyn Howard, though, unfortunately, the sentence about the bromide conveys no warning to her mind. She knows that she is in danger—but is ignorant of where the danger lies. She decides to say nothing to her husband, but sits down and writes to her solicitor, asking him to come on the morrow, and she also determines to destroy immediately the will which she has just made. She keeps the fatal letter.'

'It was to discover that letter, then, that her husband forced the lock of the despatch-case?'

‘Yes, and from the enormous risk he ran we can see how fully he realized its importance. That letter excepted, there was absolutely nothing to connect him with the crime.’

‘There’s only one thing I can’t make out, why didn’t he destroy it at once when he got hold of it?’

‘Because he did not dare take the biggest risk of all—that of keeping it on his own person.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Look at it from his point of view. I have discovered that there were only five short minutes in which he could have taken it—the five minutes immediately before our own arrival on the scene, for before that time Annie was brushing the stairs, and would have seen anyone who passed going to the right wing. Figure to yourself the scene! He enters the room, unlocking the door by means of one of the other door-keys—they were all much alike. He hurries to the despatch-case—it is locked, and the keys are nowhere to be seen. That is a terrible blow to him, for it means that his presence in the room cannot be concealed as he had hoped. But he sees clearly that everything must be risked for the sake of that damning piece of evidence. Quickly, he forces the lock with a penknife, and turns over the papers until he finds what he is looking for.

‘But now a fresh dilemma arises: he dare not keep that piece of paper on him. He may be seen leaving the room—he may be searched. If the paper is found on him, it is certain doom. Probably, at this minute, too, he hears the sounds below of Mr Wells and John leaving the boudoir. He must act quickly. Where can he hide this terrible slip of paper? The contents of the waste-paper basket are kept and, in any case, are sure to be examined. There are no means of destroying it; and he dare not keep it. He looks round, and he sees—what do you think, *mon ami?*’

I shook my head.

‘In a moment he has torn the letter into long thin strips, and rolling them up into spills he thrusts them hurriedly in amongst the other spills in the

vase on the mantelpiece.’

I uttered an exclamation.

‘No one would think of looking there,’ Poirot continued. ‘And he will be able, at his leisure, to come back and destroy this solitary piece of evidence against him.’

‘Then, all the time, it was in the spill vase in Mrs Inglethorp’s bedroom, under our very noses?’ I cried.

Poirot nodded.

‘Yes, my friend. That is where I discovered my “last link”, and I owe that very fortunate discovery to you.’

‘To me?’

‘Yes. Do you remember telling me that my hand shook as I was straightening the ornaments on the mantelpiece?’

‘Yes, but I don’t see –’

‘No, but I saw. Do you know, my friend, I remembered that earlier in the morning, when we had been there together, I had straightened all the objects on the mantelpiece. And, if they were already straightened, there would be no need to straighten them again, unless, in the meantime, someone else had touched them.’

‘Dear me,’ I murmured, ‘so that is the explanation of your extraordinary behaviour. You rushed down to Styles, and found it still there?’

‘Yes, and it was a race for time.’

‘But I still can’t understand why Inglethorp was such a fool to leave it there when he had plenty of opportunity to destroy it.’

‘Ah, but he had no opportunity. I saw to that.’

‘You?’

‘Yes. Do you remember reproving me for taking the household into my confidence on the subject?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, my friend, I saw there was just one chance. I was not sure then if Inglethorp was the criminal or not, but if he was I reasoned that he would not have the paper on him, but would have hidden it somewhere, and by enlisting the sympathy of the household I could effectually prevent his destroying it. He was already under suspicion, and by making the matter public I secured the services of about ten amateur detectives, who would be watching him unceasingly, and being himself aware of their watchfulness he would not dare seek further to destroy the document. He was, therefore, forced to depart from the house, leaving it in the spill vase.’

‘But surely Miss Howard had ample opportunities of aiding him.’

‘Yes, but Miss Howard did not know of the paper’s existence. In accordance with their pre-arranged plan, she never spoke to Alfred Inglethorp. They were supposed to be deadly enemies, and until John Cavendish was safely convicted they neither of them dared risk a meeting. Of course, I had a watch kept on Mr Inglethorp, hoping that sooner or later he would lead me to the hiding-place. But he was too clever to take any chances. The paper was safe where it was; since no one had thought of looking there in the first week, it was not likely they would do so afterwards. But for your lucky remark, we might never have been able to bring him to justice.’

