POIROT

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

HP13 - The ABC Murders

Agatha Christie

Foreword	
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by Captain Arthur Hastings, O.B.E.

In this narrative of mine I have departed from my usual practice of relating only those incidents and scenes at which I myself was present. Certain chapters, therefore, are written in the third person.

I wish to assure my readers that I can vouch for the occurrences related in these chapters. If I have taken a certain poetic license in describing the thoughts and feelings of various persons, it is because I believe I have set them down with a reasonable amount of accuracy. I may add that they have been "vetted" by my friend Hercule Poirot himself.

In conclusion, I will say that if I have described at too great length some of the secondary personal relationships which arose as a consequence of this strange series of crimes, it is because the human and personal element can never be ignored. Hercule Poirot once taught me in a very dramatic manner that romance can be a by-product of crime.

As to the solving of the A.B.C. mystery, I can only say that in my opinion Poirot showed real genius in the way he tackled a problem entirely unlike any which had previously come his way.

Chapter 1

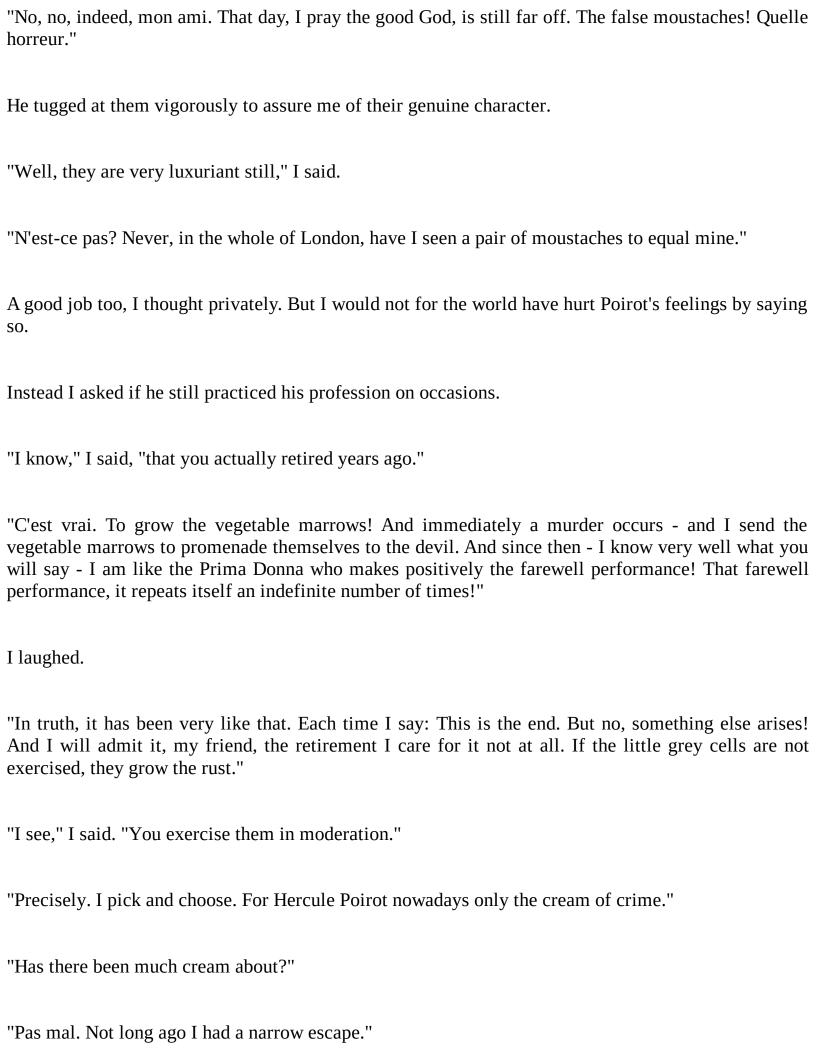
THE LETTER

It was in June of 1935 that I came home from my ranch in South America for a stay of about six months. It had been a difficult time for us out there. Like every one else, we had suffered from world depression. I had various affairs to see to in England that I felt could only be successful if a personal touch was introduced. My wife remained to manage the ranch.

I need hardly say that one of my first actions on reaching England was to look up my old friend, Hercule Poirot.

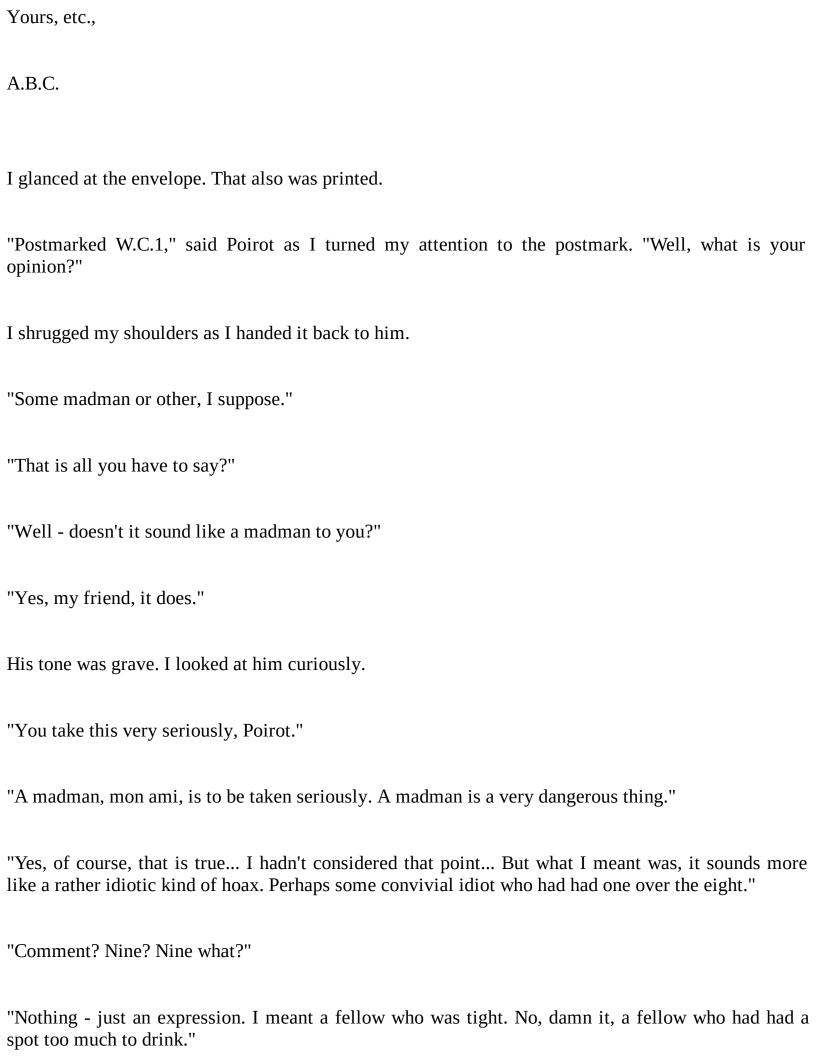


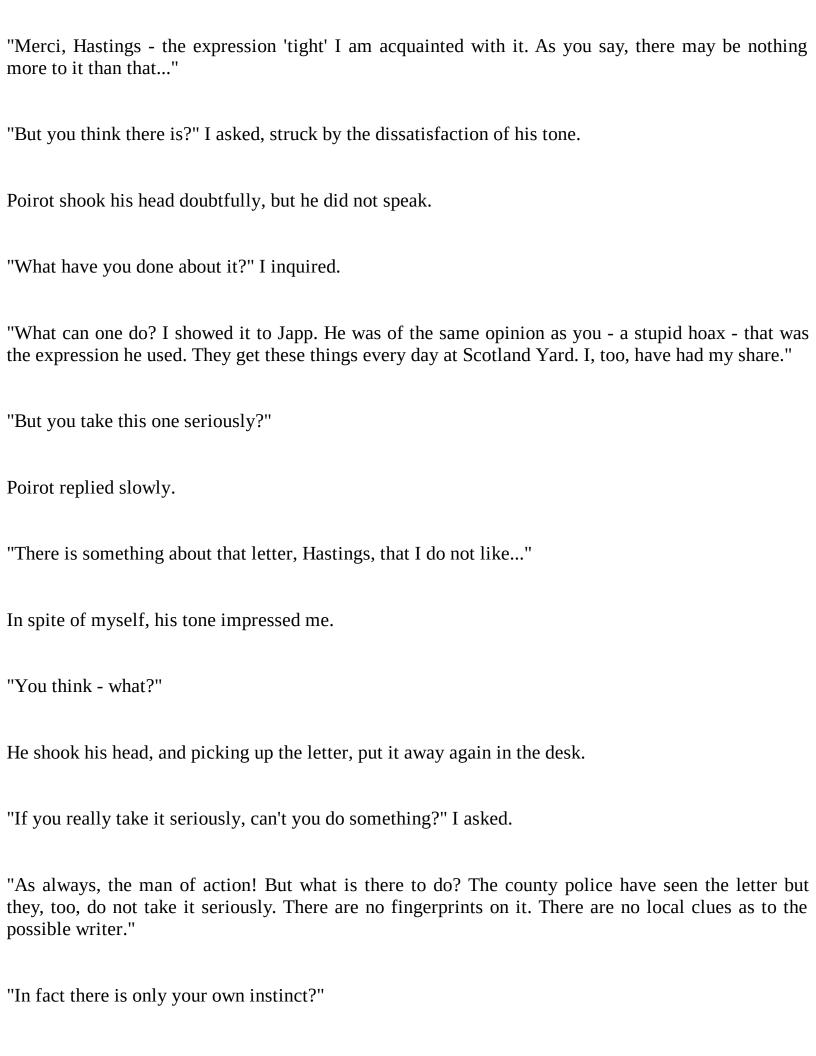


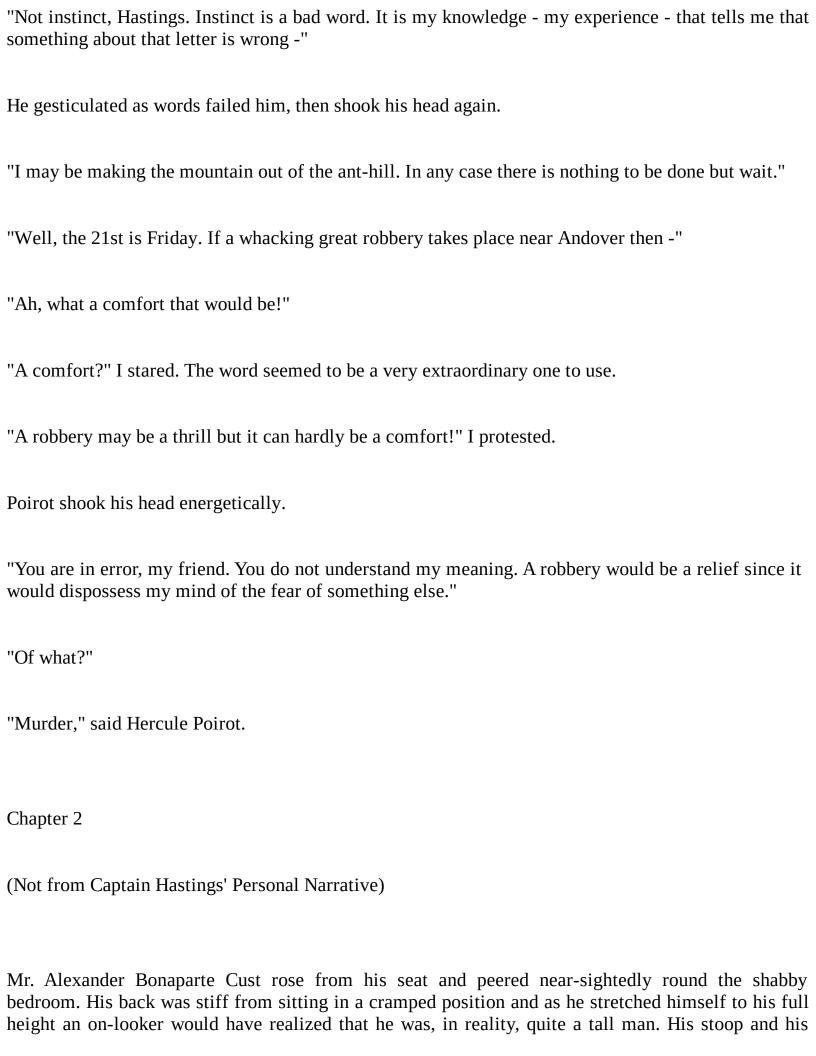












near-sighted peering gave a delusive impression.

Going to a well-worn overcoat hanging on the back of the door, he took from the pocket a packet of cheap cigarettes and some matches. He lit a cigarette and then returned to the table at which he had been sitting. He picked up a railway guide and consulted it, then he returned to the consideration of a typewritten list of names. With a pen, he made a tick against one of the first names on the list.

It was Thursday, June 20th.

Chapter 3

ANDOVER

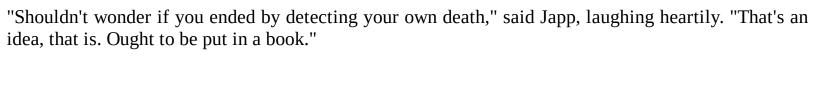
I had been impressed at the time by Poirot's forebodings about the anonymous letter he had received, but I must admit that the matter had passed from my mind when the 21st actually arrived and the first reminder of it came with a visit paid to my friend by Chief Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. The C.I.D. inspector had been known to us for many years and he gave me a hearty welcome.

"Well, I never," he exclaimed. "If it isn't Captain Hastings back from the wilds of the what do you call it! Quite like old days seeing you here with Monsieur Poirot. You're looking well, too. Just a little bit thin on top, eh? Well, that's what we're all coming to. I'm the same."

I winced slightly. I was under the impression that owing to the careful way I brushed my hair across the top of my head that thinness referred to by Japp was quite unnoticeable. However, Japp had never been remarkable for tact where I was concerned so I put a good face upon it and agreed that we were none of us getting any younger.

"Except Monsieur Poirot here," said Japp. "Quite a good advertisement for a hair tonic, he'd be. Face fungus sprouting finer than ever. Coming out into the limelight, too, in his old age. Mixed up in all the celebrated cases of the day. Train mysteries, air mysteries, high society deaths - oh, he's here, there and everywhere. Never been so celebrated as since he retired."

"I have already told Hastings that I am like the Prima Donna who makes always one more appearance," said Poirot, smiling.



"It will be Hastings who will have to do that," said Poirot, twinkling at me.

"Ha ha! That would be a joke, that would," laughed Japp.

I failed to see why the idea was so extremely amusing, and in any case I thought the joke was in poor taste. Poirot, poor old chap, is getting on. Jokes about his approaching demise can hardly be agreeable to him.

Perhaps my manner showed my feelings, for Japp changed the subject.

"Have you heard about Monsieur Poirot's anonymous letter?" he asked.

"I showed it to Hastings the other day," said my friend.

"Of course," I exclaimed. "It had quite slipped my memory. Let me see, what was the date mentioned?"

"The 21st," said Japp. "That's what I dropped in about. Yesterday was the 21st and just out of curiosity I rang up Andover last night. It was a hoax all right. Nothing doing. One broken shop window - kid throwing stones - and a couple of drunk and disorderlies. So just for once our Belgian friend was barking up the wrong tree."

"I am relieved, I must confess," acknowledged Poirot.

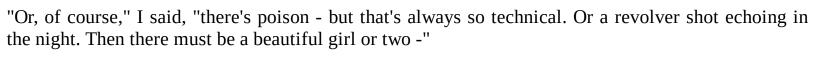
"You'd quite got the wind up about it, hadn't you?" said Japp affectionately. "Bless you, we get dozens of letters like that coming in every day! People with nothing better to do and a bit weak in the top story sit down and write 'em. They don't mean any harm! Just a kind of excitement."

"I have indeed been foolish to take the matter so seriously," said Poirot. "It is the nest of the horse that I put my nose into there."

"You're mixing up mares and wasps," said Japp.

"Pardon?"
"Just a couple of proverbs. Well, I must be off. Got a little business in the next street to see to receiving stolen jewelry. I thought I'd just drop in on my way and put your mind at rest. Pity to let those grey cells function unnecessarily."
With which words and a hearty laugh, Japp departed.
"He does not change much, the good Japp, eh?" asked Poirot.
"He looks much older," I said. "Getting as grey as a badger," I added vindictively.
Poirot coughed and said:
"You know, Hastings, there is a little device - my hairdresser is a man of great ingenuity - one attaches it to the scalp and brushes one's own hair over it - it is not a wig, you comprehend - but -"
"Poirot," I roared. "Once and for all I will have nothing to do with the beastly inventions of your confounded hairdresser. What's the matter with the top of my head?"
"Nothing - nothing at all."
"It's not as though I were going bald."
"Of course not!"
"The hot summers out there naturally cause the hair to fall out a bit. I shall take back a really good hair tonic."
"Précisément."
"And, anyway, what business is it of Japp's? He always was an offensive kind of devil. And no sense of humour. The kind of man who laughs when a chair is pulled away just as a man is about to sit





"With auburn hair," murmured my friend.

"Your same old joke. One of the beautiful girls, of course, must be unjustly suspected - and there's some misunderstanding between her and the young man. And then, of course, there must be some other suspects - an older woman, dangerous type - and some friend or rival of the dead man's - and a quiet secretary - dark horse - and a hearty man with a bluff manner - and a couple of discharged servants or gamekeepers or something - and a damn fool of a detective rather like Japp - and well - that's about all."

"That is your idea of the cream, eh?"

"I gather you don't agree."

Poirot looked at me sadly.

"You have made there a very pretty résumé of nearly all the detective stories that have ever been written."

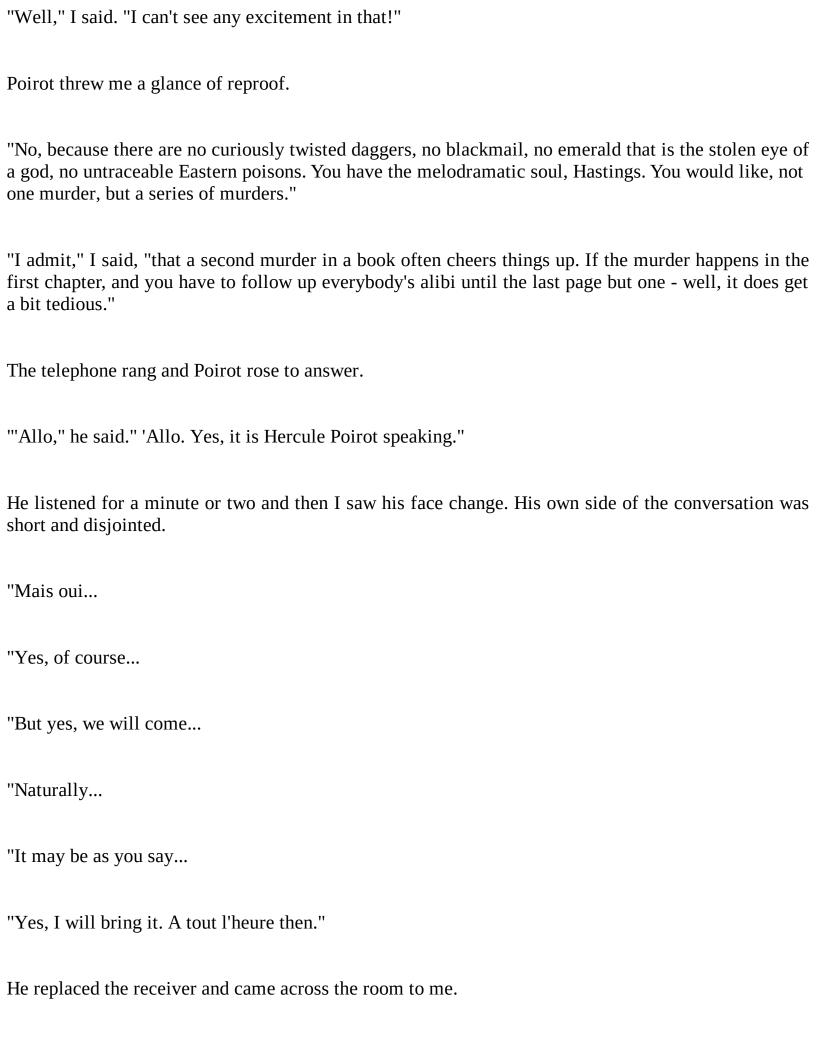
"Well," I said. "What would you order?"

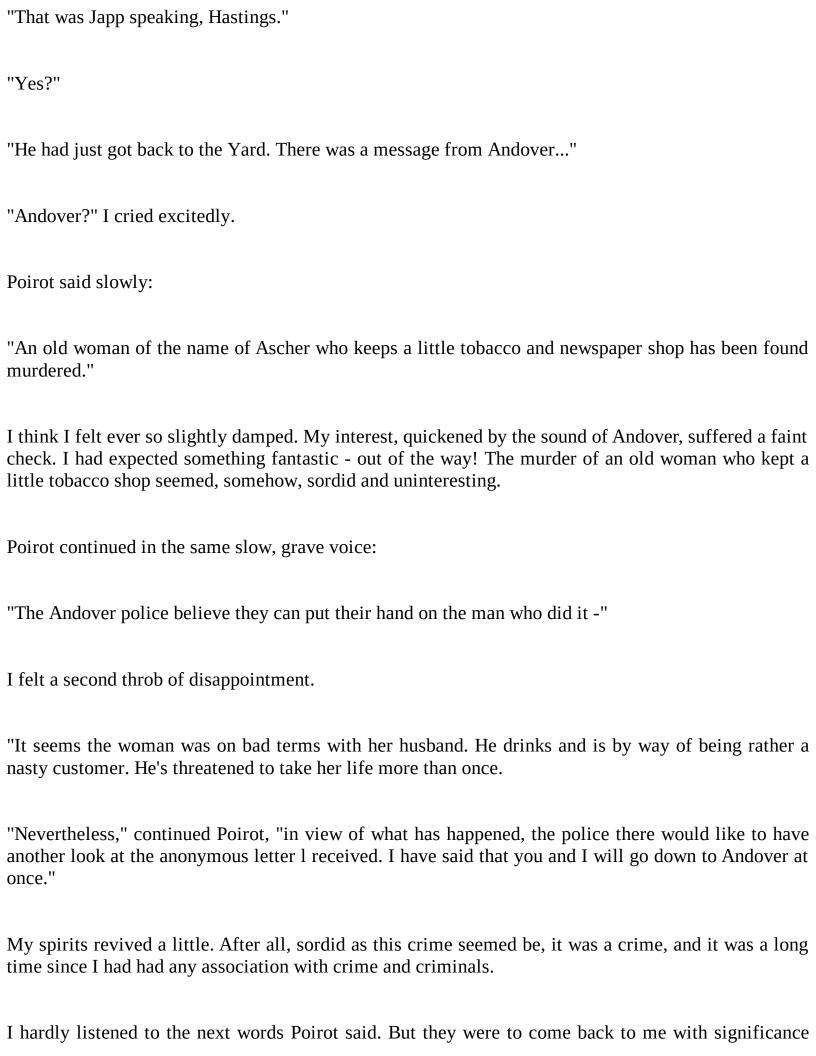
Poirot closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. His voice came puningly from between his lips.

"A very simple crime. A crime with no complications. A crime of quiet domestic life... very unimpassioned - very intime."

"How can a crime be intime?"

"Supposing," murmured Poirot, "that four people sit down to play bridge and one, the odd man out, sits in a chair by the fire. At the end of the evening the man by the fire is found dead. One of the four, while he is dummy, has gone over and killed him, and, intent on the play of the hand, the other three have not noticed. Ah, there would be a crime for you! Which of the four was it?"





later.
"This is the beginning," said Hercule Poirot.
Chapter 4
MRS. ASCHER
We were received at Andover by Inspector Glen, a tall, fair-haired man with a pleasant smile.
For the sake of conciseness I think I had better give a brief résumé of the bare facts of the case.
The crime was discovered by Police Constable Dover at 1 A.M. in the morning of the 22nd. When on his round he tried the door of the shop and found it unfastened. He entered and at first thought the place was empty. Directing his torch over the counter, however, he caught sight of the huddled-up body of the old woman. When the police surgeon arrived on the spot it was elicited that the woman had been struck down by a heavy blow on the back of the head, probably while she was reaching down a packet of cigarettes from the shelf behind the counter. Death must have occurred about nine to seven hours previously.
"But we've been able to get it down a bit nearer than that," explained the inspector. "We've found a man who went in and bought some tobacco at 5:30. And a second man went in and found the shop empty, as he thought, at five minutes past six. That puts the time at between 5:30 and 6:05. So far I haven't been able to find any one who saw this man Ascher in the neighbourhood, but, of course, it's early yet. He was in the Three Crowns at nine o'clock pretty far gone on drink. When we get hold of him he'll be detained on suspicion."
"Not a very desirable character, inspector?" asked Poirot.
"Unpleasant bit of goods."
"He didn't live with his wife?"

'No, they separated some years ago. Ascher's a German. He was waiter at one time, but he took to
drink and gradually became unemployable. His wife went into service for a bit. Her last place was as
cook-housekeeper to an old lady, Miss Rose. She allowed her husband so much out of her wages to
keep himself, but he was always getting drunk and coming round and making scenes at the places
where she was employed. That's why she took the post with Miss Rose at The Grange. It's three miles
out of Andover, dead in the country. He couldn't get at her there so well. When Miss Rose died, she
eft Mrs. Ascher a small legacy, and the woman started this tobacco and newsagent business - quite a
tiny place - just cheap cigarettes and a few newspapers - that sort of thing. She just about managed to
keep going. Ascher used to come round and abuse her now and again and she used to give him a bit to
get rid of him. She allowed him fifteen shillings a week regular."

"Had they any children?" asked Poirot.

"No. There's a niece. She's in service near Overton. Very superior steady young woman."

"And you say this man Ascher used to threaten his wife?"

"That's right. He was a terror when he was in drink - cursing and swearing that he'd bash her head in. She had a hard time, did Mrs. Ascher."

"What age of woman was she?"

"Close on sixty - respectable and hardworking."

Poirot said gravely:

"It is your opinion, inspector, that this man Ascher committed the crime?"

The inspector coughed cautiously.

"It's a bit early to say that, Mr. Poirot, but I'd like to hear Franz Ascher's own account of how he spent yesterday evening. If he can give a satisfactory account of himself, well and good - if not -"

His pause was a pregnant one.

- "Nothing. Money in the till quite undisturbed. No signs of robbery."

 "You think that this man Ascher came into the shop drunk, started abusing his wife and finally struck her down?"
- "It seems the most likely solution. But I must confess, sir, I'd like to have another look at that very odd letter you received. I was wondering if it was just possible that it came from this man Ascher."

Poirot handed over the letter and the inspector read it with a frown.

"It doesn't read like Ascher," he said at last. "I doubt if Ascher would use the term 'our' British police - not unless he was trying to be extra cunning - and I doubt if he's got the wits for that. Then the man's a wreck - all to pieces. His hand's too shaky to print letters clearly like this. It's good quality notepaper and ink, too. It's odd that the letter should mention the 21st of the month. Of course it might be a coincidence."

"That is possible - yes."

"Nothing was missing from the shop?"

"But I don't like this kind of coincidence, Mr. Poirot. It's a bit too pat."

He was silent for a minute or two - a frown creasing his forehead.

"A.B.C. Who the devil could A.B.C. be? We'll see if Mary Drower (that's the niece) can give us any help. It's an odd business. But for this letter I'd have put my money on Franz Ascher for a certainty."

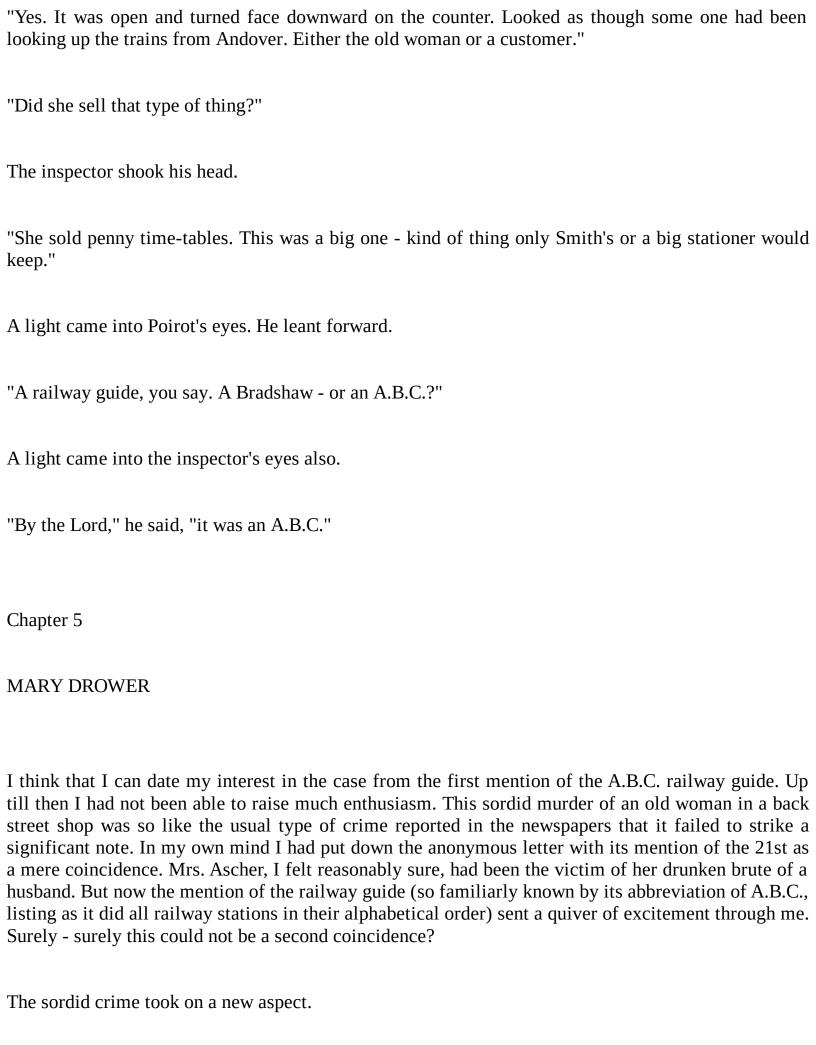
"Do you know anything of Mrs. Ascher's past?"

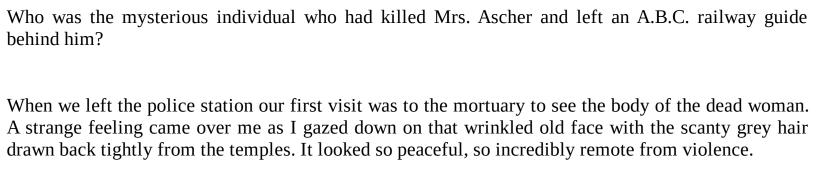
"She's a Hampshire woman. Went into service as a girl up in London - that's where she met Ascher and married him. Things must have been difficult for them during the war. She actually left him for good in 1922. They were in London then. She came back here to get away from him, but he got wind of where she was and followed her down here, pestering her for money -" A constable came in. "Yes, Briggs, what is it?"



"Yes, yes - I tell you everything. I did not go near Alice. I am with friends - good friends. We are at

the Seven Stars - and then we are at the Red Dog -"
He hurried on, his words tumbling over each other.
"Dick Willows - he was with me - and old Curdie - and George - and Platt and lots of the boys. I tell you I do not never go near Alice. Ach Gott, it is the truth I am telling you."
His voice rose to a scream. The inspector nodded to his underling.
"Take him away. Detained on suspicion."
"I don't know what to think," he said as the unpleasant shaking old man with the malevolent, mouthing jaw was removed. "If it wasn't for the letter, I'd say he did it."
"What about the men he mentions?"
"A bad crowd - not one of them would stick at perjury. I've no doubt he was with them the greater part of the evening. A lot depends on whether any one saw him near the shop between half-past five and six."
Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.
"You are sure nothing was taken from the shop?"
The inspector shrugged his shoulders. "That depends. A packet or two of cigarettes might have been taken - but you'd hardly commit murder for that."
"And there was nothing - how shall I put it - introduced into the shop. Nothing that was odd there - incongruous?"
"There was a railway guide," said the inspector.
"A railway guide?"





"Never knew who or what struck her," observed the sergeant. "That's what Dr. Kerr says. I'm glad it was that way, poor old soul. A decent woman she was."

"She must have been beautiful once," said Poirot.

"Really?" I murmured incredulously.

"But yes, look at the line of the jaw, the bones, the moulding of the head."

He sighed as he replaced the sheet and we left the mortuary.

Our next move was a brief interview with the police surgeon.

Dr. Kerr was a competent-looking middle-aged man. He spoke briskly and with decision.

"The weapon wasn't found," he said. "Impossible to say what it may have been. A weighted stick, a club, a form of sandbag - any of those would fit the case."

"Would much force be needed to strike such a blow?"

The doctor shot a keen glance at Poirot.

"Meaning, I suppose, could a shaky old man of seventy do it? Oh, yes, it's perfectly possible - given sufficient weight in the head of the weapon, quite a feeble person could achieve the desired result."

"Then the murderer could just as well be a woman as a man?"

The suggestion took the doctor somewhat aback.
"A woman, eh? Well, I confess it never occurred to me to connect a woman with this type of crime. But of course it's possible - perfectly possible. Only, psychologically speaking, I shouldn't say this was a woman's crime."
Poirot nodded his head in eager agreement.
"Perfectly, perfectly. On the face of it, highly improbable. But one must take all possibilities into account. The body was lying - how?"
The doctor gave us a careful description of the position of the victim. It was his opinion that she had been standing with her back to the counter (and therefore to her assailant) when the blow had been struck. She had slipped down in a heap behind the counter quite out of sight of any one entering the shop casually.
When we had thanked Dr. Kerr and taken our leave, Poirot said: "You perceive, Hastings, that we have already one further point in favour of Ascher's innocence. If he had been abusing his wife and threatening her, she would have been facing him over the counter. Instead, she had her back to her assailant - obviously she is reaching down tobacco or cigarettes for a customer."
I gave a little shiver.
"Pretty gruesome."
Poirot shook his head gravely.
"Pauvre femme," he murmured.
Then he glanced at his watch.
"Overton is not, I think, many miles from here. Shall we run over there and have an interview with the niece of the dead woman?"

"Surely you will go first to the shop where the crime took place?"

"I prefer to do that later. I have a reason."
He did not explain further, and a few minutes later we were driving on the London road in the direction of Overton.
The address which the inspector had given us was that of a good-sized house about a mile on the London side of the village.
Our ring at the bell was answered by a pretty dark-haired girl whose eyes were red with recent weeping.
Poirot said gently:
"Ah! I think it is you who are Miss Mary Drower, the parlourmaid here?"
"Yes, sir, that's right. I'm Mary, sir."
"Then perhaps I can talk to you for a few minutes if your mistress will not object. It is about your aunt, Mrs. Ascher."
"The mistress is out, sir. She wouldn't mind, I'm sure, if you came in here."
She opened the door of a small morning-room. We entered and Poirot, seating himself on a chair by the window, looked up keenly into the girl's face.
"You have heard of your aunt's death, of course?"

"This morning, sir. The police came over. Oh! it's terrible! Poor auntie! Such a hard life as she'd had,

The girl nodded, tears coming once more into her eyes.

"The police did not suggest your returning to Andover?"

too. And now this - it's too awful."

"They said I must come to the inquest - that's on Monday, sir. But I've nowhere to go there - I couldn't fancy being over the shop - now - and what with the housemaid being away. I didn't want to put the mistress out more than may be."

"You were fond of your aunt, Mary? said Poirot gently.

"Indeed I was, sir. Very good she's been to me always, auntie has. I went to her in London when I was eleven years old, after mother died. I started in service when I was sixteen, but I usually went along to auntie's on my day out. A lot of trouble she went through with that German fellow. 'My old devil,' she used to call him. He'd never let her be in peace anywhere. Sponging, cadging old beast."

The girl spoke with vehemence.

"Your aunt never thought of freeing herself by legal means from this persecution?"

"Well, you see, he was her husband, sir, you couldn't get away from that."

The girl spoke simply but with finality.

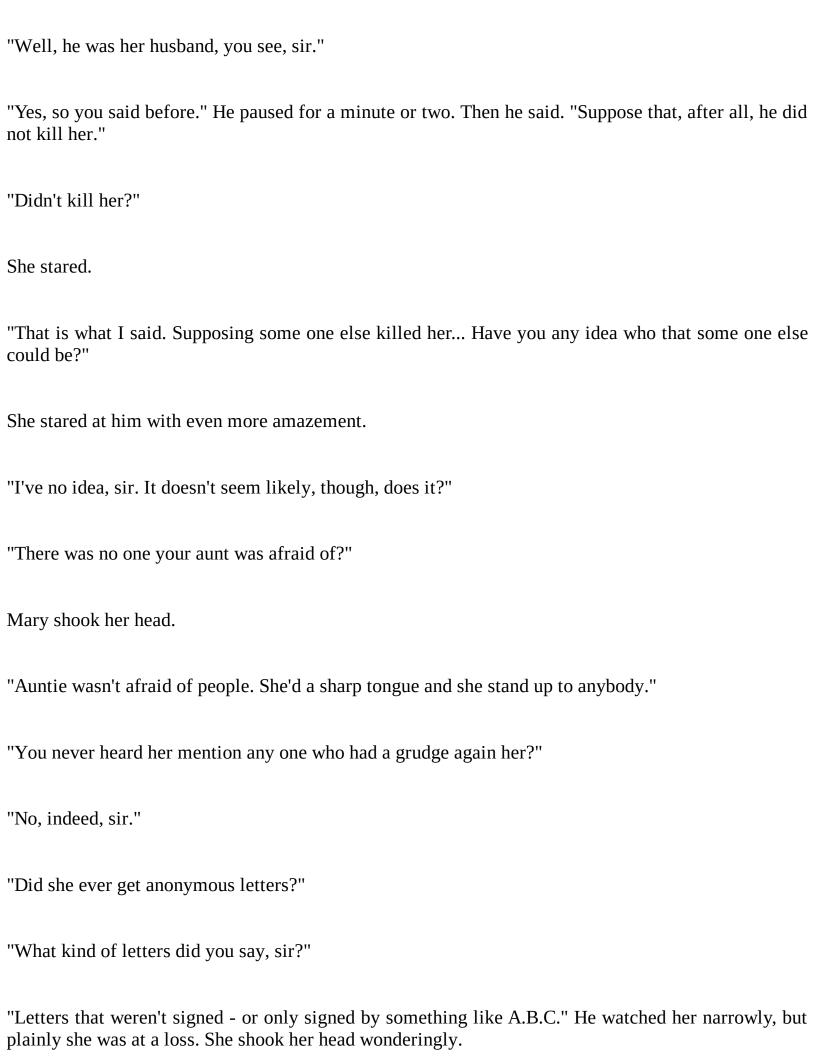
"Tell me, Mary, he threatened her, did he not?"

"Oh, yes, sir, it was awful the things he used to say. That he'd cut her throat, and such like. Cursing and swearing too - both in German and in English. And yet auntie says he was a fine handsome figure of a man when she married him. It's dreadful to think, sir, what people come to."

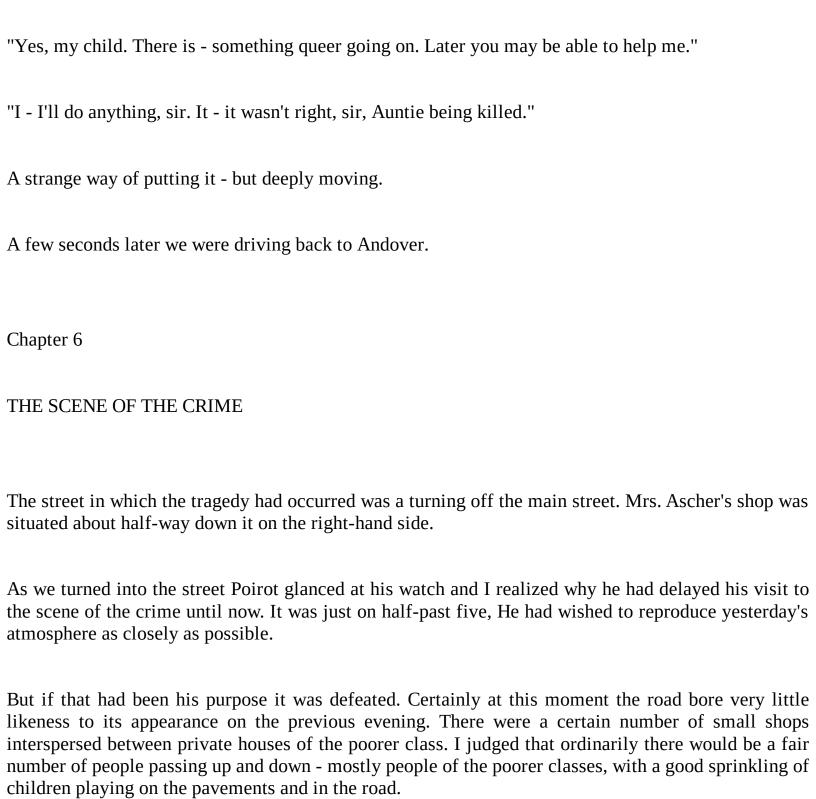
"Yes, indeed. And so, I suppose, Mary, having actually heard the threats, you were not so very surprised when you learnt what had happened?"

"Oh, but I was, sir. You see, sir, I never thought for one moment that he meant it. I thought it was just nasty talk and nothing more to it. And it isn't as though auntie was afraid of him. Why, I've seen him slip away like a dog with its tail between its legs when she turned on him. He was afraid of her if you like."

"And yet she gave him money?"



"Has your aunt any relations except you?"
"Not now, sir. One of ten she was, but only three lived to grow up. My Uncle Tom was killed in the war, and my Uncle Harry went South America and no one's heard of him since, and mother's dead, of course, so there's only me."
"Had your aunt any savings? Any money put by?"
"She'd a little in the Savings Bank, sir - enough to bury her proper, that's what she always said. Otherwise she didn't more than just make ends meet - what with her old devil and all."
Poirot nodded thoughtfully. He said - perhaps more to himself than to her:
"At present one is in the dark - there is no direction - if things get clearer -" He got up. "If I want you at any time, Mary, I will write to you here."
"As a matter of fact, sir, I'm giving in my notice. I don't like the country. I stayed here because I fancied it was a comfort to auntie to have me near by. But now -" again the tears rose in her eyes - "there's no reason I should stay, and so I'll go back to London. It's gayer for a girl there."
"I wish that, when you do go, you would give me your address. Here is my card."
He handed it to her. She looked at it with a puzzled frown.
"Then you're not - anything to do with the police, sir?"
"I am a private detective."
She stood there looking at him for some moments in silence.
She said at last:
"Is there anything - queer going on, sir?"



At this moment there was a solid mass of people standing staring at one particular house or shop and it took little perspicuity to guess which that was. What we saw was a mass of average human beings looking with intense interest at the spot where another human being had been done to death.

As we drew nearer this proved to be indeed the case. In front of a small dingy-looking shop with its shutters now closed stood a harassed-looking young policeman who was stolidly adjuring the crowd to "pass along there." By the help of a colleague, displacements took place - a certain number of people grudgingly sighed and betook themselves to their ordinary vocations, and almost immediately other

persons came along and took up their stand to gaze their full on the spot where murder had been committed.

Poirot stopped a little distance from the main body of the crowd. From where we stood the legend painted over the door could be read plainly enough. Poirot repeated it under his breath.

"A. Ascher. Oui, c'est peut-être là -" He broke off. "Come, let us go inside, Hastings."

I was only too ready.

We made our way through the crowd and accosted the young policeman.

Poirot produced the credentials which the inspector had given him. The constable nodded, and unlocked the door to let us pass within. We did so and entered to the intense interest of the lookers-on.

Inside it was very dark owing to the shutters being closed. The constable found and switched on the electric light. The bulb was a low-powered one so that the interior was still dimly lit.

I looked about me.

A dingy little place. A few cheap magazines strewn about, and yesterday's newspapers - all with a day's dust on them. Behind the counter a row of shelves reaching to the ceiling and packed with tobacco and packets of cigarettes. There were also a couple of jars o' peppermint humbugs and barley sugar. A commonplace little shop, one of many thousand such others.

The constable in his slow Hampshire voice was explaining the mise-en-scéne.

"Down in a heap behind the counter, that's where she was. Doctor says as how she never knew what hit her. Must have been reaching up to one of the shelves."

"There was nothing in her hand?"

"No, sir, but there was a packet of Players down beside her."



wooden smile on her face that so often disfigures the expression in posed photography, and makes a snapshot preferable.

The second was a more expensive type of picture - an artistically blurred reproduction of an elderly woman with white hair. A high fur collar stood up round the neck.

I guessed that this was probably the Miss Rose who had left Mrs. Ascher the small legacy which had enabled her to start in business.

The third photograph was a very old one, now faded and yellow. It represented a young man and woman in somewhat old-fashioned clothes standing arm in arm. The man had a flower in his buttonhole and there was an air of bygone festivity about the whole pose.

"Probably a wedding picture," said Poirot. "Regard, Hastings, did I not tell you that she had been a beautiful woman?"

He was right. Disfigured by old-fashioned hair-dressing and weird clothes, there was no disguising the handsomeness of the girl in the picture with her clear-cut features and spirited bearing. I looked closely at the second figure. It was almost impossible to recognize the seedy Ascher in this smart young man with the military beating. I recalled the leering drunken old man, and the worn, toil-worn face of the dead woman - and I shivered a little at the remorselessness of time...

From the parlour a stair led to two upstairs rooms. One was empty and unfurnished, the other had evidently been the dead woman's bedroom.

After being searched by the police it had been left as it was. A couple of old worn blankets on the bed - a little stock of well-darned underwear in a drawer - cookery recipes in another - a paperbacked novel entitled The Green Oasis - a pair of new stockings - pathetic in their cheap shininess - a couple of china ornaments - a Dresden shepherd much broken, and a blue and yellow spotted dog - a black raincoat and a woolly jumper hanging on pegs - such were the worldly possessions of the late Alice Ascher.

If there had been any personal papers, the police had taken them.

"Pauvre femme," murmured Poirot. "Come, Hastings, there is nothing for us here."

When we were once more in the street, he hesitated for a minute or two, then crossed the road. Almost

exactly opposite Mrs. Ascher's was a greengrocer's shop - of the type that has most of its stock outside rather than inside.

In a low voice Poirot gave me certain instructions. Then he himself entered the shop. After waiting a minute or two I followed him in. He was at the moment negotiating for a lettuce. I myself bought a pound of strawberries.

Poirot was talking animatedly to the stout lady who was serving him.

"It was just opposite you, was it not, that this murder occurred? What an affair! What a sensation it must have caused you!"

The stout lady was obviously tired of talking about the murder. She must have had a long day of it. She observed:

"It would be as well if some of that gaping crowd cleared off. What is there to look at, I'd like to know?"

"It must have been very different last night," said Poirot. "Possibly you even observed the murderer enter the shop - a tall, fair man with a beard, was he not? A Russian, so I have heard."

"What's that?" The woman looked up sharply. "A Russian did it, you say?"

"I understand that the police have arrested him."

"Did you ever now?" The woman was excited, voluble. "A foreigner."

"Mais oui. I thought perhaps you might have noticed him last night?

"Well, I don't get much chance of noticing, and that's a fact. The evening's our busy time and there's always a fair few passing along and getting home after their work. A tall, fair man with a beard - no, I can't say I saw any one of that description anywhere about."

I broke in on my cue.

"Excuse me, sir," I said to Poirot. "I think you have been misinformed. A short dark man I was told."

An interested discussion intervened in which the stout lady, her lank husband and a hoarse-voiced shop-boy all participated. No less than four short dark men had been observed, and the hoarse boy had seen a tall fair one, "but he hadn't got no beard," he added regretfully.

Finally, our purchases made, we left the establishment, leaving our falsehoods uncorrected.

"And what was the point of all that, Poirot?" I demanded somewhat reproachfully.

"Parbleu, I wanted to estimate the chances of a stranger being noticed entering the shop opposite."

"Couldn't you simply have asked - without all that tissue of lies?"

"No, mon ami. If I had 'simply asked,' as you put it, I should have got no answer at all to my questions. You yourself are English and yet you do not seem to appreciate the quality of the English reaction to a direct question. It is invariably one of suspicion and the natural result is reticence. If I had asked those people for information they would have shut up like oysters. But by making a statement (and a somewhat out-of-the-way and preposterous one) and by your contradiction of it, tongues are immediately loosened. We know also that that particular time was a 'busy time' - that is, that every one would be intent on their own concerns and that there would be a fair number of people passing along the pavements. Our murderer chose his time well, Hastings."

He paused and then added on a deep note of reproach:

"Is it that you have not in any degree the common sense, Hastings? I say to you: 'Make the purchase quelconque' - and you deliberately choose the strawberries! Already they commence to creep through their bag and endanger your good suit."

With some dismay, I perceived that this was indeed the case.

I hastily presented the strawberries to a small boy who seemed highly astonished and faintly suspicious.

Poirot added the lettuce, thus setting the seal on the child's bewilderment.

He continued to drive the moral home.

"At a cheap greengrocer's - not strawberries. A strawberry, unless fresh picked, is bound to exude juice. A banana - some apples - even a cabbage - but strawberries -"

"It was the first thing I thought of," I explained by way of excuse.

"That is unworthy of your imagination," returned Poirot sternly. He paused on the sidewalk.

The house and shop on the right of Mrs. Ascher's was empty. A "To Let" sign appeared in the windows. On the other side was a house with somewhat grimy muslin curtains.

To this house Poirot betook himself and, there being no bell, executed a series of sharp flourishes with the knocker.

The door was opened after some delay by a very dirty child with a nose that needed attending to.

"Good-evening," said Poirot. "Is your mother within?"

"Ay?" said the child.

It stared at us with disfavour and deep suspicion.

"Your mother," said Poirot.

This took some twelve seconds to sink in, then the child turned and, bawling up the stairs, "Mum, you're wanted," retreated to some fastness in the dim interior.

A sharp-faced woman looked over the balusters and began to descend.

"No good you wasting your time -" she began, but Poirot interrupted her.

He took off his hat and bowed magnificently.

"Good-evening, madame. I am on the staff of the Evening Flicker. I want to persuade you to accept a fee of five pounds and let us have an article on your late neighbour, Mrs. Ascher."

The irate words arrested on her lips, the woman came down the stairs smoothing her hair and hitching at her skirt.

"Come inside, please - on the left there. Won't you sit down, sir."

The tiny room was heavily over-crowded with a massive pseudo-Jacobean suite, but we managed to squeeze ourselves in and on to a hard-seated sofa.

"You must excuse me," the woman was saying. "I am sure I'm sorry I spoke so sharp just now, but you'd hardly believe the worry one has to put up with - fellows coming along selling this, that and the other - vacuum cleaners, stockings, lavender bags and such like foolery - and all so plausible and civil spoken. Got your name, too, pat they have. It's Mrs. Fowler this, that and the other."

Seizing adroitly on the name, Poirot said:

"Well, Mrs. Fowler, I hope you're going to do what I ask."

"I don't know, I'm sure." The five pounds hung alluringly before Mrs. Fowler's eyes. "I knew Mrs. Ascher, of course, but as to writing anything."

Hastily Poirot reassured her. No labour on her part was required. He would elicit the facts from her and the interview would be written up. Thus encouraged, Mrs. Fowler plunged willingly into reminiscence, conjecture and hearsay.

Kept to herself, Mrs. Ascher had. Not what you'd call really friendly, but there, she'd had a lot of trouble, poor soul, every one knew that. And by right Franz Ascher ought to have been locked up years ago. Not that Mrs. Ascher had been afraid of him - a real tartar she could be when roused! Give as good as she got any day. But there it was - the pitcher could go to the well once too often. Again and again, she, Mrs. Fowler, had said to her: "One of these days that man will do for you. Mark my words." And he had done, hadn't he? And there had she, Mrs. Fowler, been right next door and never heard a sound.

In a pause Poirot managed to insert a question.

Had Mrs. Ascher ever received any peculiar letters - letters without a proper signature - just something like A.B.C.?

Regretfully, Mrs. Fowler returned a negative answer.

"I know the kind of thing you mean - anonymous letters they call them - mostly full of words you'd blush to say out loud. Well, I don't know, I'm sure, if Franz Ascher ever took to writing those. Mrs. Ascher never let on to me if he did. What's that? A railway guide, an A.B.C.? No, I never saw such a thing about - and I'm sure if Mrs. Ascher had been sent one I'd have heard about it. I declare you could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard about this whole business. It was my girl Edie what came to me. 'Mum,' she says, 'there's ever so many policemen next door.' Gave me quite a turn, it did. 'Well,' I said, when I heard about it, 'it does show that she ought never to have been alone in the house - that niece of hers ought to have been with her. A man in drink can be like a ravening wolf,' I said, 'and in my opinion a wild beast is neither more nor less than what that old devil of a husband of hers is. I've warned her,' I said, 'many times and now my words have come true. He'll do for you,' I said. And he has done for her! You can't rightly estimate what a man will do when he's in drink and this murder's a proof of it."

She wound up with a deep gasp.

"Nobody saw this man Ascher go into the shop, I believe?" said Poirot.

Mrs. Fowler sniffed scornfully.

"Naturally he wasn't going to show himself," she said.