‘I understand that now; but when did you first begin to suspect Miss Howard?’

‘When I discovered that she had told a lie at the inquest about the letter she had received from Mrs Inglethorp.’

‘Why, what was there to lie about?’

‘You saw that letter? Do you recall its general appearance?’

‘Yes—more or less.’

‘You will recollect, then, that Mrs Inglethorp wrote a very distinctive hand, and left large clear spaces between her words. But if you look at the date at the top of the letter you will notice that “July 17th” is quite different in this respect. Do you see what I mean?’

‘No,’ I confessed, ‘I don’t.’

‘You do not see that that letter was not written on the 17th, but on the 7th—the day after Miss Howard’s departure? The “1” was written in before the “7” to turn it into the “17th”.’

‘But why?’

‘That is exactly what I asked myself. Why does Miss Howard suppress the letter written on the 17th, and produce this faked one instead? Because she did not wish to show the letter of the 17th. Why, again? And at once a suspicion dawned in my mind. You will remember my saying that it was wise to beware of people who were not telling the truth.’

‘And yet,’ I cried indignantly, ‘after that, you gave me two reasons why Miss Howard could not have committed the crime!’

‘And very good reasons too,’ replied Poirot. ‘For a long time they were a stumbling-block to me until I remembered a very significant fact: that she and Alfred Inglethorp were cousins. She could not have committed the crime single-handed, but the reasons against that did not debar her from being an accomplice. And, then, there was that rather overvehement hatred of hers! It concealed a very opposite emotion. There was, undoubtedly, a tie of passion between them long before he came to Styles. They had already arranged their infamous plot—that he should marry this rich, but rather foolish old lady, induce her to make a will leaving her money to him, and then gain their ends by a very cleverly conceived crime. If all had gone as they planned, they would probably have left England, and lived together on their poor victim’s money.

‘They are a very astute and unscrupulous pair. While suspicion was to be directed against him, she would be making quiet preparations for a very different *dénouement*. She arrives from Middlingham with all the compromising items in her possession. No suspicion attaches to her. No notice is paid to her coming and going in the house. She hides the strychnine and glasses in John’s room. She puts the beard in the attic. She will see to it that sooner or later they are duly discovered.’

‘I don’t quite see why they tried to fix the blame on John,’ I remarked. ‘It would have been much easier for them to bring the crime home to Lawrence.’

‘Yes, but that was mere chance. All the evidence against him arose out of pure accident. It must, in fact, have been distinctly annoying to the pair of schemers.’

‘His manner was unfortunate,’ I observed thoughtfully.

‘Yes. You realize, of course, what was the back of that?’

‘No.’

‘You did not understand that he believed Mademoiselle Cynthia guilty of the crime?’

‘No,’ I exclaimed, astonished. ‘Impossible!’

‘Not at all. I myself nearly had the same idea. It was in my mind when I asked Mr Wells that first question about the will. Then there were the bromide powders which she had made up, and her clever male impersonations, as Dorcas recounted them to us. There was really more evidence against her than anyone else.’

‘You are joking, Poirot!’

‘No. Shall I tell you what made Monsieur Lawrence turn so pale when he first entered his mother’s room on the fatal night? It was because, whilst

his mother lay there, obviously poisoned, he saw, over your shoulder, that the door into Mademoiselle Cynthia's room was unbolted.'

'But he declared that he saw it bolted!' I cried.

'Exactly,' said Poirot dryly. 'And that was just what confirmed my suspicion that it was not. He was shielding Mademoiselle Cynthia.'

'But why should he shield her?'

'Because he is in love with her.'

I laughed.

'There, Poirot, you are quite wrong! I happen to know for a fact that, far from being in love with her, he positively dislikes her.'

'Who told you that, *mon ami?*'

'Cynthia herself.'

'*La pauvre petite!* And she was concerned?'

'She said that she did not mind at all.'

'Then she certainly did mind very much,' remarked Poirot. 'They are like that –*les femmes!*'

'What you say about Lawrence is a great surprise to me,' I said.