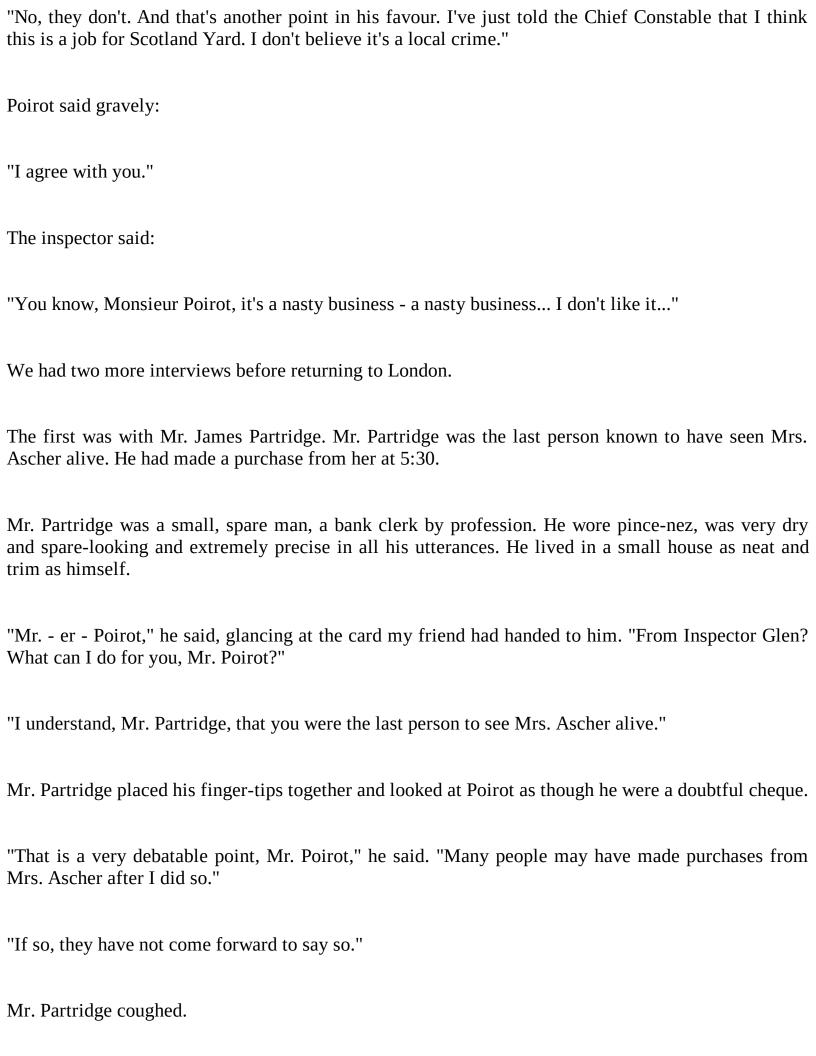
How Mr. Ascher had got there without showing himself she did not deign to explain.

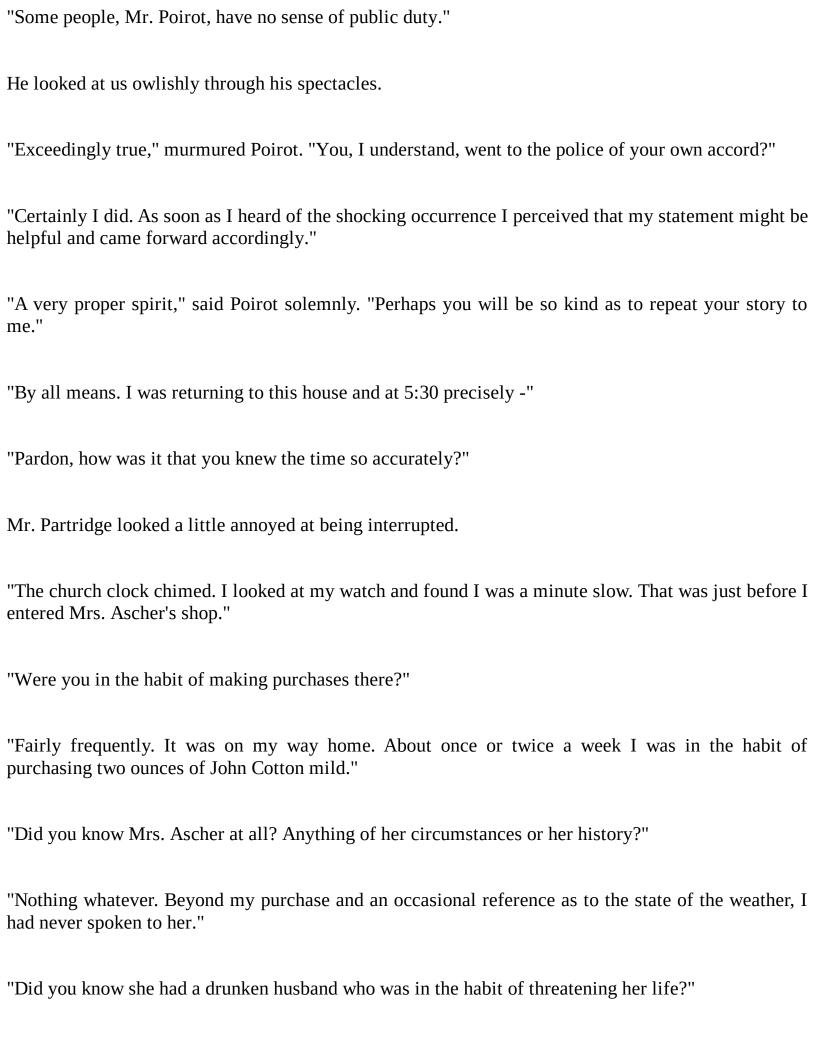
She agreed that there was no back way into the house and that Ascher was quite well known by sight in the district.

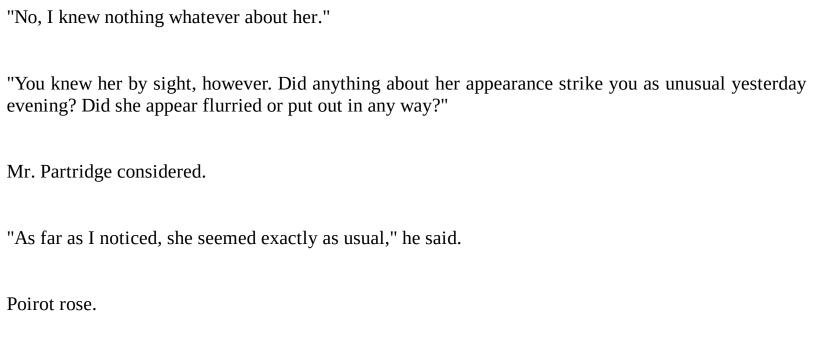
"But he didn't want to swing for it and he kept himself well hid."

Poirot kept the conversational ball rolling some little time longer but when it seemed certain that Mrs. Fowler had told all that she knew not once but many times over, he terminated the interview, first paying out the promised sum.









"Thank you, Mr. Partridge, for answering these questions. Have you, by any chance, an A.B.C. in the house? I want to look up my return train to London."

"On the shelf just behind you," said Mr. Partridge.

On the shelf in question were an A.B.C., a Bradshaw, the Stock Exchange Year Book, Kelly's Directory, a Who's Who and a local directory.

Poirot took down the A.B.C., pretended to look up a train, then thanked Mr. Partridge and took his leave.

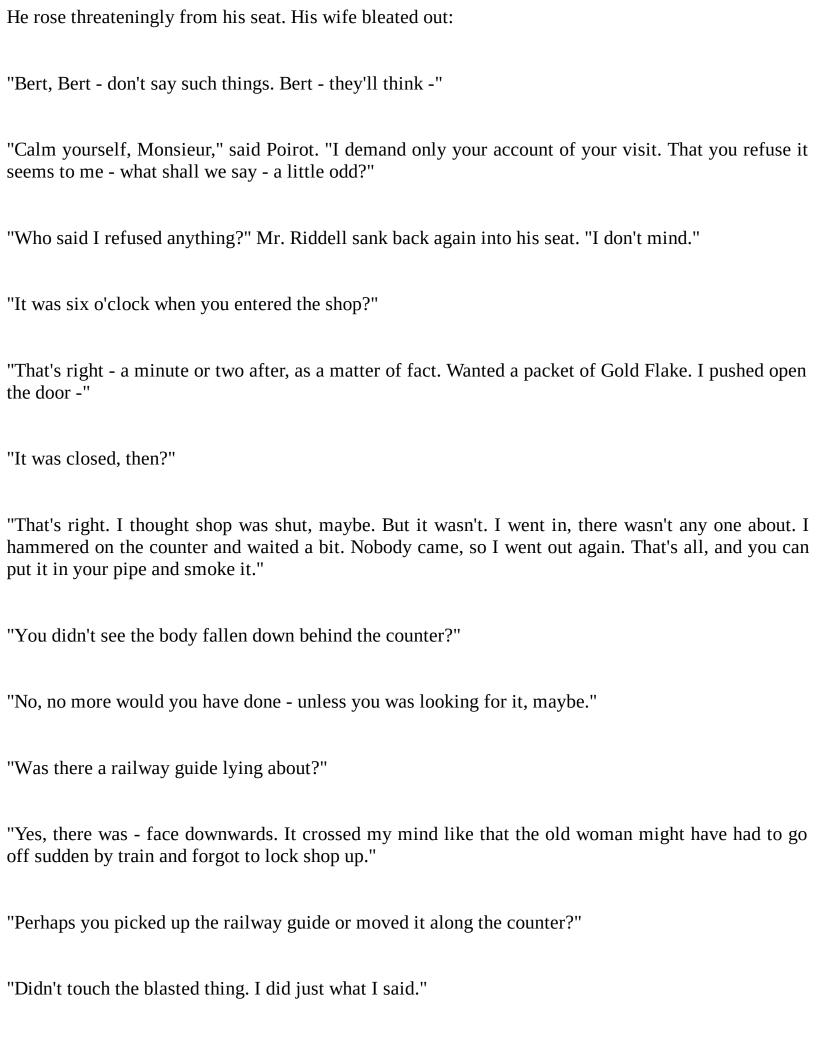
Our next interview was with Mr. Albert Riddell and was of a highly different character. Mr. Albert Riddell was a plate-layer and our conversation took place to the accompaniment of the clattering of plates and dishes by Mr. Riddell's obviously nervous wife, the growling of Mr. Riddell's dog and the undisguised hostility of Mr. Riddell himself.

He was a big clumsy giant of a man with a broad face and small suspicious eyes. He was in the act of eating meatpie, washed down by exceedingly black tea. He peered at us angrily over the rim of his cup.

"Told all I've got to tell once, haven't I?" he growled. "What's it to do with me, anyway? Told it to the blarsted police, I 'ave, and now I've got to spit it all out again to a couple of blarsted foreigners."

Poirot gave a quick amused glance in my direction and then said:







"Mon ami, what will you? You fix upon me a look of dog-like devotion and demand of me a pronouncement like in Sherlock Holmes! Now for the truth - I do not know what the murderer looks like, nor where he lives, nor how to set hands upon him."
"If only he had left some clue," I murmured.
"Yes, the clue - it is always the clue that attracts you. Alas that he did not smoke the cigarette and leave the ash, and then step in it with a shoe that has nails of a curious pattern. No - he is not so obliging. But at least, my friend, you have the railway guide. The A.B.C., that is a clue for you!"
"Do you think he left it by mistake then?"
"Of course not. He left it on purpose. The fingerprints tell us that."
"But there weren't any on it."
"That is what I mean. What was yesterday evening? A warm June night. Does a man stroll about on such an evening in gloves? Such a man would certainly have attracted attention. Therefore since there are no fingerprints on the A.B.C., it must have been carefully wiped. A innocent man would have left prints - a guilty man would not. So the murderer left it there for a purpose - but for all that it is none the less a clue. That A.B.C. was bought by some one - it was carried by some one - there is a possibility there."
"You think we may learn something that way?"
"Frankly, Hastings, I am not particularly hopeful. This man, this unknown X, obviously prides himself on his abilities. He is not likely to blaze a trail that can be followed straight away."
"So that really the A.B.C. isn't helpful at all."
"Not in the sense you mean."
"In any sense?"
Poirot did not answer at once. Then he said slowly:

"The answer to that is yes. We are confronted here by an unknown personage. He is in the dark and seeks to remain in the dark. But in the very nature of things he cannot help throwing light upon himself. In one sense we know nothing about him - in another sense we know already a good deal. I see his figure dimly taking shape - a man who prints clearly and well - who buys good quality paper - who is at great needs to express his personality. I see him as a child possibly ignored and passed over - I see him growing up with an inward sense of inferiority - warring with a sense of injustice... I see that inner urge - to assert himself - to focus attention on himself ever becoming stronger, and events, circumstances - crushing it down - heaping, perhaps, more humiliations on him. And inwardly the match is set to the powder train..."

"That's all pure conjecture," I objected. "It doesn't give you any practical help."

"You prefer the match end, the cigarette ash, the nailed boots! You always have. But at least we can ask ourselves some practical questions. Why the A.B.C.? Why Mrs. Ascher? Why Andover?"

"The woman's past life seems simple enough," I mused. "The interviews with those two men were disappointing. They couldn't tell us anything more than we knew already."

"To tell the truth, I did not expect much in that line. But we could not neglect two possible candidates for the murder."

"Surely you don't think -"

"There is at least a possibility that the murderer lives in or near Andover. That is a possible answer to our question: 'Why Andover?' Well, here were two men known to have been in the shop at the requisite time of day. Either of them might be the murderer. And there is nothing as yet to show that one or other of them is not the murderer."

"That great hulking brute, Riddell, perhaps," I admitted.

"Oh, I am inclined to acquit Riddell off-hand. He was nervous, blustering, obviously uneasy -"

"But surely that just shows -"

"A nature diametrically opposed to that which penned the A.B.C. letter. Conceit and self-confidence are the characteristics that we must look for."

"Some one who throws his weight about."
"Possibly. But some people, under a nervous and self-effacing manner, conceal a great deal of vanity and self-satisfaction."
"You don't think that little Mr. Partridge -?"
"He is more le type. One cannot say more than that. He acts as the writer of the letter would act - goes at once to the police - pushes himself to the fore-enjoys his position."
"Do you really think -?"
"No, Hastings. Personally I believe that the murderer came from outside Andover, but we must neglect no avenue of research. And although I say 'he' all the time, we must not exclude the possibility of a woman being concerned."
"Surely not!"
"The method of attack is that of a man, I agree. But anonymous letters are written by women rather than by men. We must bear that in mind."
I was silent for a few minutes, then I said:
"What do we do next?"
"My energetic Hastings," Poirot said and smiled at me.
"No, but what do we do?"
"Nothing."
"Nothing?" My disappointment rang out clearly.

"Am I the magician? The sorcerer? What would you have me do?"

Turning the matter over in my mind I found it difficult to give answer. Nevertheless I felt convinced that something ought to be done and that we should not allow the grass to grow under our feet. I said:

"There is the A.B.C. - and the notepaper and envelope -"

"Naturally everything is being done in that line. The police have all the means at their disposal for that kind of inquiry. If anything is to be discovered on those lines have no fear but that they will discover it."

With that I was forced to rest content.

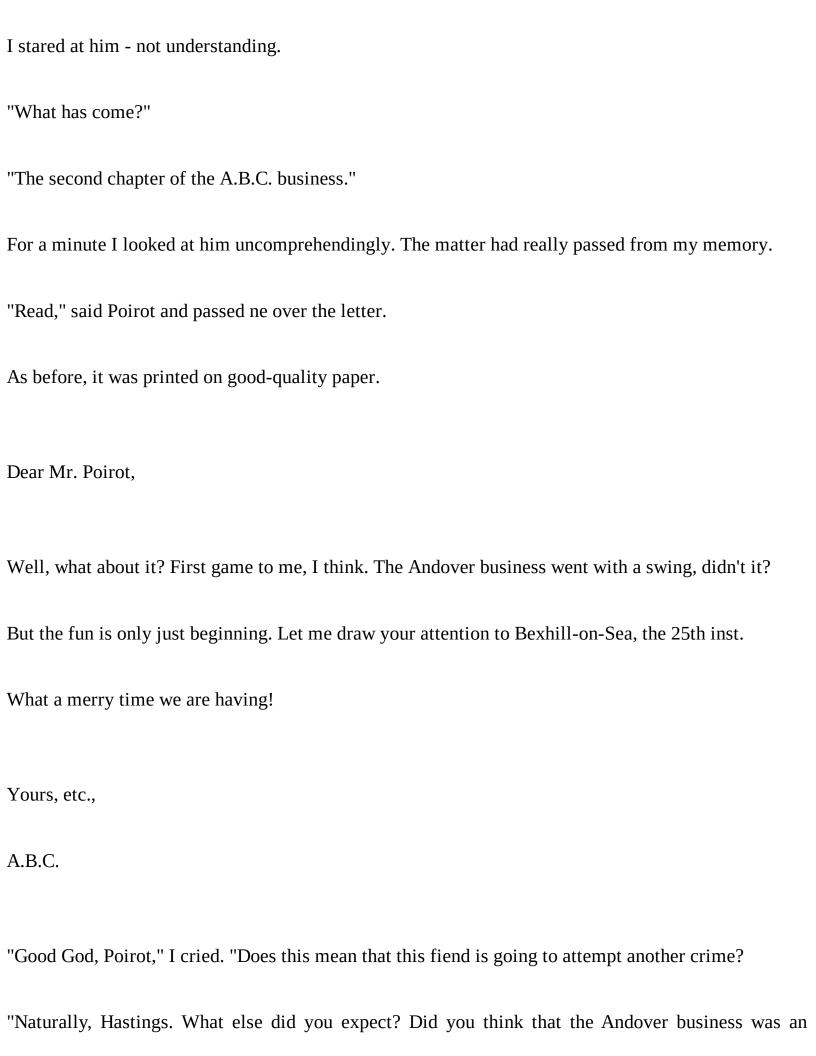
In the days that followed I found Poirot curiously disinclined to discuss the case. When I tried to reopen the subject he waved it aside with an impatient hand.

In my own mind I was afraid that I fathomed his motive. Over the murder of Mrs. Ascher, Poirot had sustained a defeat. A.B.C. had challenged him - and A.B.C. had won. My friend, accustomed to an unbroken line of successes, was sensitive to his failure - so much so that he could not even endure discussion of the subject. It was, perhaps, a sign of pettiness in so great a man, but even the most sober of us is liable to have his head turned by success. In Poirot's case the head-turning process had been going on for years. Small wonder if its effects became noticeable at long last.

Understanding, I respected my friend's weakness and I made no further reference to the case. I read in the paper the account of the inquest. It was very brief, no mention was made of the A.B.C. letter, and a verdict was returned of murder by some person or persons unknown. The crime attracted very little attention in the press. It had no popular or spectacular features. The murder of an old woman in a side street was soon passed over in the press for more thrilling topics.

Truth to tell, the affair was fading from my mind also, partly, I think, because I disliked to think of Poirot as being in any way associated with a failure, when on July 25th it was suddenly revived. I had not seen Poirot for a couple of days as I had been away in Yorkshire for the week-end. I arrived back on Monday afternoon and the letter came by the six o'clock post. I remember the sudden, sharp intake of breath that Poirot gave as he slit open that particular envelope.

"It has come," he said.





The superintendent shook his head gravely.

"It's difficult, sir. There's not the least clue towards whom the next victim may he. Speaking fair and square, what steps can we take?"

"A suggestion," murmured Poirot.

Their faces turned to him.

"I think it possible that the surname of the intended victim will begin with the letter B."

"That would be something," said the superintendent doubtfully.

"An alphabetical complex," said Dr. Thompson thoughtfully.

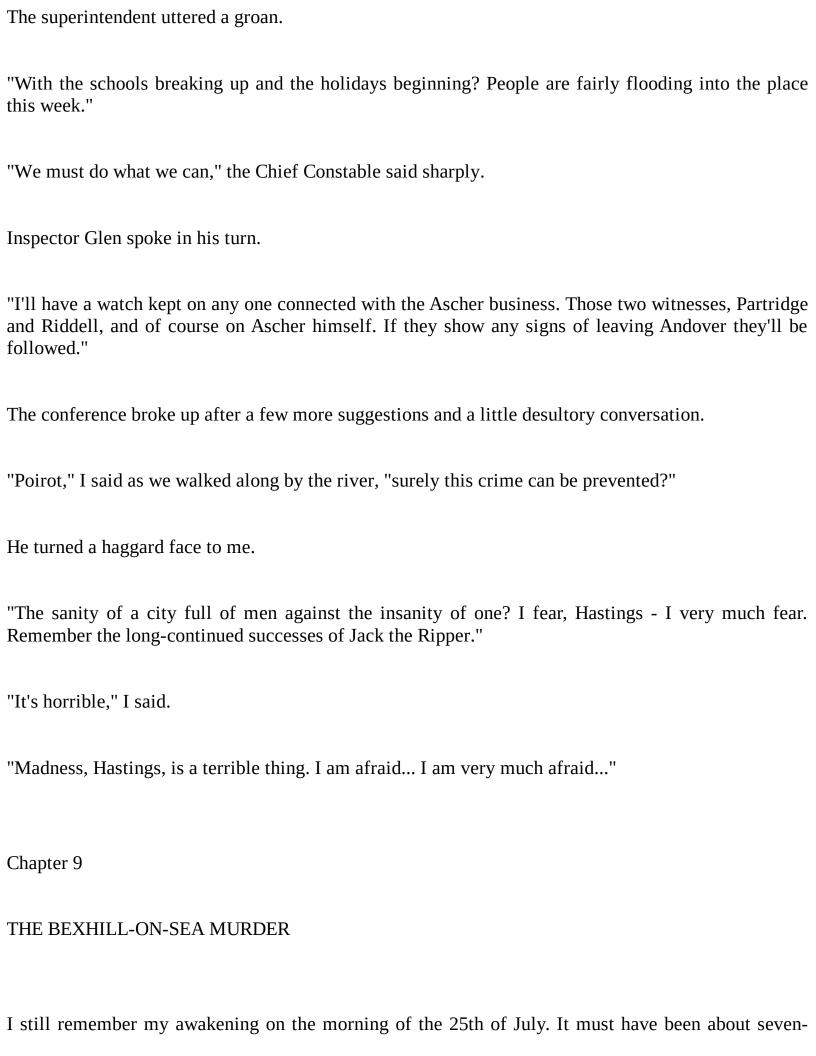
"I suggest it as a possibility - no more. It came into my mind when I saw the name Ascher clearly written over the shop door of the unfortunate woman who was murdered last month. When I got the letter naming Bexhill it occurred to me as a possibility that the victim as well as the place might be selected by an alphabetical system."

"It's possible," said the doctor. "On the other hand, it may be that the name Ascher was a coincidence - that the victim this time, no matter what her name is, will again be an old woman who keeps a shop. We're dealing, remember, with a madman. So far he hasn't given us any clue as to motive."

"Has a madman any motive, sir?" asked the superintendent skeptically.

"Of course he has, man. A deadly logic is one of the special characteristics of acute mania. A man may believe himself divinely appointed to kill clergymen - or doctors - or old women in tobacco shops - and there's always some perfectly coherent reason behind it. We mustn't let the alphabetical business run away with us. Bexhill succeeding to Andover may be a mere coincidence."

"We can at least take certain precautions, Carter, and make a special note of the B's, especially small shopkeepers, and keep a watch on all small tobacconists and newsagents looked after by a single person. I don't think there's anything more we can do than that. Naturally keep tabs on all strangers as far as possible."



thirty.
Poirot was standing by my bedside gently shaking me by the shoulder. One glance at his face brought me from semi-consciousness into full possession of my faculties.
"What is it?" I demanded, sitting up rapidly.
His answer came quite simply, but a wealth of emotion lay behind the three words he uttered.
"It has happened."
"What?" I cried. "You mean - but today is the 25th."
"It took place last night - or rather in the early hours of this morning."
As I sprang from bed and made a rapid toilet, he recounted briefly what he had just learnt over the telephone.
"The body of a young girl has been found on the beach at Bexhill. She has been identified as Elizabeth Barnard, a waitress in one of the cafés, who lived with her parents in a little recently built bungalow. Medical evidence gave the time of death as between 11:30 and 1 A.M."
"They're quite sure that this is the crime?" I asked, as I hastily lathered my face.
"An A.B.C. open at the trains to Bexhill was found actually under the body."
I shivered.
"This is horrible!"
"Faites attention, Hastings. I do not want a second tragedy in my rooms!"
I wiped the blood from my chin rather ruefully.

"What is our plan of campaign?" I asked.

"The car will call for us in a few moments' time. I will bring you a cup of coffee here so that there will be no delay in starting."

Twenty minutes later we were in a fast police car crossing the Thames on our way out of London.

With us was Inspector Crome, who had been present at the conference the other day, and who was officially in charge of the case.

Crome was a very different type of officer from Japp. A much younger man, he was the silent, superior type. Well educated and well read, he was, for my taste, several shades too pleased with himself. He had lately gained kudos over a series of child murders, having patiently tracked down the criminal who was now in Broadmoor.

He was obviously a suitable person to undertake the present case, but I thought that he was just a little too aware of the fact himself. His manner to Poirot was a shade patronizing. He deferred to him as younger man to an older one - in a rather self-conscious, "public-school" way.

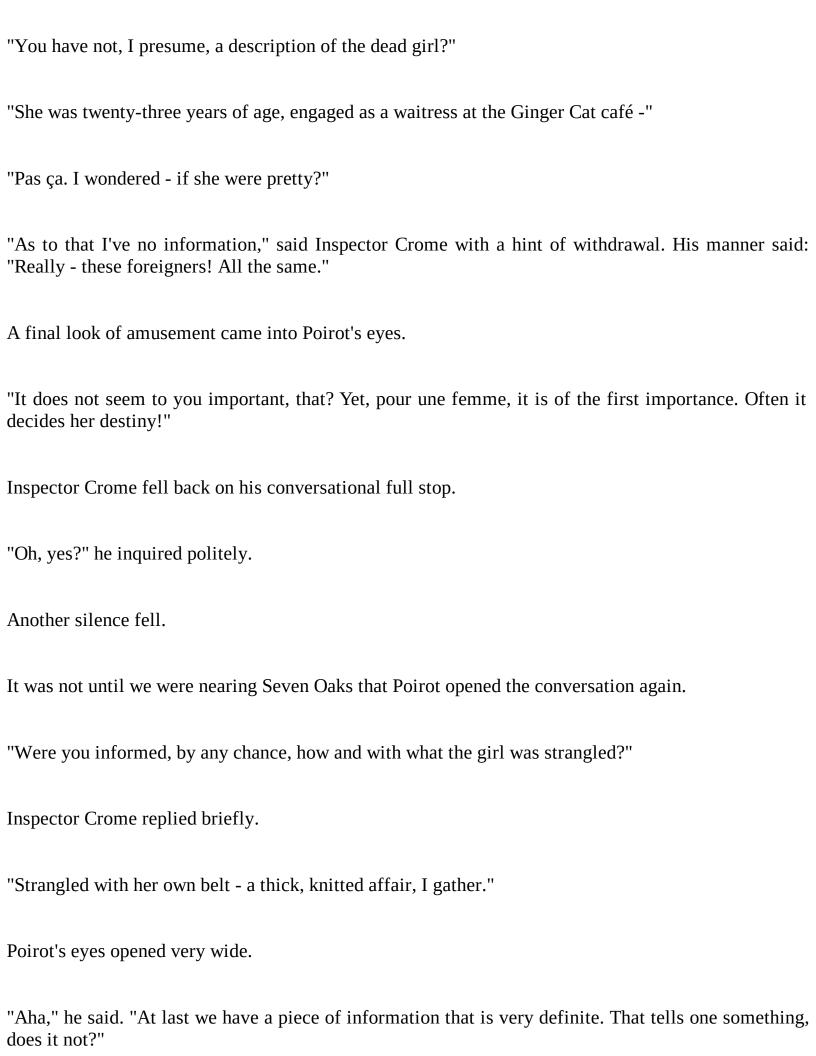
"I've had a good long talk with Dr. Thompson," he said. "He's very interested in the 'chain' or 'series' type of murder. It's the product of a particular distorted type of mentality. As a layman one can't, of course, appreciate the finer points as they present themselves to a medical point of view." He coughed. "As a matter of fact - my last case - I don't know whether you read about it - the Mabel Homer case, the Muswell Hill schoolgirl, you know - that man Capper was extraordinary. Amazingly difficult to pin the crime on to him - it was his third, too! Looked as sane as you or I. But there are various tests - verbal traps, you know - quite modern, of course, there was nothing of that kind in your day. Once you can induce a man to give himself away, you've got him! He knows that you know and his nerve goes. He starts giving himself away right and left."

"Even in my day that happened sometimes," said Poirot.

Inspector Crome looked at him and murmured conversationally: "Oh, yes?"

There was silence between us for some time. As we passed New Cross Station, Crome said:

"If there's anything you want to ask me about the case, pray do so."



- "I haven't seen it yet," said Inspector Crome coldly.
- I felt impatient with the man's caution and lack of imagination.
- "It gives us the hall-mark of the murderer," I said. "The girl's own belt. It shows the particular beastliness of his mind!"
- Poirot shot me a glance I could not fathom. On the face of it it conveyed humorous impatience. I thought that perhaps it was a warning not to be too outspoken in front of the inspector.
- I relapsed into silence.
- At Bexhill we were greeted by Superintendent Carter. He had with him a pleasant-faced, intelligent-looking young inspector called Kelsey. The latter was detailed to work in with Crome over the case.
- "You'll want to make your own inquiries, Crome," said the superintendent. "So I'll just give you the main heads of the matter and then you can get busy right away."
- "Thank you sir," said Crome.
- "We've broken the news to her father and mother," said the superintendent. "Terrible shock to them, of course. I left them to recover a bit before questioning them, so you can start from the beginning there."
- "There are other members of the families?" asked Poirot.
- "There's a sister a typist in London. She's been communicated with. And there's a young man in fact, she was supposed to be out with him last night, I gather."
- "Any help from the A.B.C. guide?" asked Crome.
- "It's there," the superintendent nodded towards the table. "No fingerprints. Open at the page for Bexhill. A new copy, I should say doesn't seem to have been opened much. Not bought anywhere round here. I' we tried all the likely stationers!"

"Who discovered the body, sir?"

"One of these fresh-air, early-morning old colonels. Colonel Jerome. He was out with his dog about 6 A.M. Went along the front in the direction of Cooden, and down on to the beach. Dog went off and sniffed at something. Colonel called it. Dog didn't come. Colonel had a look and thought something queer was up. Went over and looked. Behaved very properly. Didn't touch her at all and rang us up immediately."

"And the time of death was round about midnight last night?"

"Between midnight and 1 A.M. - that's pretty certain. Our homicidal joker is a man of his word. If he says the 25th, it is the 25th - though it may have been only by a few minutes."

Crome nodded.

"Yes, that's his mentality all right. There's nothing else? Nobody saw anything helpful?"

"Not as far as we know. But it's early yet. Every one who saw a girl in white walking with a man last night will be along to tell us about it soon, and as I imagine there were about four or five hundred girls in white walking with young men last night, it ought to be a nice business."

"Well, sir, I'd better get down to it," said Crome. "There's the café and there's the girl's home. I'd better go to both of them. Kelsey can come with me."

"And Mr. Poirot?" asked the superintendent.

"I will accompany you," said Poirot to Crome with a little bow.

Crome, I thought, looked slightly annoyed. Kelsey, who had not seen Poirot before, grinned broadly.

It was an unfortunate circumstance that the first time people saw my friend they were always disposed to consider him as a joke of the first water.

"What about this belt she was strangled with?" asked Crome. "Poirot is inclined to think it's a valuable



"That is my name. This is a most distressing business. Most distressing. How it will affect our business I really cannot think!"

Miss Merrion was a very thin woman of forty with wispy orange hair (indeed she was astonishingly like a ginger cat herself). She played nervously with various fichus and frills that were part of her official costume.

"You'll have a boom," said Inspector Kelsey encouragingly. "You'll see! You won't be able to serve teas fast enough!"

Miss Merrion, in her turn, gave him an "Oh, these foreigners" look.
"She was a nice, clean-looking girl," she said distantly.
"What time did she go off duty last night?" asked Crome.
"Eight o'clock. We close at eight. We do not serve dinners. There is no demand for them. Scrambled eggs and tea (Poirot shuddered) people come in for up to seven o'clock and sometimes after, but our rush is over by 6:30."
"Did she mention to you how she proposed to spend her evening?"
"Certainly not," said Miss Merrion emphatically. "We were not on those terms."
"No one came in and called for her? Anything like that?"
"No."
"Did she seem quite her ordinary self? Not excited or depressed?"
"Really I could not say," said Miss Merrion aloofly.
"How many waitresses do you employ?"
"Two normally, and an extra two after the 20th of July until the end of August."
"But Elizabeth Barnard was not one of the extras?"
"Miss Barnard was one of the regulars."
"What about the other one?"



girls all the morning I just can't believe it! 'You know, girls,' I said, 'it just doesn't seem real.' Betty! I mean, Betty Barnard, who's been here all along, murdered! 'I just can't believe it,' I said. Five or six times I've pinched myself just to see if I wouldn't wake up. Betty murdered... It's - well, you know what I mean - it doesn't seem real."

"You knew the dead girl well?" asked Crome.

"Well, she's worked here longer than I have. I only came this March. She was here last year. She was rather quiet, if you know what I mean. She wasn't one to joke or laugh a lot. I don't mean that she was exactly quiet - she'd plenty of fun in her and all that - but she didn't - well, she was quiet and she wasn't quiet, if you know what I mean."

I will say for Inspector Crome that he was exceedingly patient. As a witness the buxom Miss Higley was persistently maddening. Every statement she made was repeated and qualified half a dozen times. The net result was meagre in the extreme.

She had not been on terms of intimacy with the dead girl. Elizabeth Barnard, it could be guessed, had considered herself a cut above Miss Higley. She had been friendly in working hours, but the gifts had not seen much of her out of them. Elizabeth Barnard had had a "friend" - worked in the estate agents near the station. Court & Brunskill. No, he wasn't Mr. Court nor Mr. Brunskill. He was a clerk there. She didn't know his name. But she knew him by sight well. Good-looking - oh, very good-looking, and always so nicely dressed. Clearly, there was a tinge of jealousy in Miss Higley's voice.

In the end it boiled down to this. Elizabeth Barnard had not confided in any one in the café as to her plans for the evening, but in Miss Higley's opinion she had been going to meet her "friend." She had had on a new white dress, "ever so sweet with one of the new necks."

We had a word with each of the other two girls but with no further results. Betty Barnard had not said anything as to her plans and no one had noticed her in Bexhill during the course of the evening.

Chapter 10

THE BARNARDS

Elizabeth Barnard's parents lived in a minute bungalow, one of fifty or so recently run up by a

speculative builder on the confines of the town. The name of it was Llandudno.

Mr. Barnard, a stout, bewildered-looking man of fifty-five or so, had noticed our approach and was standing waiting in the doorway.

"Come in, gentlemen," he said.

Inspector Kelsey took the initiative.

"This is Inspector Crome of Scotland Yard, sir," he said. "He's come down to help us over this business."

"Scotland Yard?" said Mr. Barnard hopefully. "That's good. This murdering villain's got to be laid by the heels. My poor little girl -"

His face was distorted by a spasm of grief.

"And this is Mr. Hercule Poirot, also from London, and er -"

"Captain Hastings," said Poirot.

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen," said Mr. Barnard mechanically. "Come into the snuggery. I don't know that my poor wife's up to seeing you. All broken up, she is."

However, by the time that we were ensconced in the living-room of the bungalow, Mrs. Barnard had made her appearance. She had evidently been crying bitterly, her eyes were reddened and she walked with the uncertain gait of a person who had had a great shock.

"Why, Mother, that's fine," said Mr. Barnard. "You're sure you're all right - eh?"

He patted her shoulder and draw her down into a chain.

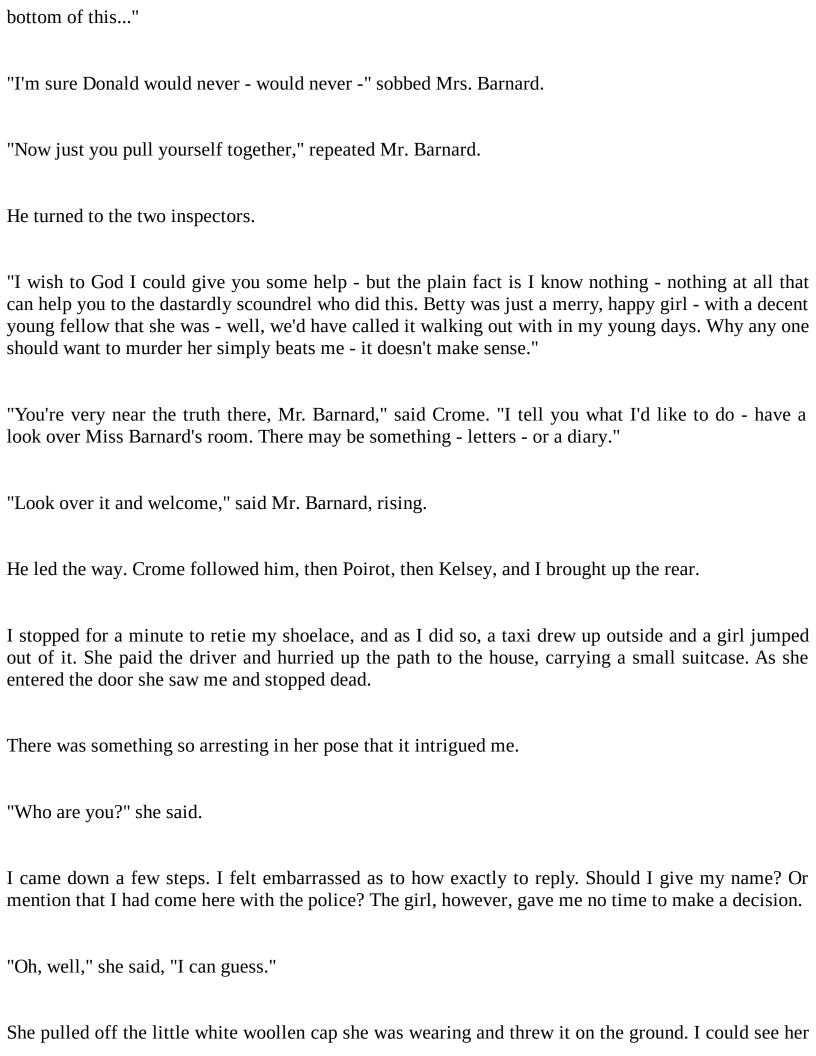
"The superintendent was very kind," said Mr. Barnard. "After he'd broken the news to us, he said he'd leave any questions till later when we'd got over the first shock."

"It is too cruel. Oh, it is too cruel," cried Mrs. Barnard tearfully. "The cruelest thing that ever was, it is."
Her voice had a faintly sing-song intonation that I thought for a moment was foreign till I remembered the name on the gate and realized that the "effer wass" of her speech was in reality proof of her Welsh origin.
"It's very painful, madam, I know," said Inspector Crome. "And we've every sympathy for you, but we want to know all the facts we can so as to get to work as quick as possible."
"That's sense, that is," said Mr. Barnard, nodding approval.
"Your daughter was twenty-three, I understand. She lived here with you and worked at the Ginger Cat café, is that right?"
"That's it."
"This is a new place, isn't it? Where did you live before?"
"I was in the ironmongery business in Kennington. Retired two years ago. Always meant to live near the sea."
"You have two daughters?"
"Yes. My elder daughter works in an office in London in the City."
"Weren't you alarmed when your daughter didn't come home last night?"
"We didn't know she hadn't," said Mrs. Barnard tearfully. "Dad and I always go to bed early. Nine o'clock's our time. We never knew Betty hadn't come home till the police officer came and said - and said -"

She broke down.

"Was your daughter in the habit of - er - returning home late?"
"You know what girls are nowadays, inspector," said Barnard. "Independent, that's what they are. These summer evenings they're not going to rush home. All the same, Betty was usually in by eleven."
"How did she get in? Was the door open?"
"Left the key under the mat - that's what we always did."
"There is some rumour, I believe, that your daughter was engaged to be married?"
"They don't put it as formally as that nowadays," said Mr. Barnard.
"Donald Fraser his name is, and I liked him. I liked him very much," said Mrs. Barnard. "Poor fellow, it'll be terrible for him - this news. Does he know yet, I wonder?"
"He works in Court & Brunskill's, I understand?"
"Yes, they're the estate agents."
"Was he in the habit of meeting your daughter most evenings after her work?"
"Not every evening. Once or twice a week would be nearer."
"Do you know if she was going to meet him yesterday?"
"She didn't say. Betty never said much about what she was doing or where she was going. But she was a good girl, Betty was. Oh, I can't believe -"
Mrs. Barnard started sobbing again.

"Pull yourself together, old lady. Try to hold up, Mother," urged her husband. "We' we got to get to the



better now as she turned a little so that the light fell on her. My first impression was of the Dutch dolls that my sisters used to play with in my childhood. Her hair was black and cut in a straight bob and a bang across the forehead. Her cheekbones were high and her whole figure had a queer modern angularity that was not, somehow, unattractive. She was not goodlooking - plain rather - but there was an intensity about her, a forcefulness that made her a person quite impossible to overlook. "You are Miss Barnard?" I asked. "I am Megan Barnard. You belong to the police, I suppose." "Well," I said, "not exactly -" She interrupted me. "I don't think I've got anything to say to you. My sister was a nice bright girl with no men friends. Good-morning." She gave a short laugh as she spoke and regarded me challengingly. "That's the correct phrase, I believe?" she said. "I'm not a reporter, if that's what you're getting at." "Well, what are you?" She looked round. "Where's mum and dad?" "Your father is showing the police your sister's bedroom. Your mother's in there. She's very upset." The girl seemed to make a decision.

"Come in here," she said.

She pulled open a door and passed through. I followed her and found myself in a small, neat kitchen.

I was about to shut the door behind me - but found an unexpected resistance. The next moment Poirot had slipped quietly into the room and shut the door behind him.

"Mademoiselle Barnard?" he said with a quick bow.

"This is M. Hercule Poirot," I said.

Megan Barnard gave him a quick, appraising glance.

"I've heard of you," she said. "You're the fashionable private sleuth, aren't you?"

"Not a pretty description - but it suffices," said Poirot.

The girl sat down on the edge of the kitchen table. She felt in her bag for a cigarette. She placed it between her lips, lighted it, and then said in between two puffs of smoke:

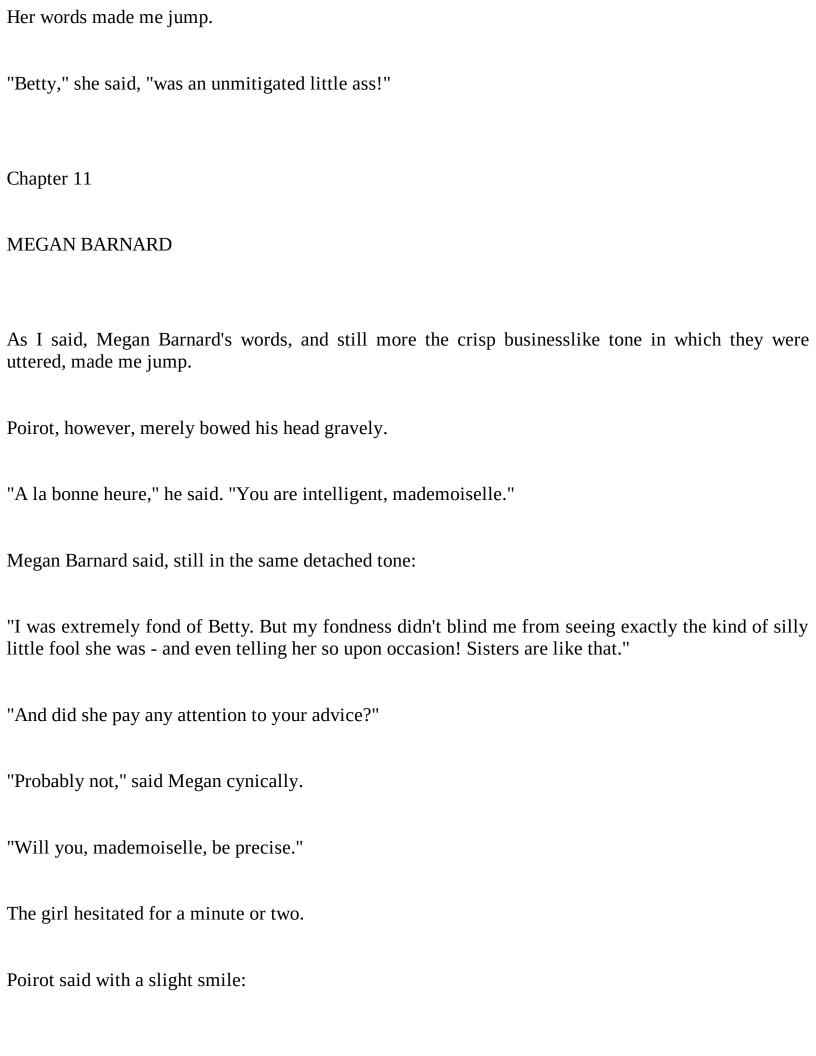
"Somehow, I don't see what M. Hercule Poirot is doing in our humble little crime."

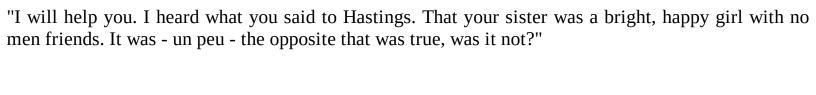
"Mademoiselle," said Poirot, "what you do not see and what I do not see would probably fill a volume. But all that is of no practical importance. What is of practical importance is something that will not be easy to find."

"What's that?"

"Death, mademoiselle, unfortunately creates a prejudice. A prejudice in favour of the deceased. I heard what you said just now to my friend Hastings. 'A nice bright girl with no men friends.' You said that in mockery of the newspapers, And it is very true - when a young girl is dead, that is the kind of thing that is said. She was bright. She was happy. She was sweet-tempered. She had not a care in the world. She had no undesirable acquaintances. There is a great charity always to the dead. Do you know what I should like this minute? I should like to find some one who knew Elizabeth Barnard and who does not know she is dead. Then, perhaps, I should hear what is useful to me - the truth."

Megan Barnard looked at him for a few minutes in silence whilst she smoked. Then, at last, she spoke.





Megan said slowly:

"There wasn't any harm in Betty. I want you to understand that. She'd always go straight. She's not the week-ending kind. Nothing of that sort. But she liked being taken out and dancing and - oh, cheap flattery and compliments and all that sort of thing."

"And she was pretty - yes?"

This question, the third time I had heard it, met this time with a practical response.

Megan slipped off the table, went to her suitcase, snapped it open and extracted something which she handed to Poirot.

In a leather frame was a head and shoulders of a fair-haired, smiling girl. Her hair had evidently recently been permed; it stood out from her head in a mass of rather frizzy curls. The smile was arch and artificial. It was certainly not a face that you could call beautiful, but it had an obvious and cheap prettiness.

Poirot handed it back, saying:

"You and she do not resemble each other, mademoiselle."

"Oh, I'm the plain one of the family. I've always known that." She seemed to brush aside the fact as unimportant.

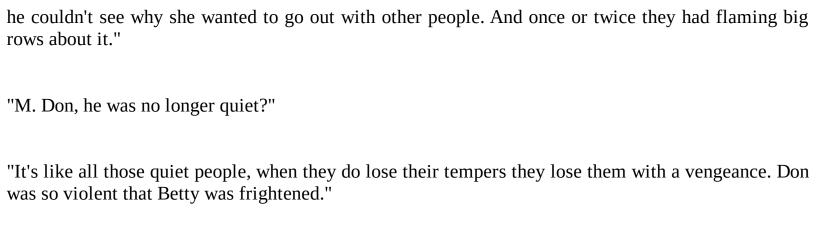
"In what way exactly do you consider your sister was behaving foolishly? Do you mean perhaps, in relation to Mr. Donald Fraser?"

"That's it, exactly. Don's a very quiet sort of person - but he - well, naturally he'd resent certain things - and then -"

"And then what, mademoiselle?"

His eyes were on her very steadily.
It may have been my fancy but it seemed to me that she hesitated a second before answering.
"I afraid that he might - chuck her altogether. And that would have been a pity. He's a very steady and hard-working man and would have made her a good husband."
Poirot continued to gaze at her. She did not flush under his glance but returned it with one of her own equally steady and with something else in it - something that reminded me of her first defiant, disdainful manner.
"So it is like that," he said at last. "We do not speak the truth any longer."
She shrugged her shoulders and turned towards the door.
"Well," she said, "I've done what I could to help you."
Poirot's voice arrested her.
"Wait, mademoiselle. I have something to tell you. Come back."
Rather unwillingly, I thought, she obeyed.
Somewhat to my surprise Poirot plunged into the whole story of the letters, the murder at Andover, and the railway guide found by the victims.
He had no reason to complain of any lack of interest on her part. Her lips parted, her eyes gleaming, she hung on his words.
"Is this all true, M. Poirot?"
"Yes, it is true."





"When was this?

"There was one row nearly a year ago and another - a worse one - just over a month ago. I was home for the weekend - and I got them to patch it up again, and it was then that I tried to knock a little sense into Betty - told her she was a little fool. All she would say was that there hadn't been any harm in it. Well, that was true enough, but all the same she was riding for a fall. You see, after the row a year ago, she'd got into the habit of telling a few useful lies on the principle that what the mind doesn't know the heart doesn't grieve over. This last flare-up came because she'd told Don she was going to Hastings to see a girl pal and he found out that she'd really been over to Eastbourne with some man. He was a married man, as it happened, and he'd been a bit secretive about the business anyway - and so that made it worse. They had an awful scene - Betty saying that she wasn't married to him yet and she had a right to go about with whom she pleased and Don all white and shaking and saying that one day - one day -"

"Yes?"

"He'd commit murder -" said Megan in a lowered voice.

She stopped and stared at Poirot.

He nodded his head gravely several times.

"And so, naturally, you were afraid..."

"I didn't think he'd actually done it - not for a minute! But I was afraid it might be brought up - the quarrel and all that he'd said - several people knew about it."

Again Poirot nodded his head gravely.

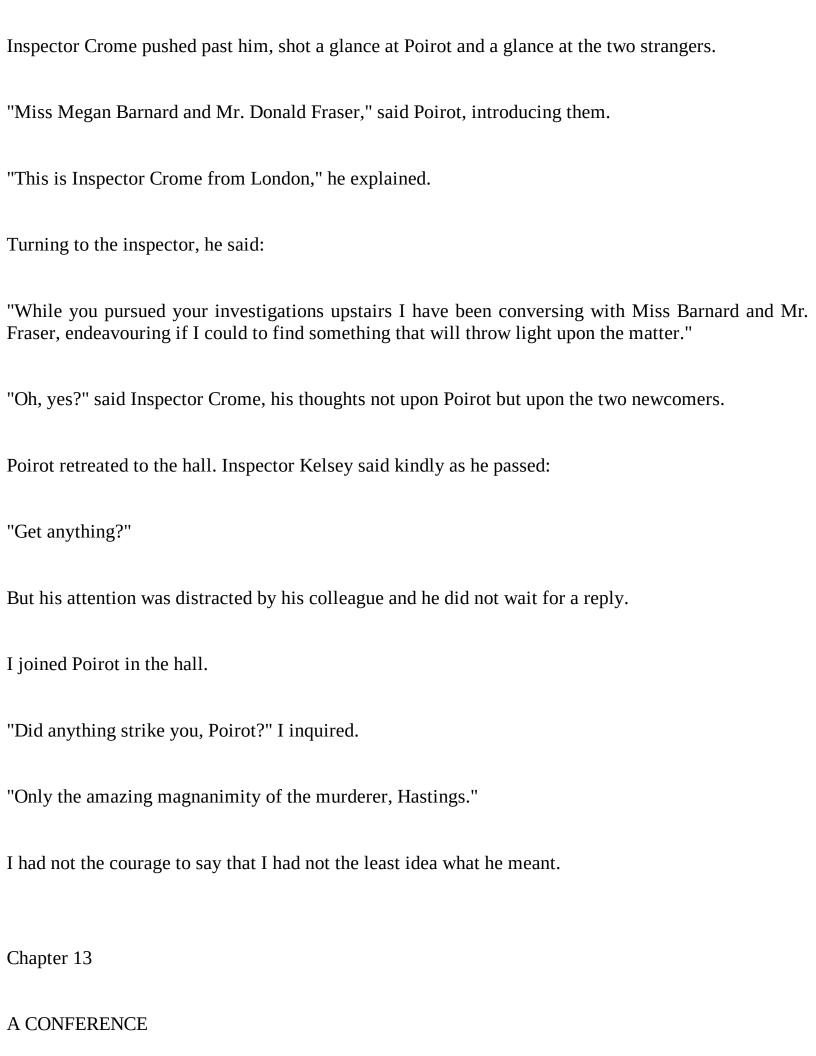






"Did you believe her?"
"I -" Suddenly the automaton came to life. "What the devil do you mean?"
His face then, menacing, convulsed by sudden passion, made me understand that a girl might well be afraid of rousing his anger.
Poirot said crisply:
"Betty Barnard was killed by a homicidal murderer. Only by speaking the exact truth can you help us to get on his track."
His glance for a minute turned to Megan.
"That's right, Don," she said. "It isn't a time for considering one's own feelings or any one else's. You've got to come clean."
Donald Fraser looked suspiciously at Poirot.
"Who are you? You don't belong to the police?"
"I am better than the police," said Poirot. He said it without conscious arrogance. It was, to him, a simple statement of fact.
"Tell him," said Megan.
Donald Fraser capitulated.
"I - wasn't sure," he said. "I believed her when she said it. Never thought of doing anything else. Afterwards - perhaps it was something in her manner. I - I, well, I began to wonder."
"Yes?" said Poirot.