'But why? It was most obvious. Did not Monsieur Lawrence make the sour face every time Mademoiselle Cynthia spoke and laughed with his brother? He had taken it into his long head that Mademoiselle Cynthia was in love with Monsieur John. When he entered his mother's room and saw her obviously poisoned, he jumped to the conclusion that Mademoiselle Cynthia knew something about the matter. He was nearly driven desperate. First he crushed the coffee-cup to powder under his feet, remembering that *she* had gone up with his mother the night before, and he determined that there should be no chance of testing its contents. Thenceforward, he

strenuously, and quite uselessly, upheld the theory of “Death from natural causes”.’

‘And what about the “extra coffee-cup”?’

‘I was fairly certain that it was Mrs Cavendish who had hidden it, but I had to make sure. Monsieur Lawrence did not know at all what I meant; but, on reflection, he came to the conclusion that if he could find an extra coffee-cup anywhere his lady love would be cleared of suspicion. And he was perfectly right.’

‘One thing more. What did Mrs Inglethorp mean by her dying words?’

‘They were, of course, an accusation against her husband.’

‘Dear me, Poirot,’ I said with a sigh, ‘I think you have explained everything. I am glad it has all ended so happily. Even John and his wife are reconciled.’

‘Thanks to me.’

‘How do you mean—thanks to you?’

‘My dear friend, do you realize that it was simply and solely the trial which has brought them together again? That John Cavendish still loved his wife, I was convinced. Also, that she was equally in love with him. But they had drifted very far apart. It all arose from a misunderstanding. She married him without love. He knew it. He is a sensitive man in his way, he would not force himself upon her if she did not want him. And, as he withdrew, her love awoke. But they are both unusually proud, and their pride held them inexorably apart. He drifted into an entanglement with Mrs Raikes, and she deliberately cultivated the friendship of Dr Bauerstein. Do you remember the day of John Cavendish’s arrest, when you found me deliberating over a big decision?’

‘Yes, I quite understood your distress.’

‘Pardon me, *mon ami*, but you did not understand it in the least. I was trying to decide whether or not I would clear John Cavendish at once. I could have cleared him—though it might have meant a failure to convict the real criminals. They were entirely in the dark as to my real attitude up to the very last moment—which partly accounts for my success.’

‘Do you mean that you could have saved John Cavendish from being brought to trial?’

‘Yes, my friend. But I eventually decided in favour of “a woman’s happiness”. Nothing but the great danger through which they have passed could have brought these two proud souls together again.’

I looked at Poirot in silent amazement. The colossal cheek of the little man! Who on earth but Poirot would have thought of a trial for murder as a restorer of conjugal happiness!

‘I perceive your thoughts, *mon ami*,’ said Poirot, smiling at me. ‘No one but Hercule Poirot would have attempted such a thing! And you are wrong in condemning it. The happiness of one man and woman is the greatest thing in all the world.’

His words took me back to earlier events. I remembered Mary as she lay white and exhausted on the sofa, listening, listening. There had come the sound of the bell below. She had started up. Poirot had opened the door, and meeting her agonized eyes had nodded gently. ‘Yes, madame,’ he said. ‘I have brought him back to you.’ He had stood aside, and as I went out I had seen the look in Mary’s eyes, as John Cavendish had caught his wife in his arms.

‘Perhaps you are right, Poirot,’ I said gently. ‘Yes, it is the greatest thing in the world.’

Suddenly, there was a tap at the door, and Cynthia peeped in.

‘I—I—only –’

‘Come in,’ I said, springing up.

She came in, but did not sit down.

‘I—only wanted to tell you something –’

‘Yes?’

Cynthia fidgeted with a little tassel for some moments, then, suddenly exclaiming: ‘You dears!’ kissed first me and then Poirot, and rushed out of the room again.

‘What on earth does this mean?’ I asked, surprised.

It was very nice to be kissed by Cynthia, but the publicity of the salute rather impaired the pleasure.

‘It means that she has discovered Monsieur Lawrence does not dislike her as much as she thought,’ replied Poirot philosophically.

‘But –’

‘Here he is.’

Lawrence at that moment passed the door.

‘Eh! Monsieur Lawrence,’ called Poirot. ‘We must congratulate you, is it not so?’

Lawrence blushed, and then smiled awkwardly. A man in love is a sorry spectacle. Now Cynthia had looked charming.

I sighed.

‘What is it, *mon ami?*’

‘Nothing,’ I said sadly. ‘They are two delightful women!’

‘And neither of them is for you?’ finished Poirot.

‘Never mind. Console yourself, my friend. We may hunt together again, who knows? And then –’

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