He had sat down opposite Donald Fraser. His eyes, fixed on the other man's, seemed to be exercising a mesmeric spell.
"I was ashamed of myself for being so suspicious. But - but I was suspicious I thought of going down to the front and watching her when she left the café. I actually went there. Then I felt I couldn't do that. Betty would see me and she'd be angry. She'd realize at once that I was watching her."
"What did you do?"
"I went over to St. Leonards. Got over there by eight o'clock. Then I watched the buses - to see if she were in them. But there was no sign of her"
"And then?"
"I - I lost my head rather. I was convinced she was with some man. I thought it probable he had taken her in his car to Hastings. I went on there - looked in hotels and restaurants, hung round cinemas went on the pier. All damn foolishness. Even if she was there I was unlikely to find her, and anyway, there were heaps of other places he might have taken her to instead of Hastings."
He stopped. Precise as his tone had remained, I caught an undertone of that blind, bewildering misery and anger that had possessed him at the time he described.
"In the end I gave it up - came back."
"At what time?"
"I don't know. I walked. It must have been midnight or after when I got home -"
"Then - "
The kitchen door opened.
"Oh, there you are," said Inspector Kelsey.



Conferences!

Much of my memories of the A.B.C. case seem to be of conferences.

Conferences at Scotland Yard. At Poirot's rooms. Official conferences. Unofficial conferences.

This particular conference was to decide whether or not the facts relative to the anonymous letters should or should not be made public in the press.

The Bexhill murder had attracted much more attention than the Andover one.

It had, of course, far more elements of popularity. The victim was a young and good-looking girl to begin with. Also, it had taken place at a popular seaside resort.

All the details of the crime were reported fully and rehashed daily in thin disguises. The A.B.C. railway guide came in for its share of attention. The favourite theory was that it had been bought locally by the murderer and that it was a valuable clue to his identity. It also seemed to show that he had come to the place by train and was intending to leave for London.

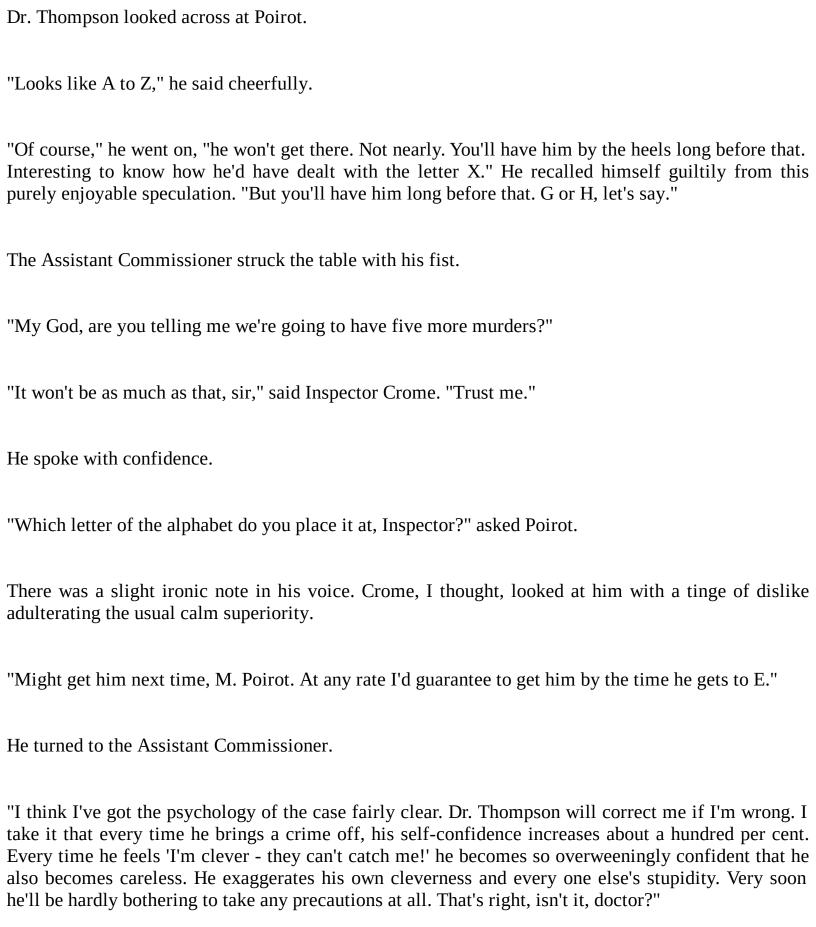
The railway guide had not figured at all in the meagre accounts of the Andover murder so there seemed at present little likelihood of the two crimes being connected in the public eye.

"We've got to decide upon a policy," said the Assistant Commissioner. "The thing is - which way will give us the best results? Shall we give the public the facts - enlist their co-operation - after all, it'll be the co-operation of several million people, looking out for a madman -"

"He won't look like a madman," interjected Dr. Thompson.

"- looking out for sales of A.B.C.'s - and so on. Against that I suppose there's the advantage of working in the dark - not letting our man know what we're up to, but then there's the fact that he knows very well that we know. He's drawn attention to himself deliberately by his letters. Eh, Crome, what's your opinion?"

"I look at it this way, sir. If you make it public, you're playing A.B.C.'s game. That's what he wants - publicity - notoriety. That's what he's out after. I'm right, aren't I, doctor? He wants to make a splash."
Thompson nodded.
The Assistant Commissioner said thoughtfully:
"So you're for baulking him. Refusing him the publicity he's hankering after. What about you, M. Poirot?"
Poirot did not speak for a minute. When he did it was with an air of choosing his words carefully.
"It is difficult for me, Sir Lionel," he said. "I am, as you might say, an interested party. The challenge was sent to me. If I say, 'Suppress that fact - do not make it public,' may it not be thought that it is my vanity that speaks? That I am afraid for my reputation? It is difficult! To speak out - to tell all - that has its advantages. It is, at least, a warning On the other hand, I am as convinced as Inspector Crome that it is what the murderer wants us to do."
"H'm!" said the Assistant Commissioner, rubbing his chin. He looked across at Dr. Thompson. "Suppose we refuse our lunatic the satisfaction of the publicity he craves. What's he likely to do?"
"Commit another crime," said the doctor promptly. "Force your hand."
"And if we splash the thing about in headlines. Then what's his reaction?"
"Same answer. One way you feed his megalomania, the other you baulk it. The result's the same. Another crime."
"What do you say, M. Poirot?"
"I agree with Dr. Thompson."
"A cleft stick - eh? How many crimes do you think this - lunatic has in mind?"



"That's usually the case. In non-medical terms it couldn't have been put better. You know something

Thompson nodded.

about such things, M. Poirot. Don't you agree?"
I don't think that Crome liked Thompson's appeal to Poirot. He considered that he and he only was the expert on this subject.
"It is as Inspector Crome says," agreed Poirot.
"Paranoia," murmured the doctor.
Poirot turned to Crome.
"Are there any material facts of interest in the Bexhill case?"
"Nothing very definite. A waiter at the Splendide at Eastbourne recognizes the dead girl's photograph as that of a young woman who dined there in company with a middle-aged man in spectacles. It's also been recognized at a roadhouse place called the Scarlet Runner, halfway between Bexhill and London. There they say she was with a man who looked like a naval officer. They can't both be right, but either of them's probable. Of course, there's a host of other identifications, but most of them not good for much. We haven't been able to trace the A.B.C."
"Well, you seem to be doing all that can be done, Crome," said the Assistant Commissioner. "What do you say, M. Poirot? Does any line of inquiry suggest itself to you?"
Poirot said slowly:
"It seems to me that there is one very important clue - the discovery of the motive."
"Isn't that pretty obvious? An alphabetical complex. Isn't that what you called it, doctor?"
"Ça, oui," said Poirot. "There is an alphabetical complex. A madman in particular has always a very strong reason for the crimes he commits."
"Come, come, M. Poirot," said Crome. "Look at Stoneman in 1929. He ended by trying to do away with any one who annoyed him in the slightest degree."

Poirot turned to him.

"Quite so. But if you are a sufficiently great and important person, it is necessary that you should be spared small annoyances. If a fly settles on your forehead again and again, maddening you by its tickling - what do you do? You endeavour to kill that fly. You have no qualms about it. You are important - the fly is not. You kill the fly and the annoyance ceases. Your action appears to you sane and justifiable. Another reason for killing a fly is if you have a strong passion for hygiene. The fly is a potential source of danger to the community - the fly must go. So works the mind of the mentally deranged criminal. But consider now this case - if the victims are alphabetically selected, then they are not being removed because they are a source of annoyance to him personally. It would be too much of a coincidence to combine the two."

"That's a point," said Dr. Thompson. "I remember a case where a woman's husband was condemned to death. She started killing the members of the jury one by one. Quite a time before the crimes were connected up. They seemed entirely haphazard. But as M. Poirot says, there isn't such a thing as a murderer who commits crimes at random. Either he removes people who stand (however insignificantly) in his path, or else he kills by conviction. He removes clergymen, or policemen, or prostitutes because he firmly believes that they should be removed. That doesn't apply here either as far as I can see. Mrs. Ascher and Betty Barnard cannot be linked as members of the same class. Of course, it's possible that there is a sex complex. Both victims have been women. We can tell better, of course, after the next crime -"

"For God's sake, Thompson, don't speak so glibly of the next crime," said Sir Lionel irritably. "We're going to do all we can to prevent another crime."

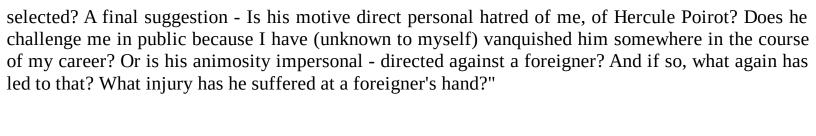
Dr. Thompson held his peace and blew his nose with some violence.

"Have it your own way," the noise seemed to say. "If you won't face facts -"

The Assistant Commissioner turned to Poirot.

"I see what you're driving at, but I'm not quite clear yet."

"I ask myself," said Poirot, "what passes in itself exactly in the mind of the murderer? He kills, it would seem from his letters, pour le sport - to amuse himself. Can that really be true? And even if it is true, on what principle does he select his victims apart from the merely alphabetical one? If he kills merely to amuse himself he would not advertise the fact, since, otherwise, he could kill with impunity. But no, he seeks, as we all agree, to make the splash in the public eye - to assert his personality. In what way has his personality been suppressed that one can connect with the two victims he has so far



"All very suggestive questions," said Dr. Thompson.

Inspector Crome cleared his throat.

"Oh, yes? A little unanswerable at present, perhaps."

"Nevertheless, my friend," said Poirot, looking straight at him, "it is there in those questions that the solution lies. If we knew the exact reason - fantastic, perhaps, to us - but logical to him - of why our madman commits these crimes, we should know, perhaps, who the next victim is likely to be."

Crome shook his head.

"He selects them haphazard - that's my opinion."

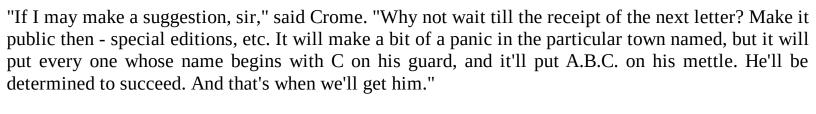
"The magnanimous murderer," said Poirot.

"What's that you say?"

"I said - the magnanimous murderer! Franz Ascher would have been arrested for the murder of his wife - Donald Fraser might have been arrested for the murder of Betty Barnard - if it had not been for the warning letters of A.B.C. Is he, then, so soft-hearted that he cannot bear others to suffer for something they did not do?"

"I've known stranger things happen," said Dr. Thompson. "I've known men who've killed half a dozen victims all broken up because one of their victims didn't die instantaneously and suffered pain. All the same, I don't think that is our fellow's reason. He wants the credit of these crimes for his own honour and glory. That's the explanation that fits best."

"We've come to no decision about the publicity business," said the Assistant Commissioner.



How little we knew what the future held.

Chapter 14

THE THIRD LETTER

I well remember the arrival of A.B.C.'s third letter.

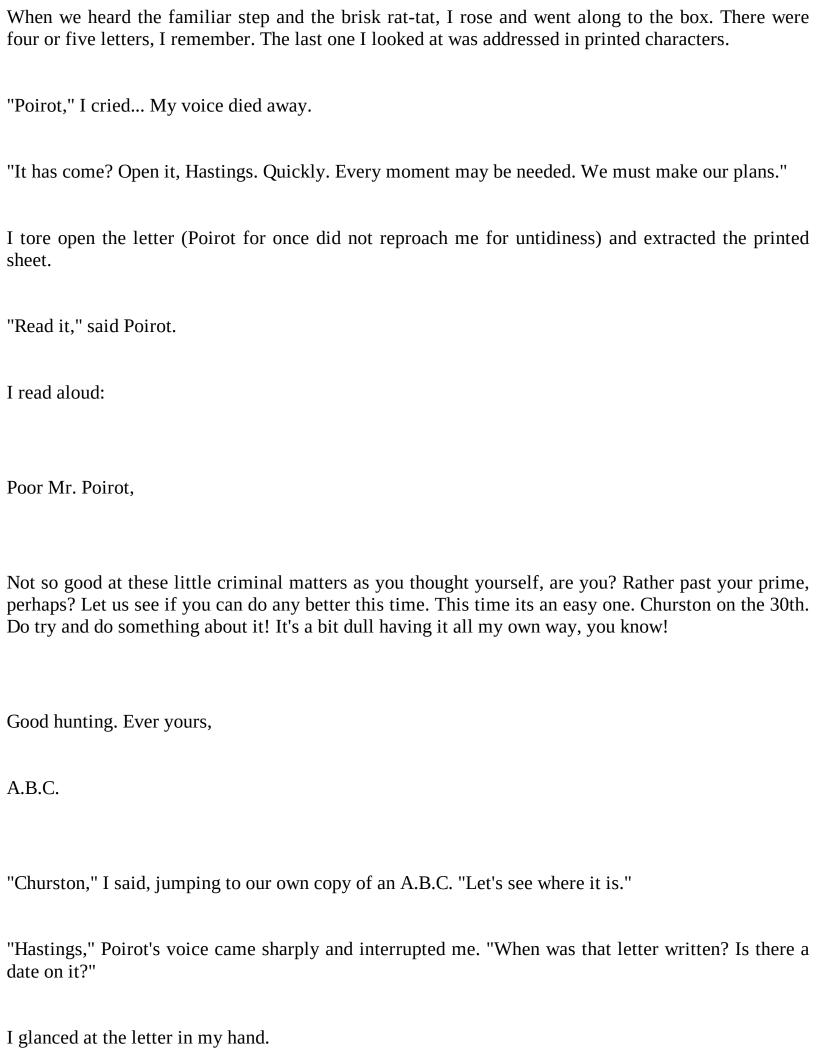
I may say that all precautions had been taken so that when A.B.C. resumed his campaign there should be no unnecessary delays. A young sergeant from Scotland Yard was attached to the house and if Poirot and I were out it was his duty to open anything that came so as to be able to communicate with headquarters without loss of time.

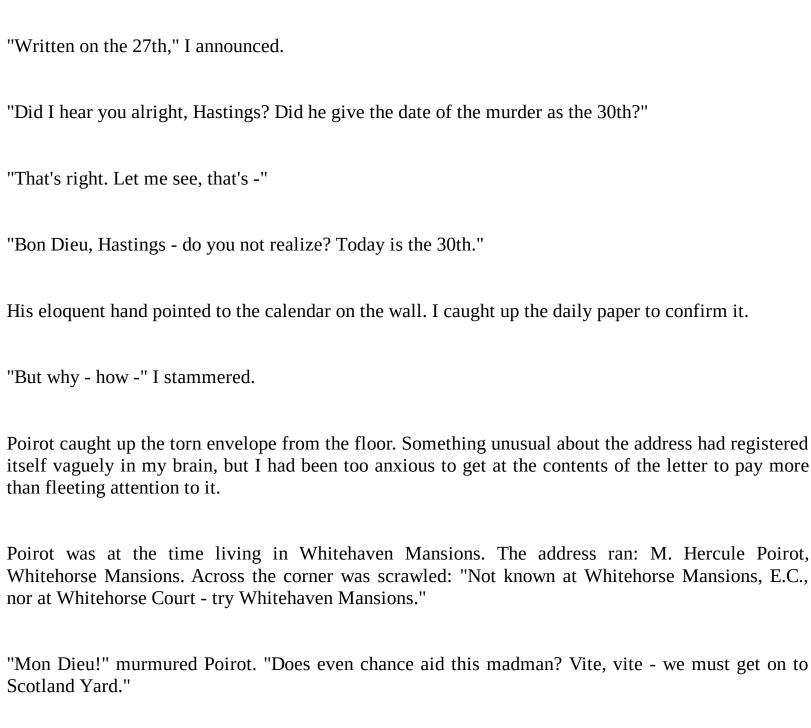
As the days succeeded each other we had all grown more and more on edge. Inspector Crome's aloof and superior manner grew more and more aloof and superior as one by one his more hopeful clues petered out. The vague descriptions of men said to have been seen with Betty Barnard proved useless - various men noticed in the vicinity of Bexhill and Cooden were either accounted for or could not be traced. The investigation of purchases of A.B.C. railway guides caused inconvenience and trouble to heaps of innocent people.

As for ourselves, each time the postman's familiar rat-tat sounded on the door, our hearts beat faster with apprehension. At least that was true for me, and I cannot but believe that Poirot experienced the same sensation.

He was, I knew, deeply unhappy over the case. He refused to leave London, preferring to be on the spot in case of emergency. In those hot dog days even his moustaches drooped - neglected for once by their owner.

It was on a Friday that A.B.C.'s third letter came. The evening post arrived about ten o'clock.





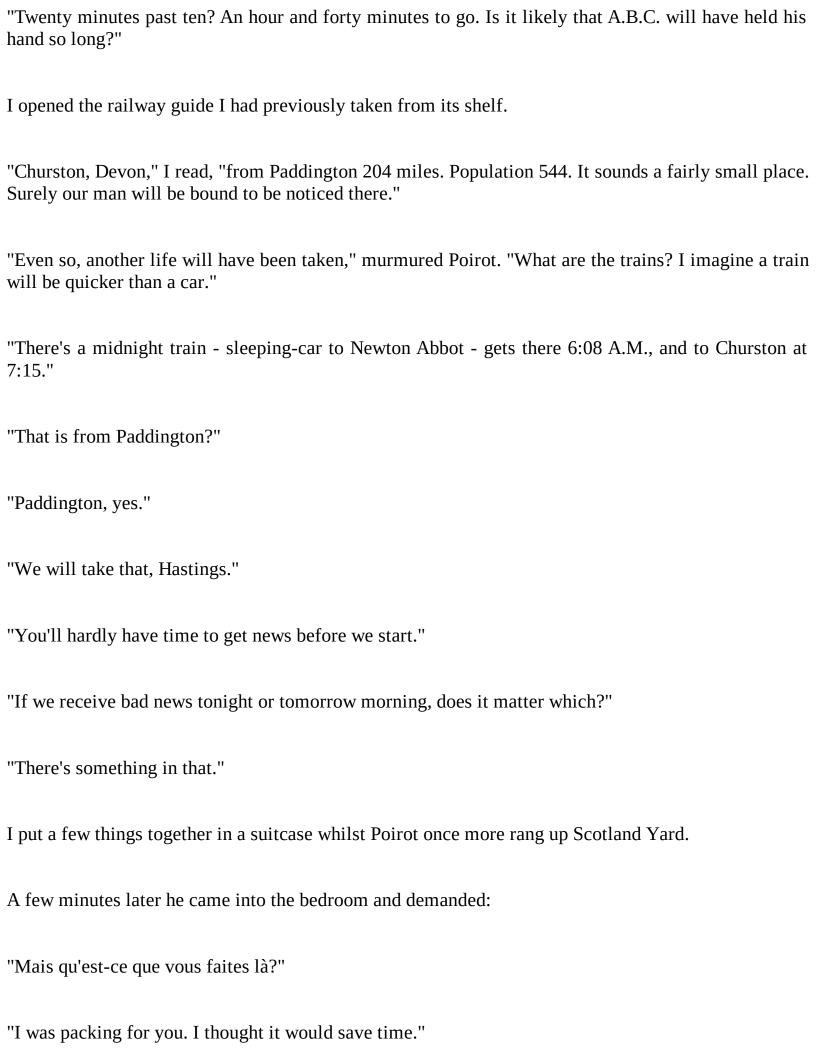
A minute or two later we were speaking to Crome over the wire. For once the self-controlled inspector did not reply "Oh, yes?" Instead a quickly stifled curse came to his lips. He heard what we had to say,

then rang off in order to get a connection to Churston as rapidly as possible.

"C'est trop tard," murmured Poirot.

"You can't be sure of that," I argued, though without any great hope.

He glanced at the clock.



"Vous éprouvez trop d'emotion, Hastings. It affects your hands and your wits. Is that a way to fold a coat? And regard what you have done to my pyjamas. If the hairwash breaks what will befall them?"

"Good heavens, Poirot," I cried, "this is a matter of life and death. What does it matter what happens to our clothes?"

"You have no sense of proportion, Hastings. We cannot catch a train earlier than the time that it leaves, and to ruin one's clothes will not be the least helpful in preventing a murder."

Taking his suitcase from me firmly, he took the packing into his own hands.

He explained that we were to take the letter and envelope to Paddington with us. Some one from Scotland Yard would meet us there.

When we arrived on the platform the first person we saw was Inspector Crome.

He answered Poirot's look of inquiry.

"No news as yet. All men available are on the lookout. All persons whose name begins with C are being warned by phone when possible. There's just a chance. Where's the letter?"

Poirot gave it to him.

He examined it, sweating softly under his breath.

"Of all the damned luck. The stars in their courses fight for the fellow."

"You don't think," I suggested, "that it was done on purpose?"

Crome shook his head.

"No. He's got his rules - crazy rules - and abides by them. Fair warning. He makes a point of that. That's where his boastfulness comes in. I wonder now - I'd almost bet the chap drinks White Horse

whisky."

"Ah, c'est ingénieux ça!" said Poirot, driven to admiration in spite of himself. "He prints the letter and the bottle is in front of him."

"That's the way of it," said Crome. "We've all of us done much the same thing one time or another: unconsciously copied something that's just under the eye. He started off White and went on horse instead of haven..."

The inspector, we found, was also travelling by the train.

"Even if by some unbelievable luck nothing happened, Churston is the place to be. Our murderer is there, or has been there today. One of my men is on the phone here up to the last minute in case anything comes through."

Just as the train was leaving the station we saw a man running down the platform. He reached the inspector's window and called up something.

As the train drew out of the station Poirot and I hurried along the corridor and tapped on the door of the inspector's sleeper.

"You have news - yes? demanded Poirot.

Crome said quietly:

"It's about as bad as it can be. Sir Carmichael Clarke has been found with his head bashed in."

Sir Carmichael Clarke, although his name was not very well known to the general public, was a man of some eminence. He had been in his time a very well-known throat specialist. Retiring from his profession, very comfortably off, he had been able to indulge what had been one of the chief passions of his life - a collection of Chinese pottery and porcelain. A few years later, inheriting a considerable fortune from an elderly uncle, he had been able to indulge his passion to the full, and he was now the possessor of one of the best known collections of Chinese art. He was married but had no children, and lived in a house he had built for himself near the Devon coast, only coming to London on rare occasions such as when some important sale was on.

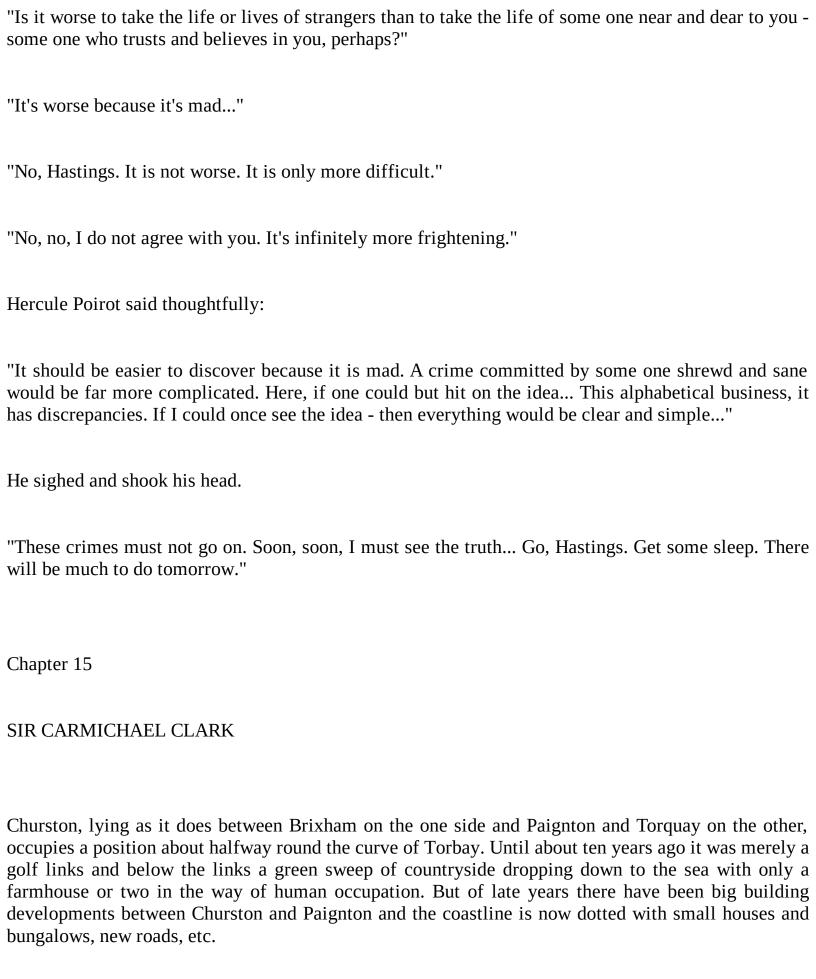
It did not require much reflection to realize that his death, following that of the young and pretty Barnard, would provide the best newspaper sensation in years. The fact that it was August and that the papers were hard up for subject matter would make matters worse.
"Eh bien," said Poirot. "It is possible that publicity may do what private efforts have failed to do. The whole country now will be looking for A.B.C."
"Unfortunately," I said, "that's what he wants."
"True. But it may, all the same, be his undoing. Gratified by success, he may become careless That is what I hope - that he may be drunk with his own cleverness."
"How odd all this is, Poirot," I exclaimed, struck suddenly by an idea. "Do you know, this is the first crime of this kind that you and I have worked on together? All our murders have been - well, private murders, so to speak."
"You are quite right, my friend. Always, up to now, it has fallen our lot to work from the inside. It has been the history of the victim that was important. The important points have been: 'Who benefited by the death? What opportunities had those round him to commit the crime?' It has always been the 'crime intime.' Here, for the first time in our association, it is cold-blooded, impersonal murder. Murder from the outside."
I shivered.
"It's rather horrible"

"Yes. I felt from the first, when I read the original letter, that there was something wrong - misshapen _"

"One must not give way to the nerves... This is no worse than any ordinary crime..."

He made an impatient gesture.

"It is... It is..."



Sir Carmichael Clarke had purchased a site of some two acres commanding an uninterrupted view of the sea. The house he had built was of modern design - a white rectangle that was not unpleasing to the

eye. Apart from two big galleries that housed his collection it was not a large house.

Our arrival there took place about 8 A.M. A local police officer had met us at the station and had put us au courant of the situation. Sir Carmichael Clarke, it seemed, had been in the habit of taking a stroll after dinner every evening. When the police rang up - at some time after eleven - it was ascertained that he had not returned. Since his stroll usually followed the same course, it was not long before a search-party discovered his body. Death was due to a crashing blow with some heavy instrument on the back of the head. An open A.B.C. ad been placed face downwards on the dead body.

We arrived at Combeside (as the house was called) at about eight o'clock. The door was opened by an elderly butler whose shaking hands and disturbed face showed how much the tragedy had affected him.

"Good-morning, Deveril," said the local police officer.

"Good-morning, Mr. Wells."

"These are the gentlemen from London, Deveril."

"This way, sir." He ushered us into a long dining-room where breakfast was laid. "I'll get Mr. Franklin, sir."

A minute or two later a big fair-haired man with a sunburnt face entered the room.

This was Franklin Clarke, the dead man's only brother.

He had the resolute competent manner of a man accustomed to meeting with emergencies.

"Good-morning, gentlemen."

Inspector Wells made the introductions.

"This is Inspector Crome of the C.I.D., Mr. Hercule Poirot and - er - Captain Hayter."

"Hastings," I corrected coldly.

Franklin Clarke shook hands with each of us in turn and in each case the handshake was accompanied by a piercing look.

"Let me offer you some breakfast," he said. "We can discuss the position as we eat."

There were no dissentient voices and we were soon doing justice to excellent eggs and bacon and coffee.

"Now for it," said Franklin Clarke. "Inspector Wells gave me a rough idea of the position last night - though I may say it seemed one of the wildest tales I have ever heard. Am I really to believe, Inspector Crome, that my poor brother is the victim of a homicidal maniac, that this is the third murder that has occurred and that in each case an A.B.C. railway guide has been deposited beside the body?"

"That is substantially the position, Mr. Clarke."

"But why? What earthly benefit can accrue from such a crime - even in the most diseased imagination?"

Poirot nodded his head in approval.

"You go straight to the point, Mr. Clarke," he said.

"It's not much good looking for motives at this stage, Mr. Clarke," said Inspector Crome. "That's a matter for an alienist - though I may say that I've had a certain experience of criminal lunacy and that the motives are usually grossly inadequate. There is a desire to assert one's personality, to make a splash in the public eye - in fact, to be a somebody instead of a nonentity."

"Is that true, M. Poirot?"

Clarke seemed incredulous. His appeal to the older man was not too well received by Inspector Crome, who frowned.

"Absolutely true," replied my friend.

"At any rate such a man cannot escape detection long," said Clarke thoughtfully.

"Vous croyez? Ah, but they are cunning - ces gens là. And you must remember such a type has usually all the outer signs of insignificance - he belongs to the class of person who is usually passed over and ignored or even laughed at!"

"Will you let me have a few facts, please, Mr. Clarke," said Crome, breaking in on the conversation.

"Certainly."

"Your brother, I take it, was in his usual health and spirits yesterday? He received no unexpected letters? Nothing to upset him?"

"No. I should say he was quite his usual self."

"Not upset and worried in any way?"

"Excuse me, inspector. I didn't say that. To be upset and worried was my poor brother's normal condition."

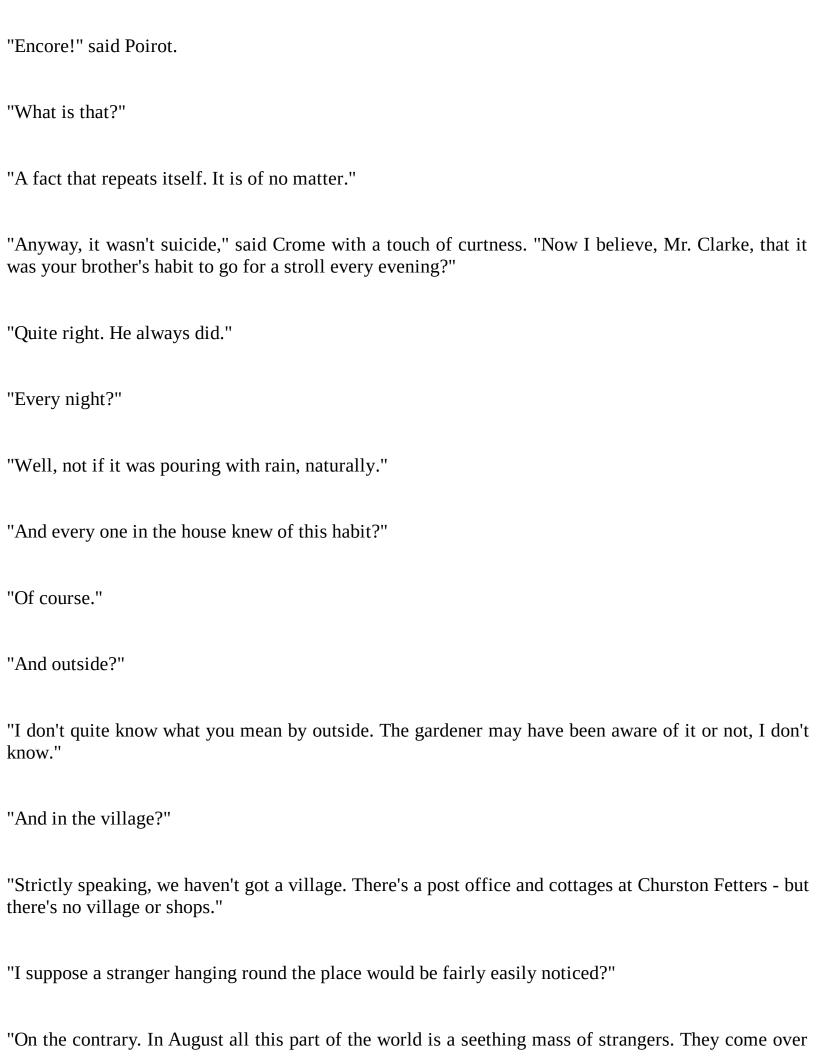
"Why was that?"

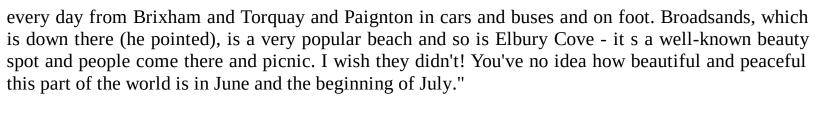
"You may not know that my sister-in-law, Lady Clarke, is in very bad health. Frankly, between ourselves, she is suffering from an incurable cancer, and cannot live very much longer. Her illness has preyed terribly on my brother's mind. I myself returned from the East not long ago and I was shocked at the change in him."

Poirot interpolated a question.

"Supposing, Mr. Clarke, that your brother had been found shot at the foot of a cliff - or shot with a revolver beside him. What would have been your first thought?"

"Quite frankly, I should have jumped to the conclusion that it was suicide," said Clarke.





"So you don't think a stranger would be noticed?"

"Not unless he looked - well, off his head."

"This man doesn't look off his head," said Crome with certainty. "You see what I'm getting at, Mr. Clarke. This man must have been spying out the land beforehand and discovered your brother's habit of taking an evening stroll. I suppose, by the way, that no strange man came up to the house and asked to see Sir Carmichael yesterday?"

"Not that I know of - but we'll ask Deveril."

He rang the bell and put the question to the butler.

"No, sir, no one came to see Sir Carmichael. And I didn't notice any one hanging about the house either. No more did the maids, because I've asked them."

The butler waited a moment, then inquired: "Is that all, sir?"

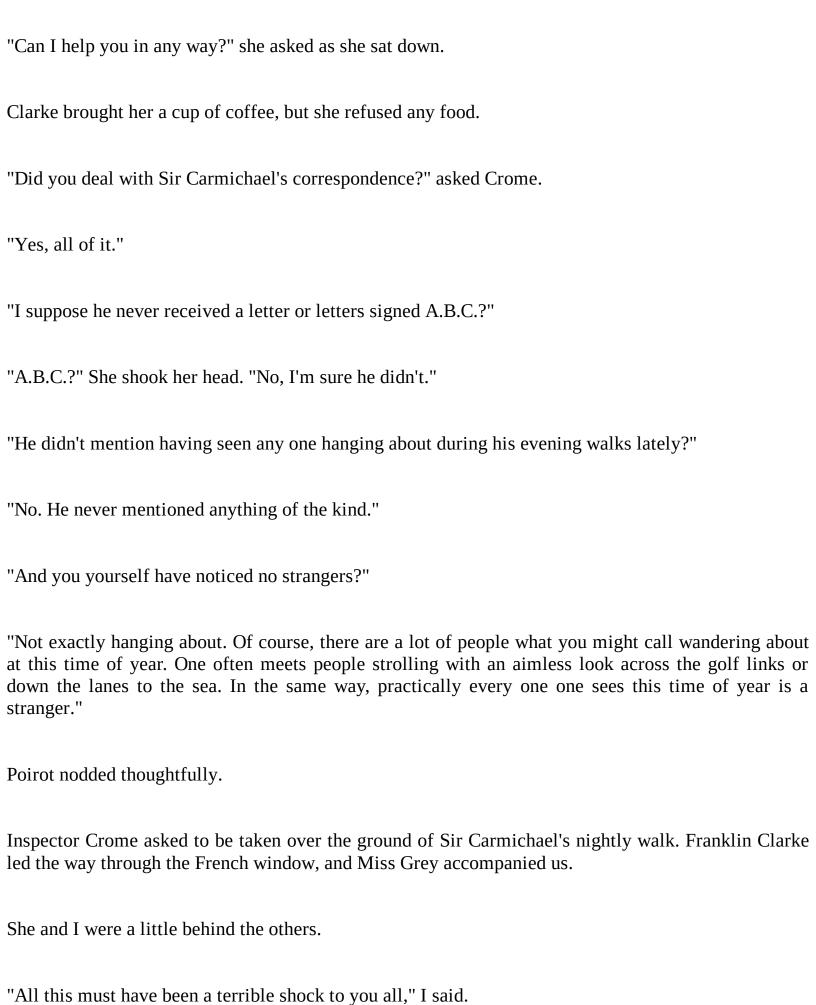
"Yes, Deveril, you can go."

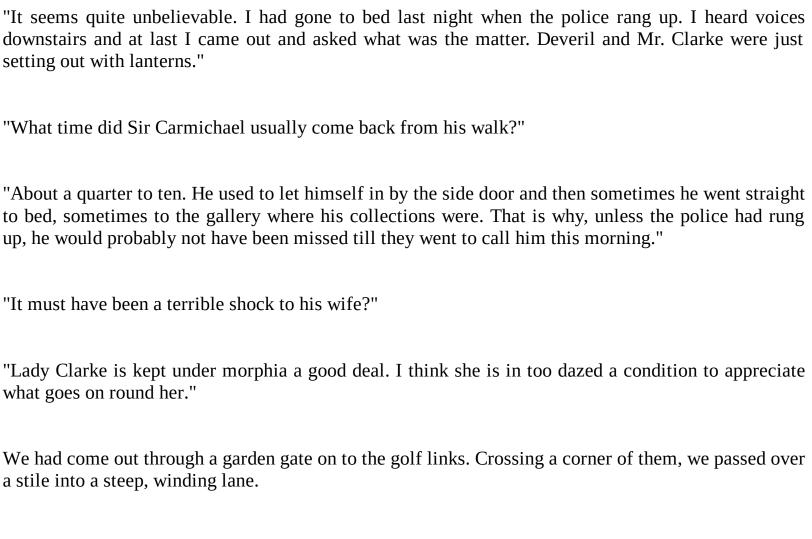
The butler withdrew, drawing back in the doorway to let a young woman pass.

Franklin Clarke rose as she came.

"This is Miss Grey, gentlemen. My brother's secretary."

My attention was caught at once by the girl's extraordinary Scandinavian fairness. She had the almost colourless ash hair - light grey eyes - and transparent glowing pallor that one finds amongst Norwegians and Swedes. She looked about twenty-seven and seemed to be as efficient as she was decorative.





"This leads down to Elbury Cove," explained Franklin Clarke. "But two years ago they made a new road leading from the main road to Broadsands and on to Elbury, so that now this lane is practically deserted."

We went on down the lane. At the foot of it a path led between brambles and bracken down to the sea. Suddenly we came out on a grassy ridge overlooking the sea and a beach of glistening white stones. All round dark green trees ran down to the sea. It was an enchanting spot - white, deep green - and sapphire blue.

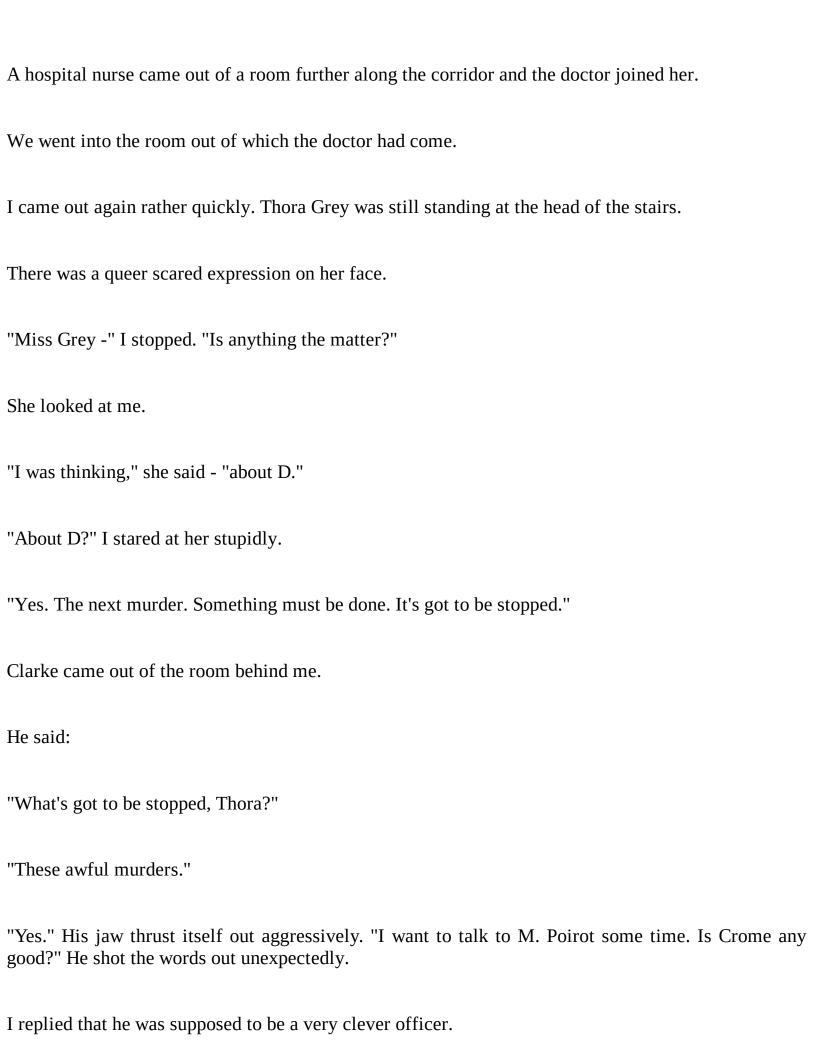
"How beautiful!" I exclaimed.

Clarke turned to me eagerly.

"Isn't it? Why people want to go abroad to the Riviera when they've got this! I've wandered all over the world in my time and, honest to God, I've never seen anything as beautiful."

Then, as though ashamed of his eagerness, he said in a more matter-of-fact tone:





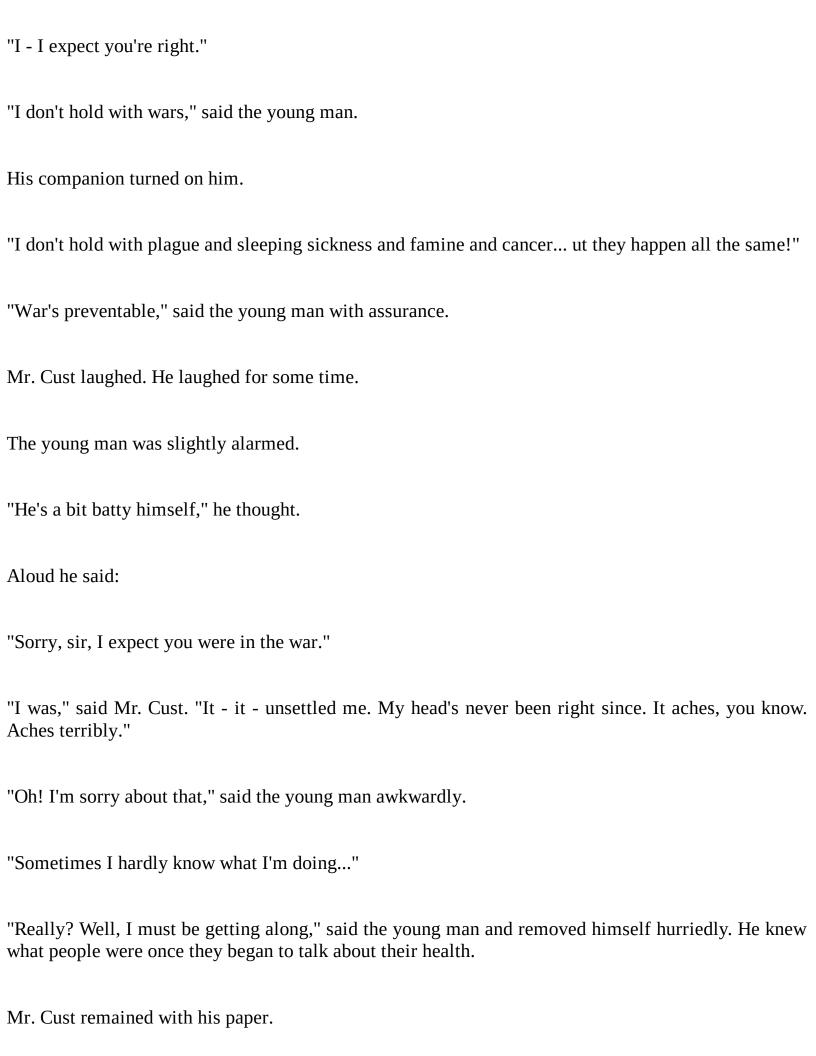
My voice was perhaps not as enthusiastic as it might have been.
'He's got a damned offensive manner," said Clarke. "Looks as though he knows everything - and what does he know? Nothing at all as far as I can make out."
He was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:
'M. Poirot's the man for my money. I've got a plan. But we'll talk of that later."
He went along the passage and tapped at the same door as the doctor had entered.
I hesitated a moment. The girl was staring in front of her.
'What are you thinking of, Miss Grey?''
She turned her eyes towards me.
'I'm wondering where he is now the murderer, I mean. It's not twelve hours yet since it happened Oh! aren't there any real clairvoyants who could see where he is now and what he is doing?''
"The police are searching -" I began.
My commonplace words broke the spell. Thora Grey pulled herself together.
'Yes," she said. "Of course."
In her turn she descended the staircase. I stood there a moment longer going her words over in my mind.
A.B.C

Where was he now...?

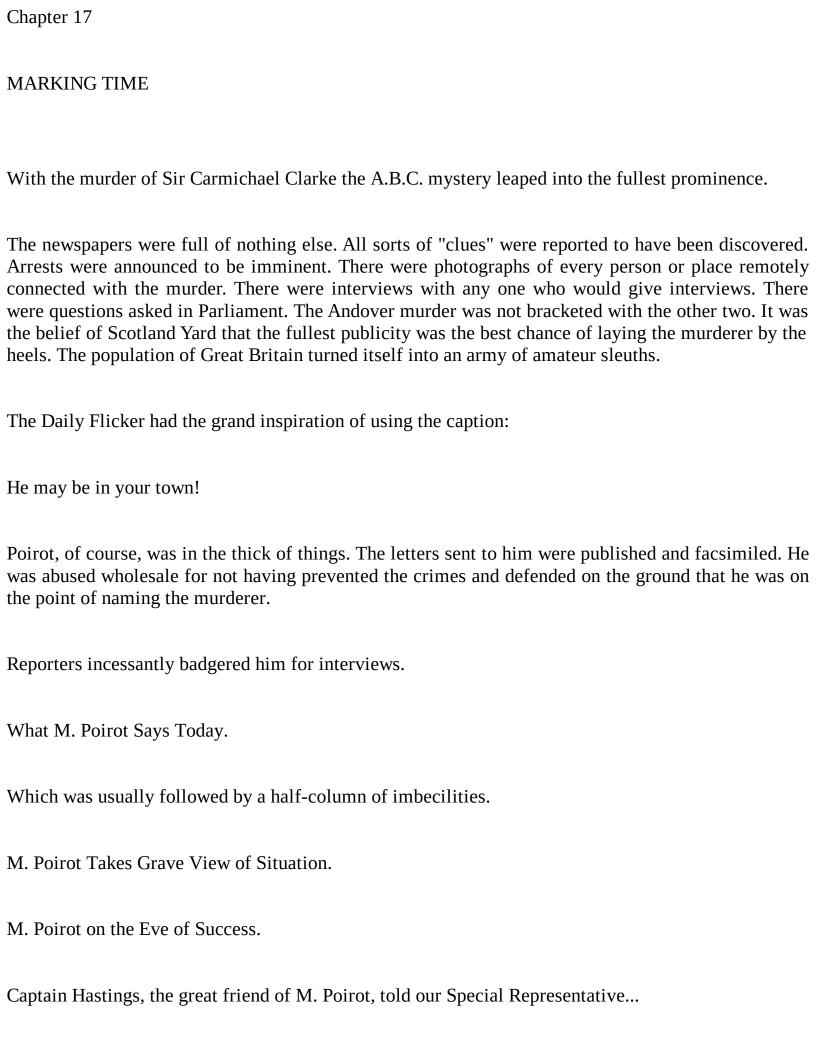
Chapter 16
(Not from Captain Hastings' Personal Narrative)
Mr. Alexander Bonaparte Cust came out with the rest of the audience the Torquay Pavilion, where he had been seeing and hearing that highly emotional film, Not a Sparrow
He blinked a little as he came out into the afternoon sunshine and peered round him in that lost-dog fashion that was characteristic of him.
He murmured to himself: "It's an idea -"
Newsboys passed along crying out:
"Latest Homicidal Maniac at Churston"
They carried placards on which was written:
CHURSTON MURDER. LATEST.
Mr. Cust fumbled in his pocket, found a coin, and bought a paper. He did not open it at once.
Entering the Princess Gardens, he slowly made his way to a shelter facing Torquay harbour. He sat down and opened the paper.
There were big headlines:

SIR CARMICHAEL CLARKE MURDERED
TERRIBLE TRAGEDY AT CHURSTON
WORK OF A HOMICIDAL MANIAC
And below them:
Only a month ago England was shocked and startled by the murder of a young girl, Elizabeth Barnard, at Bexhill. It may be remembered that an A.B.C. railway guide figured in the case. An A.B.C. as also found by the dead body of Sir Carmichael Clarke, and the police incline to the belief that both crimes were committed by the same person. Can it be possible that a homicidal murderer is going the round of our seaside resorts?
A young man in flannel trousers and a bright blue aertex shirt who was sitting beside Mr. Cust remarked:
"Nasty business - eh?"
Mr. Cust jumped.
"Oh, very - very -"
His hands, the young man noticed, were trembling so that he could hardly hold the paper.
"You never know with lunatics," said the young man chattily. "They don't always look balmy, you know. Often they seem just the same as you or me"
"I suppose they do," said Mr. Cust.

"It's a fact. Sometimes it's the war what unhinged them - never been right since."



He read and reread
People passed to and fro in front of him.
Most of them were talking of the murder
"Awful do you think it was anything to do with the Chinese? Wasn't the waitress in a Chinese café?"
"Actually on the golf links"
"I heard it was on the beach"
"- but, darling, we took out tea to Elbury only yesterday"
"- police are sure to get him"
"- say he may be arrested any minute now"
"- quite likely he's in Torquay that other woman was who murdered the what do you call 'ems"
Mr. Cust folded up the paper very neatly and laid it on the seat. Then he rose and walked sedately along towards the town.
Girls passed him, girls in white and pink and blue, in summery frocks and pyjamas and shorts. They laughed and giggled. Their eyes appraised the men they passed.
Not once did their eyes linger for a second on Mr. Cust
He sat down at a little table and ordered tea and Devonshire cream



"Poirot," I would cry. "Pray believe me. I never said anything of the kind."

My friend would reply kindly:

"I know, Hastings - I know. The spoken word and the written - there is an astonishing gulf between them. There is a way of turning sentences that completely reverses the original meaning."

"I wouldn't like you to think I'd said -"

"But do not worry yourself. All this is of no importance. These imbecilities, even, may help."

"How?"

"Eh bien," said Poirot grimly. "If our madman reads what I am supposed to have said to the Daily Flicker today, he will lose all respect for me as an opponent!"

I am, perhaps, giving the impression that nothing practical was being done in the way of investigations. On the contrary, Scotland Yard and the local police of the various counties were indefatigable in following up the smallest clues.

Hotels, people who kept lodgings, boarding-houses - all those within a wide radius of the crimes were questioned minutely. Hundreds of stories from imaginative people who had "seen a man looking very queer and rolling his eyes," or "noticed a man with a sinister face slinking along," were sifted to the last detail. No information, even of the vaguest character, was neglected. Trains, buses, trams, railway porters, conductors, bookstalls, stationers - there was an indefatigable round of questions and verifications.

At least a score of people were detained and questioned until they could satisfy the police as to their movements on the night in question. The net result was not entirely a blank. Certain statements were borne in mind and noted down as of possible value, but without further evidence they led nowhere.

If Crome and his colleagues were indefatigable, Poirot seemed to me strangely supine. We argued now and again.

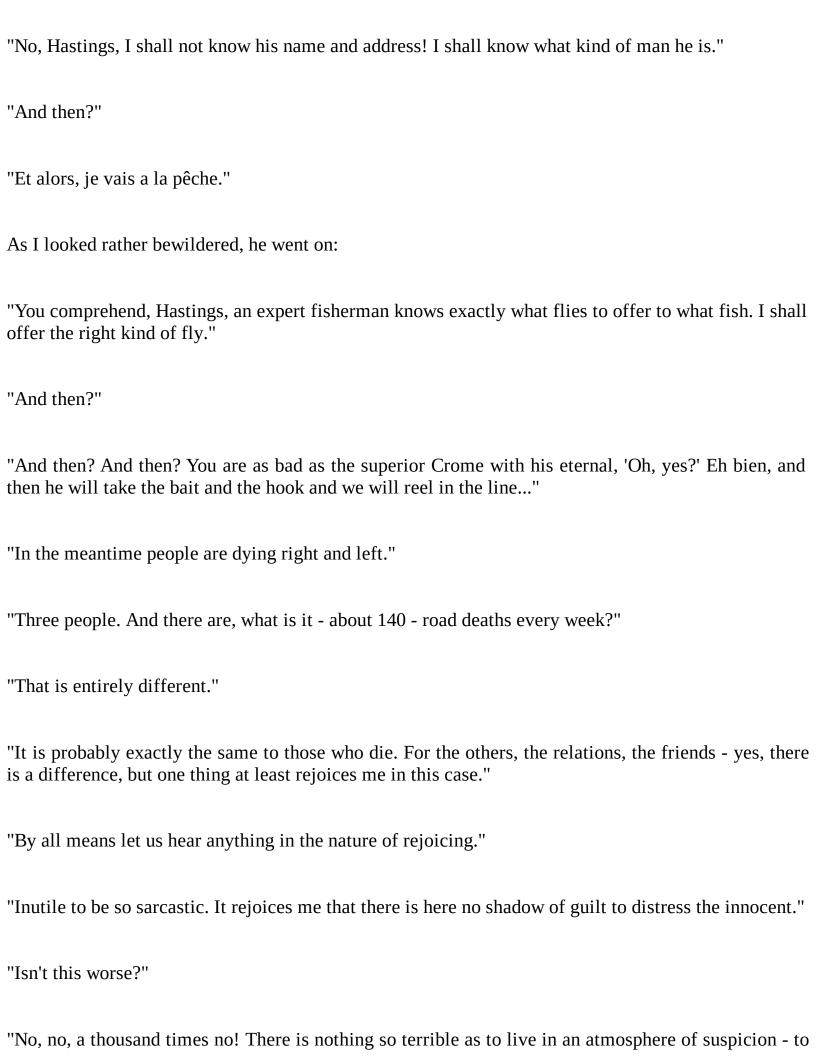
"But what is it that you would have me do, my friend? The routine inquiries, the police make them better than I do. Always - always you want me to run about like the dog."

'Instead of which you sit at home like - like -''
'A sensible man! My force, Hastings, is in my brain, not in my feet! All the time, whilst I seem to you dle, I am reflecting."
'Reflecting?" I cried. "Is this a time for reflection?"
'Yes, a thousand times yes."
'But what can you possibly gain by reflection? You know the facts of the three cases by heart."
'It is not the facts I reflect upon - but the mind of the murderer."
'The mind of a madman!''
'Precisely. And therefore not to be arrived at in a minute. When I know what the murderer is like, I shall be able to find out who he is. And all the time I learn more. After the Andover crime, what did we know about the murderer? Next to nothing at all. After the Bexhill crime? A little more. After the Churston murder? More still. I begin to see - not what you would like to see - the outlines of a face and form - but the outlines of a mind. A mind that moves and works in certain definite directions. After the next crime -"
'Poirot!"
My friend looked at me dispassionately.

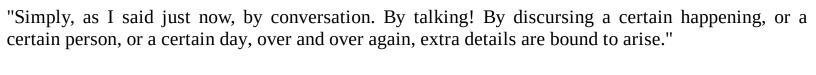
"But, yes, Hastings, I think it is almost certain there will be another. A lot depends on la chance. So far our inconnu has been lucky. This time the luck may turn against him. But in any case, after another crime, we shall know infinitely more. Crime is terribly revealing. Try and vary your methods as you will your tastes, your habits, your attitude of mind, and your soul is revealed by your actions. There are confusing indications - sometimes it is as though there were two intelligences at work - but soon

"Who it is?"

the outline will clear itself, I shall know."







"What kind of details?"

"Naturally that I do not know or I should not want to find out! I think enough time has passed now for ordinary things to reassume their value. It is against all mathematical laws that in three cases of murder there is no single fact or sentence with a bearing on the case. Some trivial happening, some trivial remark there must be which would be a pointer! It is looking for the needle in the haystack, I grant - but in the haystack there is a needle - of that I am convinced!"

It seemed to me extremely vague and hazy.

"You do not see it? Your wits are not so sharp as those of a mere servant girl."

He tossed me over a letter. It was neatly written in a sloping board-school hand.

Dear Sir,

I hope you will forgive the liberty I take in writing to you. I have been thinking a lot since these awful two murders like poor Auntie. It seems as though we're all in the same boat, as it were. I saw the young lady picture in the paper, the young lady, I mean, that is the sister of the young lady that was killed at Bexhill. I made so bold as to write to her and tell her I was coming to London to get a place and asked if I could come to her or her mother as I said two heads might be better than one and I would not want much wages, but only to find out who this awful fiend is and perhaps we might get at it better if we could say what we knew something might come of it.

The young lady wrote very nicely and said as how she worked in an office and lived in a hotel, but she suggested I might write to you and she said she'd been thinking something of the same kind as I had. And she said we were in the same trouble and we ought to stand together. So I am writing, sir, to say I am coming to London and this is my address.

Hoping I am not troubling you,





"Who do you propose should form this legion?"

"I've been into that. As a matter of fact, I wrote to Miss Megan Barnard - indeed, this is partly her idea. I suggest myself, Miss Barnard, Mr. Donald Fraser, who was engaged to the dead girl. Then there is a niece of the Andover woman - Miss Barnard knows her address. I don't think the husband would be of any use to us - I hear he's usually drunk. I also think the Barnards - the father and mother - are a bit old for active campaigning."

"Nobody else?"

"Well - er - Miss Grey."

He flushed slightly as he spoke the name.

"Oh! Miss Grey?"

Nobody in the world could put a gentle nuance of irony into a couple of words better than Poirot. About thirty-five years fell away from Franklin Clarke. He looked suddenly like a shy schoolboy.

"Yes. You see, Miss Grey was with my brother for over two years. She knows the countryside and the people round, and everything. I've been away for a year and a half."

Poirot took pity on him and turned the conversation.

"You have been in the East? In China?"

"Yes. I had a kind of roving commission to purchase things for my brother."

"Very interesting it must have been. Eh bien, Mr. Clarke, I approve very highly of your idea. I was saying to Hastings only yesterday that a rapprochement of the people concerned was needed. It is necessary to pool reminiscences, to compare notes - enfin to talk the thing over - to talk - to talk - and again to talk. Out of some innocent phrase may come enlightenment."

A few days later the "Special Legion" met at Poirot's rooms.

As they sat round looking obediently towards Poirot, who had his place, like the chairman at a Board meeting, at the head of the table, I myself passed them, as it were, in review, confirming or revising my first impressions of them.

The three girls were all of them striking looking - the extraordinary fair beauty of Thora Grey, the dark intensity of Megan Barnard, with her strange Red Indian immobility of face - Mary Drower, neatly dressed in a black coat and skirt, with her pretty, intelligent face. Of the two men, Franklin Clarke, big, bronzed and talkative, Donald Fraser, self-contained and quiet, made an interesting contrast to each other.

Poirot, unable, of course, to resist the occasion, made a little speech.

"Mesdames and Messieurs, you know what we are here for. The police are doing their utmost to track down the criminal. I, too, in my different way. But it seems to me a reunion of those who have a personal interest in the matter - and also, I may say, a personal knowledge of the victims - might have results that an outside investigation cannot pretend to attain.

"Here we have three murders - an old woman, a young girl, an elderly man. Only one thing links these three people together - the fact that the same person killed them. That means that the same person was present in three different localities and was seen necessarily by a large number of people. That he is a madman in an advanced stage of mania goes without saying. That his appearance and behaviour give no suggestion of such a fact is equally certain. This person - and though I say he, remember it may be a man or woman - has all the devilish cunning of insanity. He has succeeded so far in covering his traces completely. The police have certain vague indications but nothing upon which they can act.

"Nevertheless, there must exist indications which are not vague but certain. To take one particular point - this assassin he did not arrive at Bexhill at midnight and find conveniently on the beach a young lady whose name began with B -"

"Must we go into that?"

It was Donald Fraser who spoke - the words wrung from him, it seemed, by some inner anguish.

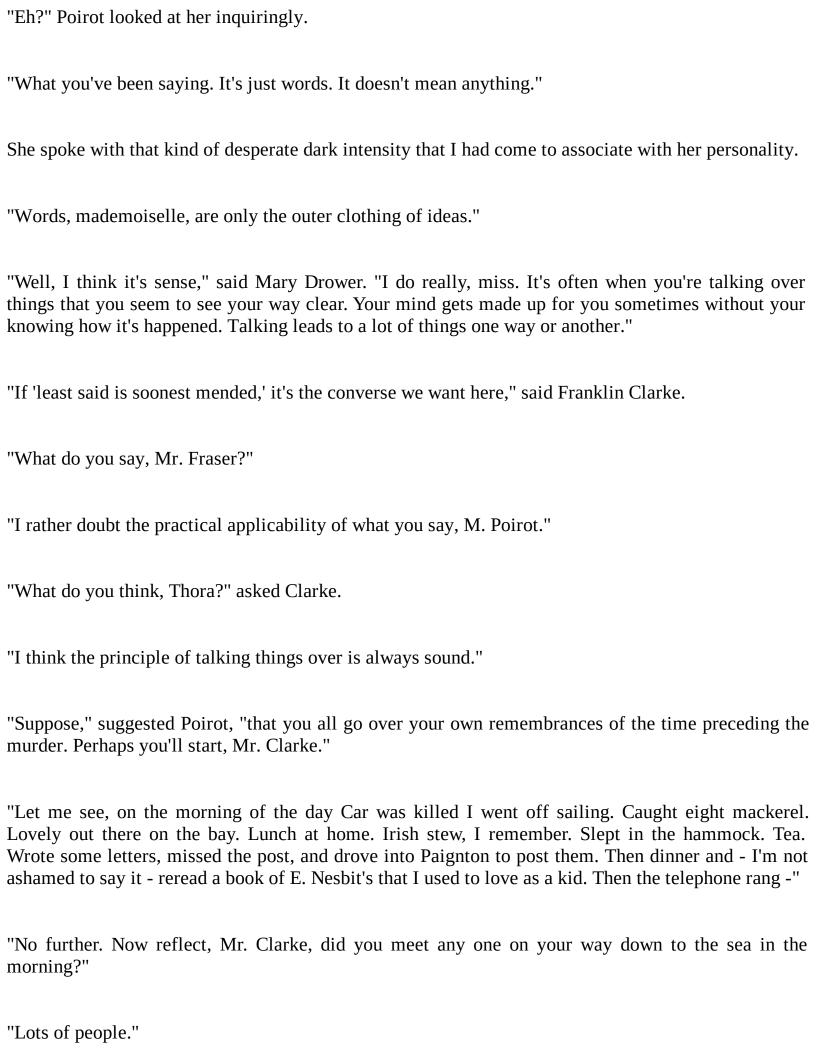
"It is necessary to go into everything, Monsieur," said Poirot, turning to him. "You are here, not to save your feelings by refusing to think of details, but if necessary to harrow them by going into the matter au fond. As I say, it was not chance that provided A.B.C. with a victim in Betty Barnard. There must have been deliberate selection on his part - and therefore premeditation. That is to say, he must have reconnoitered the ground beforehand. There were facts of which he had informed himself - the best hour for the committing of the crime at Andover - the mise en scéne at Bexhill - the habits of Sir

Carmichael Clarke at Churston. Me, for one, I refuse to believe that there is no indication - no slightest hint - that might help to establish his identity.

"I make the assumption that one - or possibly all of you - knows something that they do not know they know.

"Sooner or later, by reason of your association with one another, something will come to light, will take on a significance as yet undreamed of. It is like the jigsaw puzzle - each of you may have a piece apparently without meaning, but which when reunited may show a definite portion of the picture as a whole."

"Words!" said Megan Barnard.

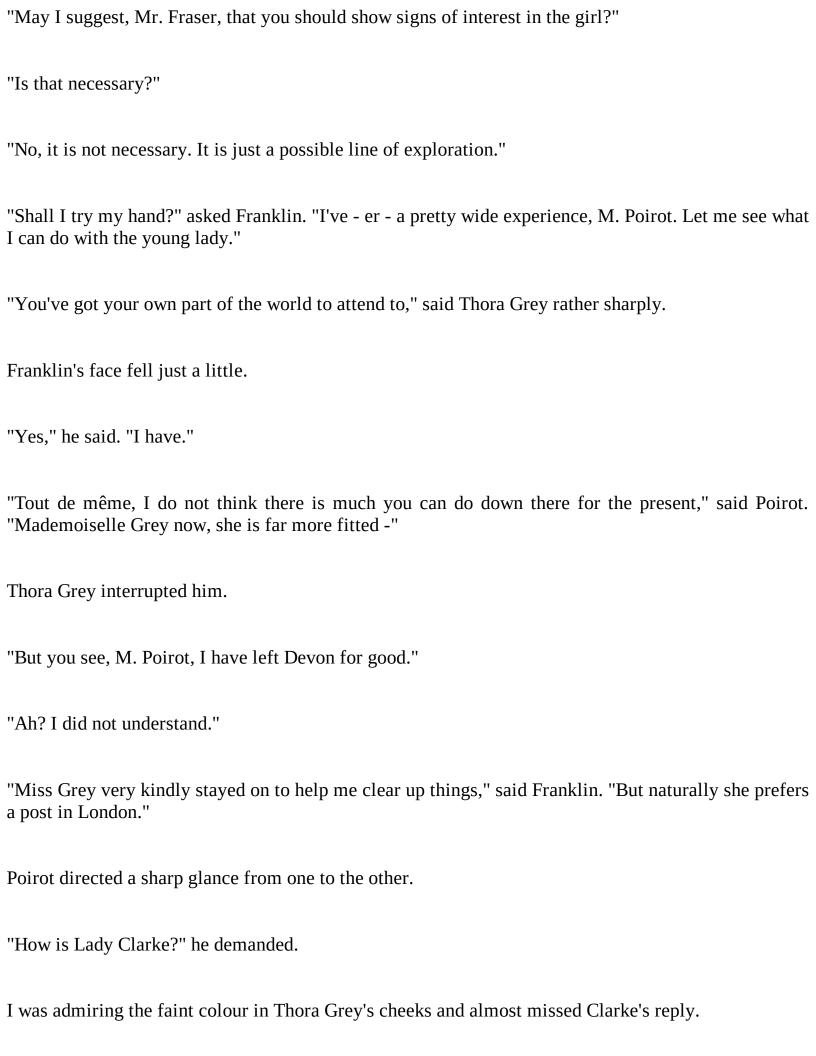






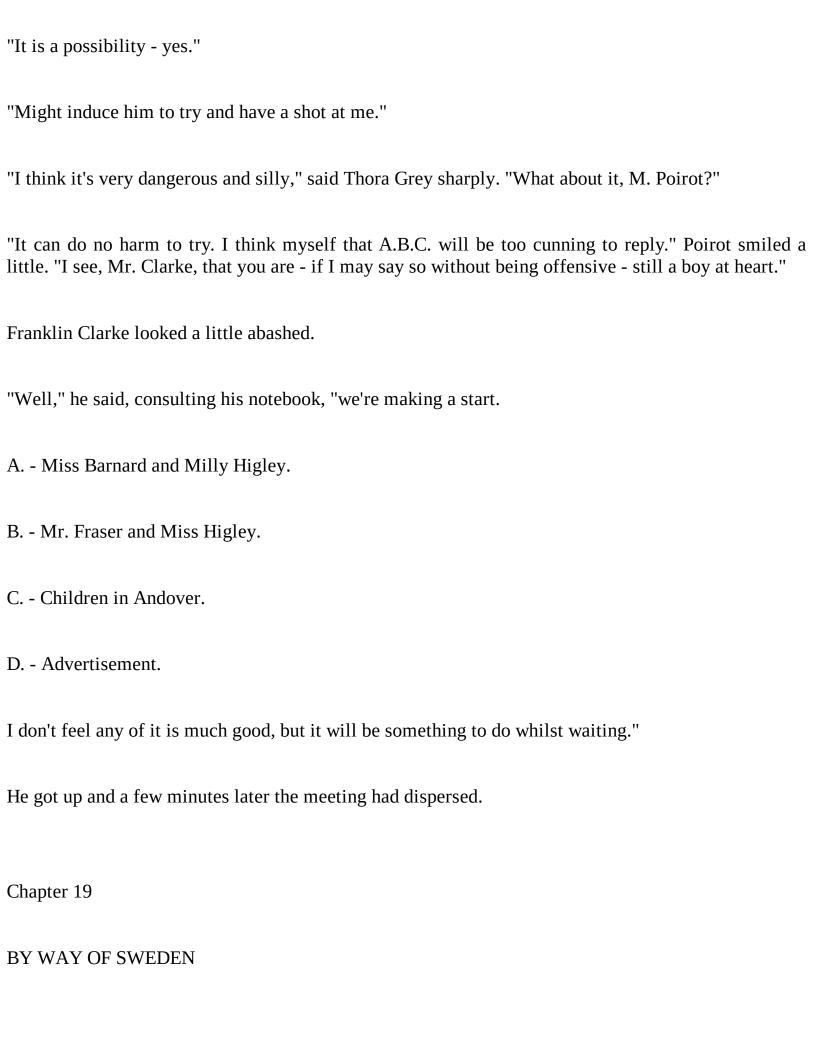








silence. X.Y.Z. Nothing quite so crude as that - but you see the idea. It might draw him."





"Really, Poirot," I cried, blushing slightly.

"C'est tout naturel. Did you observe how Franklin Clarke was suddenly at one and in sympathy with Mademoiselle Megan? How he leaned forward and looked at her? And did you also notice how very much annoyed Mademoiselle Thora Grey was about it? And Mr. Donald Fraser, he -"

"Poirot," I said, "your mind is incurably sentimental."

"That is the last thing my mind is. You are the sentimental one, Hastings."

I was about to argue the point hotly, but at that moment the door opened. To my astonishment it was Thora Grey who entered.

"Forgive me for coming back," she said composedly. "But there was something that I think I would like to tell you, M. Poirot."

"Certainly, mademoiselle. Sit down, will you not?"

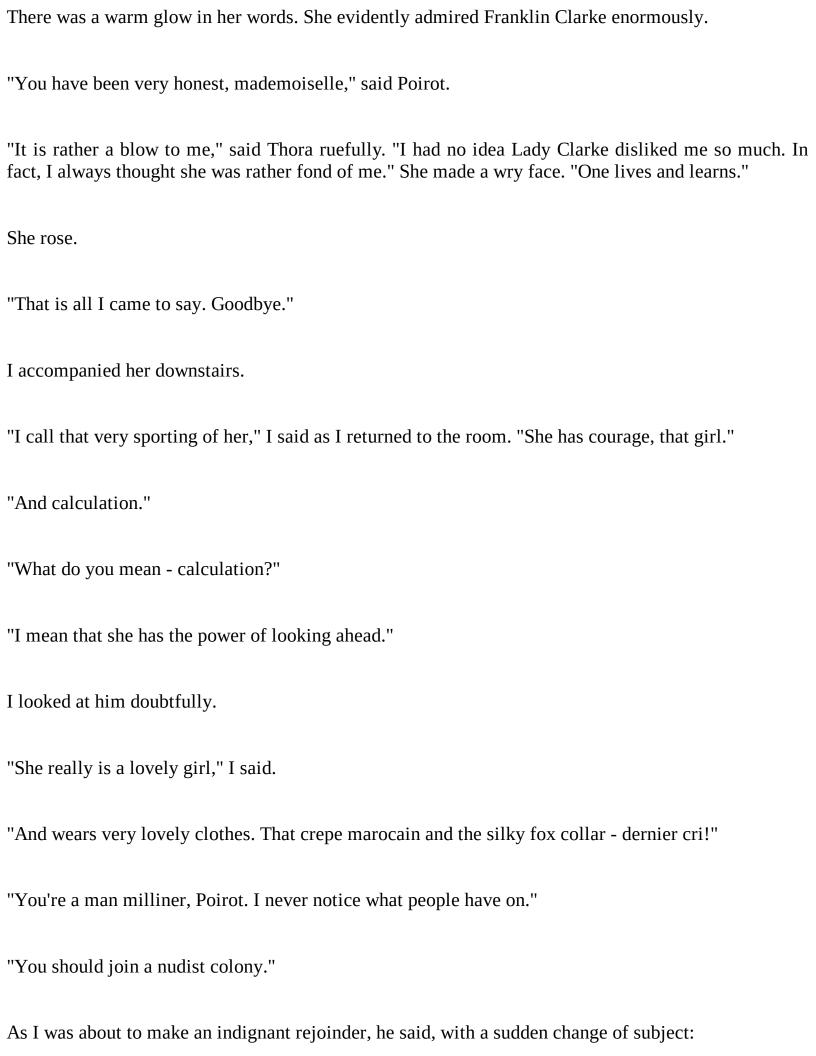
She took a seat and hesitated for just a minute as though choosing her words.

"It is just this, Mr. Poirot. Mr. Clarke very generously gave you to understand just now that I had left Combeside by my own wish. He is a very kind and loyal person. But as a matter of fact, it is not quite like that. I was quite prepared to stay on - there is any amount of work to be done in connection with the collections. It was Lady Clarke who wished me to leave! I can make allowances. She is a very ill woman, and her brain is somewhat muddled with the drugs they give her. It makes her suspicious and fanciful. She took an unreasoning dislike to me and insisted that I should leave the house."

I could not but admire the girl's courage. She did not attempt to gloss over facts, as so many might have been tempted to do, but went straight to the point with an admirable candour. My heart went out to her in admiration and sympathy.

"I call it splendid of you to come and tell us this," I said.

"It's always better to have the truth," she said with a little smile. "I don't want to shelter behind Mr. Clarke's chivalry. He is a very chivalrous man."





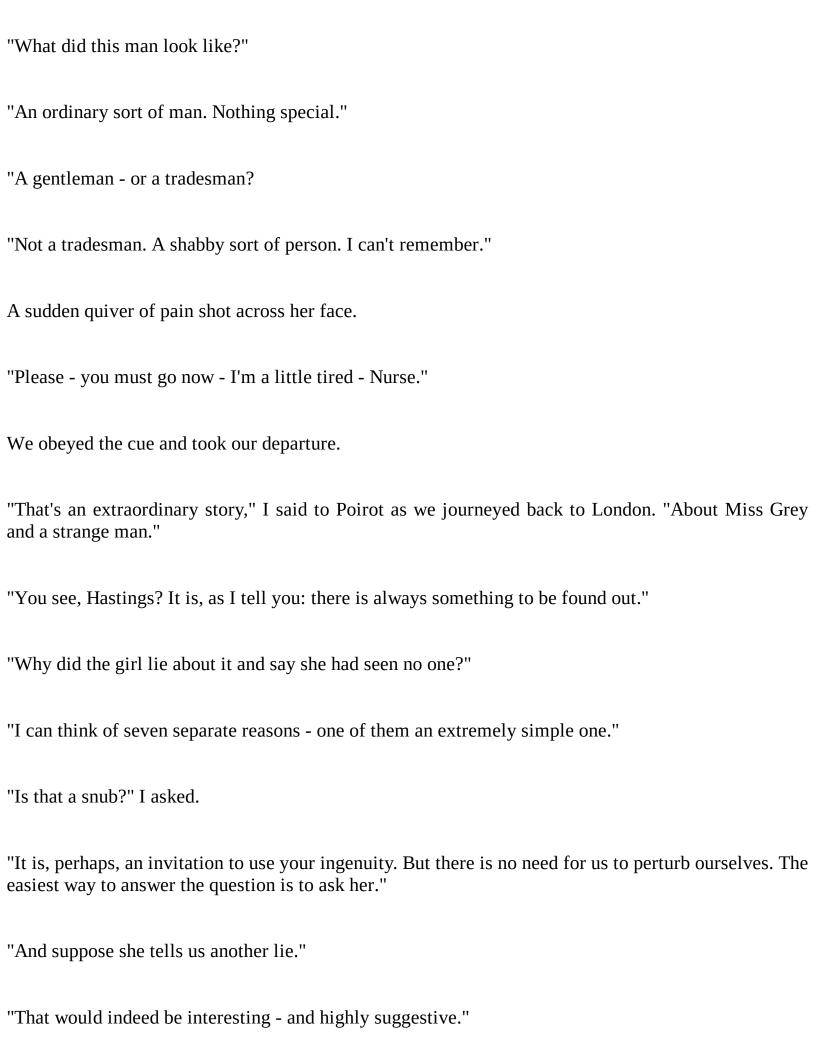


"Oh, yes - Miss Grey. She has left, has she not?
"Yes - I'm very sorry about it - but ladies do take these fancies sometimes when they're not well. And there's no arguing with them. It's better to give in. Miss Grey was very sensible about it."
"Has Lady Clarke always disliked her?"
"No - that is to say, not disliked. As a matter of fact, I think she rather liked her to begin with. But there, I mustn't keep you gossiping. My patient will be wondering what has become of us."
She led us upstairs to a room on the first floor. What had at one time been a bedroom had been turned into a cheerful-looking sitting-room.
Lady Clarke was sitting in a big arm-chair near the window. She was painfully thin, and her face had the grey, haggard look of one who suffers much pain. She had a slightly far-away, dreamy look, and I noticed that the pupils of her eyes were mere pinpoints.
"This is M. Poirot whom you wanted to see," said Nurse Capstick in her high, cheerful voice.
"Oh, yes, M. Poirot," said Lady Clarke vaguely.
She extended her hand.
"My friend Captain Hastings, Lady Clarke."
"How do you do? So good of you both to come."
We sat down as her vague gesture directed. There was a silence.
Lady Clarke seemed to have lapsed into a dream.
Presently with a slight effort she roused herself.

- "It was about Car, wasn't it? About Car's death. Oh, yes."
- She sighed, but still in a far-away manner, shaking her head.
- "We never thought it would be that way round... I was so sure I should be the first to go..." She mused a minute or two. "Car was very strong wonderful for his age. He was never ill. He was nearly sixty but he seemed more like fifty... Yes, very strong..."
- She relapsed again into her dream. Poirot, who was well acquainted with the effects of certain drugs and of how they give their taker the impression of endless time, said nothing. Lady Clarke said suddenly:
- "Yes it was good of you to come. I told Franklin. He said he wouldn't forget to tell you. I hope Franklin isn't going to be foolish... e's so easily taken in, in spite of having knocked about the world so much. Men are like that They remain boys... Franklin, in particular."
- "He has an impulsive nature," said Poirot.
- "Yes yes... And very chivalrous. Men are so foolish that way. Even Car -" Her voice tailed off.
- She shook her head with a febrile impatience.
- "Everything's so dim... One's body is a nuisance, M. Poirot, especially when it gets the upper hand. One is conscious of nothing else whether the pain will hold off or not nothing else seems to matter."
- "I know, Lady Clarke. It is one of the tragedies of this life."
- "It makes me so stupid. I cannot even remember what it was I wanted to say to you."
- "Was it something about your husband's death?"
- "Car's death? Yes, perhaps... Mad, poor creature the murderer, I mean. It's all the noise and the speed nowadays people can't stand it. I've always been sorry for mad people their heads must feel so queer. And then, being shut up it must be so terrible. But what else can one do? If they kill people..."

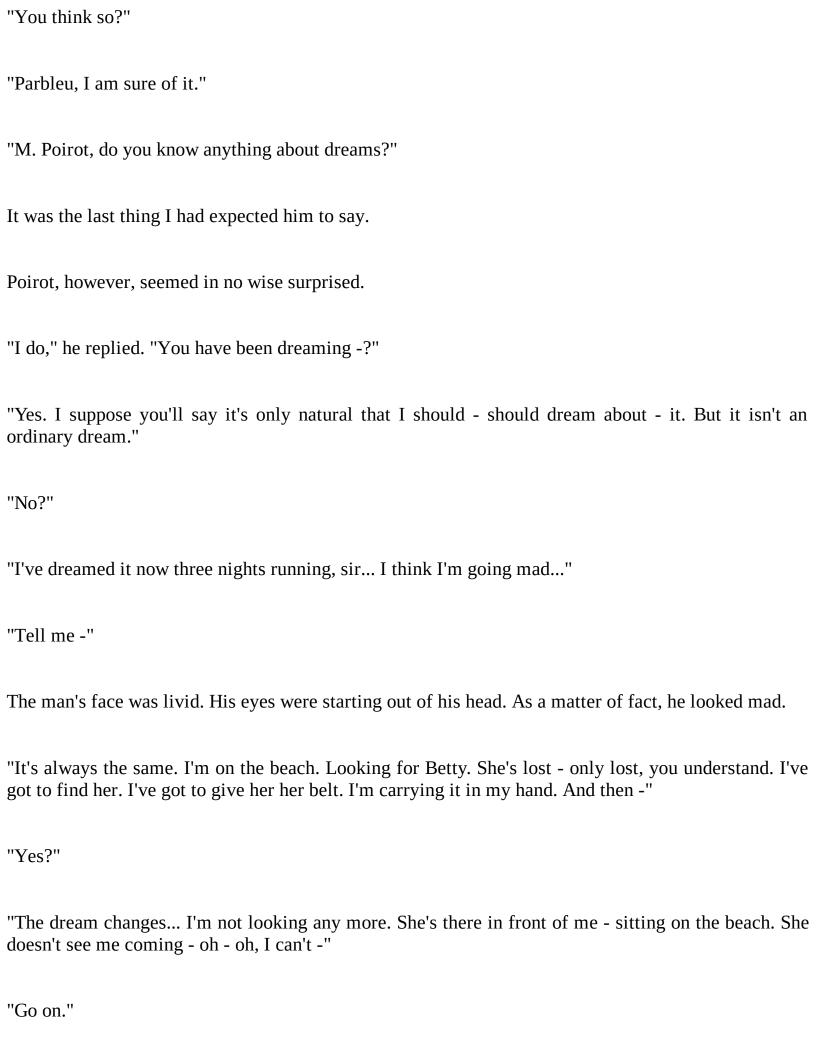




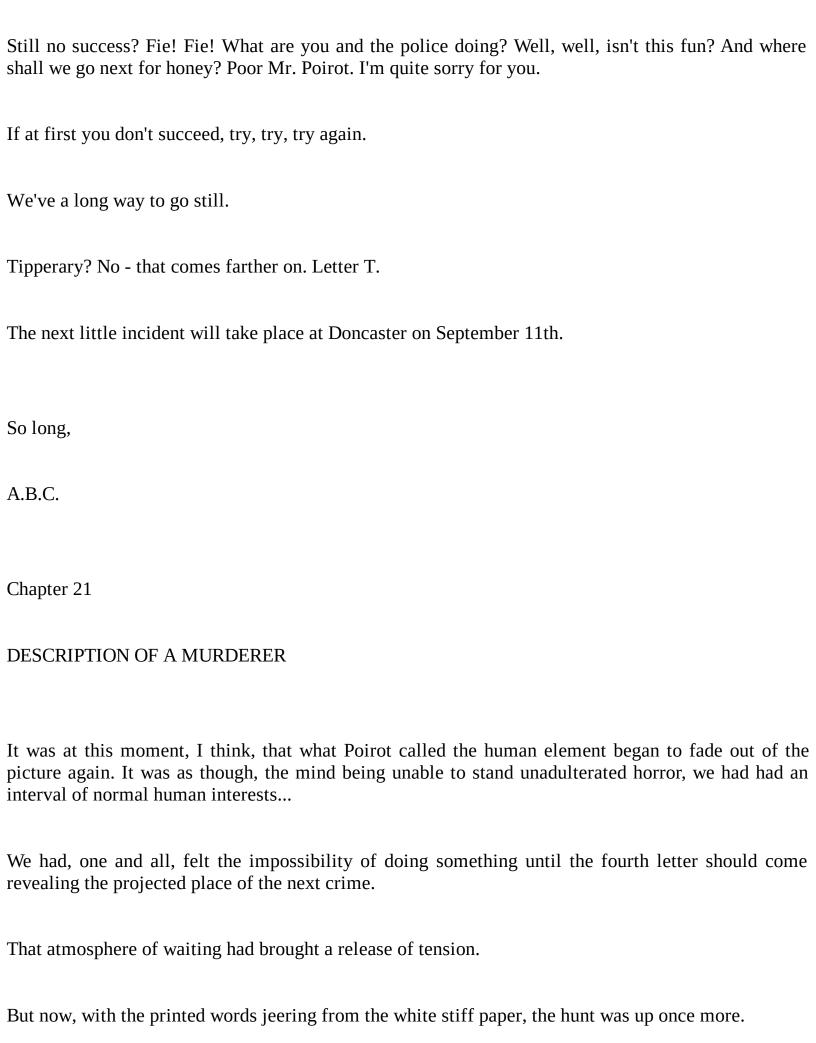




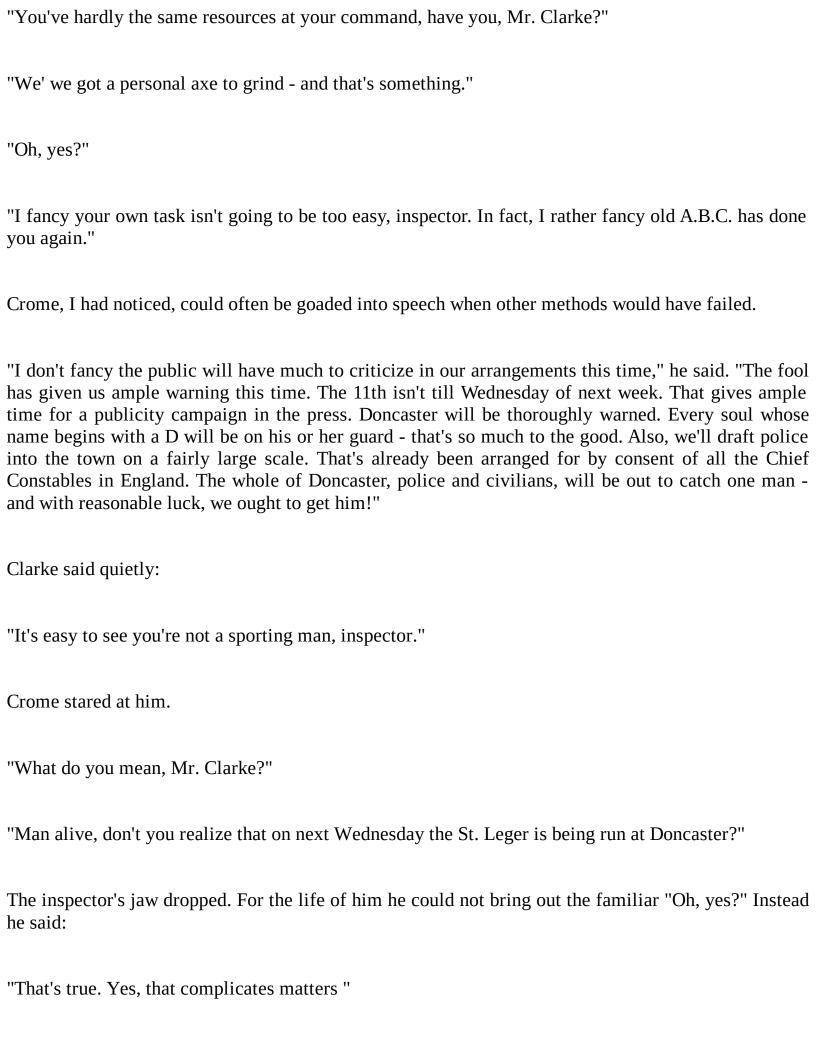
He seemed very embarrassed and his inarticulateness was more noticeable than ever.
Poirot did not press him to come to the point of his visit, but instead suggested sandwiches and a glass of wine.
Until these made their appearance he monopolized the conversation, explaining where we had been, and speaking with kindliness and feeling of the invalid woman.
Not until we finished the sandwiches and sipped the wine did he give the conversation a personal turn.
"You have come from Bexhill, Mr. Fraser?"
"Yes."
"Any success with Milly Higley?"
"Milly Higley? Milly Higley?" Fraser repeated the name wonderingly. "Oh, that girl! No, I haven't done anything there yet. It's -"
He stopped. His hands twisted themselves together nervously.
"I don't know why I've come to you," he burst out.
"I know," said Poirot.
"You can't. How can you?"
"You have come to me because there is something that you must tell to some one. You were quite right. I am the proper person. Speak!"
Poirot's air of assurance had its effect. Fraser looked at him with a queer air of grateful obedience.



Poirot's voice was authorative - firm.
"I come up behind her she doesn't hear me I slip the belt round her neck and pull - oh - pull -"
The agony in his voice was frightful I gripped the arms of my chair The thing was too real.
"She's choking she's dead I've strangled her - and then her head falls back and I see her face and it's Megan - not Betty!"
He leant back white and shaking. Poirot poured out another glass of wine and passed it over to him.
"What's the meaning of it, M. Poirot? Why does it come to me? Every night?"
"Drink up your wine," ordered Poirot.
The young man did so, then he asked in a calmer voice:
"What does it mean? I - I didn't kill her, did I?"
What Poirot answered I do not know, for at that minute I heard the postman's knock and automatically I left the room.
What I took out of the letter-box banished all my interest in Donald Fraser's extraordinary revelations.
I raced back into the sitting-room.
"Poirot," I cried. "It's come. The fourth letter."
He sprang up, seized it from me, caught up his paper-knife and slit it open. He spread it out on the table.
The three of us read it together.







"A.B.C. is no fool, even if he is a madman." We were all silent for a minute or two, taking in the situation. The crowds on the race-course - the passionate, sport-loving English public - the endless complications. Poirot murmured: "C'est ingénieux. Tout de même c'est bien imaginé, ça." "It's my belief," said Clarke, "that the murder will take place on the race-course - perhaps actually while the Leger is being run." For the moment his sporting instincts took a momentary pleasure in the thought... Inspector Crome rose, taking the letter with him.

"The St. Leger is a complication," he allowed. "It's unfortunate."

He went out. We heard a murmur of voices in the hallway. A minute later Thora Grey entered.

She said anxiously:

"The inspector told me there is another letter. Where this time?"

It was raining outside. Thora Grey was wearing a black coat and skirt and furs. A little black hat just perched itself on the side of her golden head.

It was to Franklin Clarke that she spoke and she came right up to him and, with a hand on his arm, waited for his answer.

"Doncaster - and on the day of the St. Leger."

We settled down to a discussion. It went without saying that we all intended to be present, but the

race-meeting undoubtedly complicated the plans we had made tentatively beforehand.

A feeling of discouragement swept over me. What could this little band of six people do, after all, however strong their personal interest in the matter might be? There would be innumerable police, keen-eyed and alert, watching all likely spots. What could six more pairs of eyes do?

As though in answer to my thought, Poirot raised his voice. He spoke rather like a schoolmaster or a priest.

"Mes enfants," he said, "we must not disperse the strength. We must approach this matter with method and order in our thoughts. We must look within and not without for the truth. We must say to ourselves - each one of us - what do I know about the murderer? And so we must build up a composite picture of the man we are going to seek."

"We know nothing about him," sighed Thora Grey helplessly.

"No, no, mademoiselle. That is not true. Each one of us knows something about him - if we only knew what it is we know. I am convinced that the knowledge is there if we could only get at it."

Clarke shook his head.

"We don't know anything - whether he's old or young, fair or dark! None of us has even seen him or spoken to him! We've gone over everything we all know again and again."

"Not everything! For instance, Miss Grey here told us that she did not see or speak to any stranger on the day that Sir Carmichael Clarke was murdered."

Thora Grey nodded.

"That's quite right."

"Is it? Lady Clarke told us, mademoiselle, that from her window she saw you standing on the front door step talking to a man."

"She saw me talking to a strange man?" The girl seemed genuinely astonished. Surely that pure,

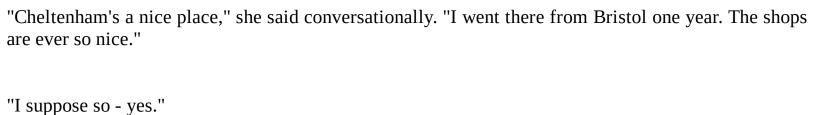


"Yes - yes - she did... I remember now. She said something about being sorry for these wretched men

mother bought those stockings, not at a shop, but from some one who came to the door?"

who go round and try to get on."
"But what's the connection?" cried Franklin. "That a man came selling stockings proves nothing!"
"I tell you, my friends, it cannot be coincidence. Three crimes - and every time a man selling stockings and spying out the land."
He wheeled round on Thora.
"A vous la parole! Describe this man."
She looked at him blankly.
"I can't I don't know how He had glasses, I think and a shabby overcoat"
"Mieux que fa, mademoiselle."
"He stooped I don't know. I hardly looked at him. He wasn't the sort of man you'd notice "
Poirot said gravely:
"You are quite right, mademoiselle. The whole secret of the murders is there in your description of the murderer - for without a doubt he was the murderer! 'He wasn't the sort of man you'd notice.' Yes - there is no doubt about it You have described the murderer!"
Chapter 22
(Not from Captain Hastings' Personal Narrative)
Mr. Alexander Bonaparte Cust sat very still. His breakfast lay cold and untasted on his plate. A newspaper was propped up against the teapot and it was this newspaper that Mr. Cust was reading with





Mrs. Marbury stooped rather stiffly - for stooping did not suit her figure - to pick up the paper that was lying crumpled on the floor.

"Nothing but this murdering business in the papers nowadays," she said as she glanced at the headlines before putting it back on the table.

"Gives me the creeps, it does. I don't read it. It's like Jack the Ripper all over again."

Mr. Cust's lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"Doncaster - that's the place he's going to do his next murder," said Mrs. Marbury. "And tomorrow! Fairly makes your flesh creep, doesn't it? If I lived in Doncaster and my name began with a D, I'd take the first train away, that I would. I'd run no risks. What did you say, Mr. Cust?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Marbury - nothing."

"It's the races and all. No doubt he thinks he'll get his opportunity there. Hundreds of police, they say, they're drafting in and - Why, Mr. Cust, you do look bad. Hadn't you better have a little drop of something? Really, now, you oughtn't to go travelling today."

Mr. Cust drew himself up.

"It is necessary, Mrs. Marbury. I have always been punctual in my - engagements. People must have - must have confidence in you! When I have undertaken to do a thing, I carry it through. It is the only way to get on in - in - business."

"But if you're ill?"

"I am not ill, Mrs. Marbury. Just a little worried over - various personal matters. I slept badly. I am really quite all right."

His manner was so firm that Mrs. Marbury gathered up the breakfast things and reluctantly left the room.
Mr. Cust dragged out a suitcase from under the bed and began to Pack. Pyjamas, sponge-bag, spare collar, leather slippers. Then unlocking a cupboard, he transferred a dozen or so flattish cardboard boxes about ten inches by seven from a shelf to the suitcase.
He just glanced at the railway guide on the table and then left the room, suitcase in hand.
Setting it down in the hall, he put on his hat and overcoat. As he did so he sighed deeply, so deeply that the girl who came out from a room at the side looked at him in concern.
"Anything the matter, Mr. Cust?"
"Nothing, Miss Lily."
"You were sighing so!"
Mr. Cust said abruptly:
"Are you at all subject to premonitions, Miss Lily? To presentiments?"
"Well, I don't know that I am, really Of course, there are days when you just feel everything's going wrong, and days when you feel everything's going right."
"Quite," said Mr. Cust.
He sighed again.
"Well, good-bye, Miss Lily. Good-bye. I'm sure you've been very kind to me always here."
"Well, don't say good-bye as though you were going away for ever," laughed Lily.

"No, no, of course not."
"See you Friday," laughed the girl. "Where are you going this time? Seaside again?"
"No, no - er - Cheltenham."
"Well, that's nice, too. But not quite as nice as Torquay. That must have been lovely. I want to go there for my holiday next year. By the way, you must have been quite near where the murder was - the A.B.C. murder. It happened while you were down there, didn't it?"
"Er - yes. But Churston's six or seven miles away."
"All the same, it must have been exciting! Why, you may have passed the murderer in the street! You may have been quite near to him!"
"Yes, I may, of course," said Mr. Cust with such a ghastly and contorted smile that Lily Marbury noticed it.
"Oh, Mr. Cust, you don't look well."
"I'm quite all right, quite all right. Good-bye, Miss Marbury."
He fumbled to raise his hat, caught up his suitcase and fairly hastened out of the front door.
"Funny old thing," said Lily Marbury indulgently. "Looks half batty to my mind."
Inspector Crome said to his subordinate:
"Get me out a list of all stocking manufacturing firms and circularize them. I want a list of all their agents - you know, fellows who sell on commission and tout for orders."

"This the A.B.C. case, sir?"
"Yes. One of Mr. Hercule Poirot's ideas." The inspector's tone was disdainful. "Probably nothing in it, but it doesn't do to neglect any chance, however faint."
"Right, sir. Mr. Poirot done some good stuff in his time, but I think he's a bit ga ga now, sir."
"He's a mountebank," said Inspector Crome. "Always posing. Takes in some people. It doesn't take in me. Now then, about the arrangement for Doncaster"
Tom Hartigan said to Lily Marbury:
"Saw your old dugout this morning."
"Who? Mr. Cust?"
"Cust it was. At Euston. Looking like a lost hen, as usual. I think the fellow's half a loony. He needs some one to look after him. First he dropped his paper and then he dropped his ticket. I picked that up - he hadn't the faintest idea he'd lost it. Thanked me in an agitated sort of manner, but I don't think he recognized me."
"Oh, well," said Lily. "He's only seen you passing in the hall, and not very often at that."
They danced once round the floor.
"You dance something beautiful," said Tom.
"Go on," said Lily and wriggled yet a little closer.
They danced round again.
"Did you say Euston or Paddington?" asked Lily abruptly. "Where you saw old Cust, I mean?"



Lily crinkled her brows.
"He was away Yes, I remember he was away because he forgot his bathing-dress. Mother was mending it for him. And she said: 'There - Mr. Cust went away yesterday without his bathing-dress after all,' and I said: 'Oh, never mind the old bathing-dress - there's been the most awful murder,' I said, 'a girl strangled at Bexhill.'"
"Well, if he wanted his bathing-dress, he must have been going to the seaside. I say, Lily -" his face crinkled up with amusement. "What price your old dugout being the murderer himself?"
"Poor Mr. Cust? He wouldn't hurt a fly," laughed Lily.
They danced on happily - in their conscious minds nothing but the pleasure of being together.
In their unconscious minds something stirred
Chapter 23
SEPTEMBER 11TH, DONCASTER
Doncaster!
I shall, I think, remember that 11th of September all my life.
Indeed, whenever I see a mention of the St. Leger my mind flies automatically not to horse-racing but to murder.
When I recall my own sensations, the thing that stands out most is a sickening sense of insufficiency. We were here - on the spot - Poirot, myself, Clarke, Fraser, Megan Barnard, Thora Grey and Mary Drower, and in the last resort what could any of us do?

We were building on a forlorn hope on the chance of recognizing amongst a crowd of thousands of people a face or figure imperfectly seen on an occasion one, two or three months back.

The odds were in reality greater than that. Of us all, the only person likely to make such a recognition was Thora Grey.

Some of her serenity had broken down under the strain. Her callous efficient manner was gone. She sat twisting her hands together and weeping, appealing incoherently to Poirot.

"I never really looked at him... Why didn't I? What a fool I was. You're depending on me, all of you... and I shall let you down. Because even if I did see him again I mightn't recognize him. I've got bad memory for faces."

Poirot, whatever he might say to me, and however harshly he might seem to criticize the girl, showed nothing but kindness now. His manner was tender in the extreme. It struck me that Poirot was no more indifferent to beauty in distress than I was.

He patted her shoulder kindly.

"Now then, petite, not the hysteria. We cannot have that. If you should see this man you would recognize him."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, a great many reasons - for one, because the red succeeds the black."

"What do you mean, Poirot?" I cried.

"I speak the language of the tables. At roulette there may be a long run on the black - but in the end red must turn up. It is the mathematical laws of chance."

"You mean that luck turns?"

"Exactly, Hastings. And that is where the gambler (and the murderer, who is, after all, only a supreme kind of gambler since what he risks is not his money but his life) often lacks intelligent anticipation.

Because he has won he thinks he will continue to win! He does not leave the tables in good time with his pockets full. So in crime the murderer who is successful cannot conceive the possibility of not being successful! He takes to himself all the credit for a successful performance - but I tell you, my friends, however carefully planned - no crime can be successful without luck!"

"Isn't that going rather far?" demurred Franklin Clarke.

Poirot waved his hands excitedly.

"No, no. It is an even chance, if you like, but it must be in your favour. Consider! It might have happened that some one enters Mrs. Ascher's shop just as the murderer is leaving. That person might have thought of looking behind the counter, have seen the dead woman - and either laid hands on the murderer straight away or else been able to give such an accurate description of him to the police that he would have been arrested forthwith."

"Yes, of course, that's possible," admitted Clarke. "What it comes to is that a murderer's got to take a chance."

"Precisely. A murderer is always a gambler. And, like many gamblers, a murderer often does not know when to stop. With each crime his opinion of his own abilities is strengthened. His sense of proportion is warped. He does not say, 'I have been clever and lucky!' No, he says only, 'I have been clever!' And his opinion of his cleverness grows... nd then, mes amis, the ball spins, and the run of colour is over - it drops into a new number and the croupier calls out 'Rouge.'"

"You think that will happen in this case?" asked Megan, drawing her brows together in a frown.

"It must happen sooner or later! So far the luck has been with the criminal - sooner or later it must turn and be with us. I believe that it has turned! The clue of the stockings is the beginning. Now, instead of everything going right for him, everything will go wrong for him! And he, too, will begin to make mistakes..."

"I will say you're heartening," said Franklin Clarke. "We all need a bit of comfort. I've had a paralyzing feeling of helplessness ever since I woke up."

"It seems to me highly problematical that we can accomplish anything of practical value," said Donald Fraser.

"Don't be a defeatist, Don."
Mary Drower, flushing up a little, said:
"What I say is, you never know. That wicked fiend's in this place, and so are we - and after all, you do run up against people in the funniest way sometimes."
I fumed:
"If only we could do something more."
"You must remember, Hastings, that the police are doing everything reasonably possible. Special constables have been enrolled. The good Inspector Crome may have the irritating manner, but he is a very able police officer, and Colonel Anderson, the Chief Constable, is a man of action. They have taken the fullest measures for watching and patrolling the town and the race-course. There will be plain clothes men everywhere. There is also the press campaign. The public is fully warned."
Donald Fraser shook his head.
"He'll never attempt it, I'm thinking," he said more hopefully. "The man would just be mad!"
"Unfortunately," said Clarke dryly, "he is mad! What do you think, M. Poirot? Will he give it up or will he try to carry it through?"
"In my opinion the strength of his obsession is such that he must attempt to carry out his promise! Not to do so would he to admit failure, and that his insane egoism would never allow. That, I may say, is also Dr. Thompson's opinion. Our hope is that he may he caught in the attempt."
Donald shook his head again.
"He'll be very cunning."

Megan rapped out:

Poirot glanced at his watch. We took the hint. It had been agreed that we were to make an all day session of it, patrolling as many streets as possible in the morning, and later, stationing ourselves at various likely points on the racecourse.
I say "we." Of course, in my own case such a patrol was of little avail since I was never likely to have set eyes on A.B.C. However, as the idea was to separate so as to cover as wide an area as possible I had suggested that I should act as escort to one of the ladies.

Poirot had agreed - I am afraid with somewhat of a twinkle in his eye.

The girls went off to get their hats on. Donald Fraser was standing by the window looking out, apparently lost in thought.

Franklin Clarke glanced over at him, then evidently deciding that the other was too abstracted to count as a listener, he lowered his voice a little and addressed Poirot.

"Look here, M. Poirot. You went down to Churston, I know, and saw my sister-in-law. Did she say - or hint - I mean - did she suggest at all -?"

He stopped, embarrassed.

Poirot answered with a face of blank innocence that aroused my strongest suspicions.

"Comment? Did your sister-in-law say, hint or suggest - what?"

Franklin Clarke got rather red.

"Perhaps you think this isn't a time for butting in with personal things -"

"Du tout!"

"But I feel I'd like to get things quite straight."

"An admirable course."

This time I think Clarke began to suspect Poirot's bland face of concealing some inner amusement. He ploughed on rather heavily.

"My sister-in-law's an awfully nice woman - I've been very fond of her always - but of course she's been ill some time - and in that kind of illness - being given drugs and all that - one tends to - well to fancy things about people!"

"Ah!"

By now there was no mistaking the twinkle in Poirot's eye. But Franklin Clarke, absorbed in his diplomatic task, was past noticing it. "It's about Thora - Miss Grey," he said.

"Oh, it is of Miss Grey you speak?" Poirot's tone held innocent surprise.

"Yes. Lady Clarke got certain ideas in her head. You see, Thora - Miss Grey is well, rather a good-looking girl -"

"Perhaps - yes," conceded Poirot.

"And women are, even the best of them, a bit catty about other women. Of course, Thora was invaluable to my brother - he always said she was the best secretary he ever had - and he was very fond of her, too. But it was all perfectly straight and above-board. I mean, Thora isn't the sort of girl -"

"No?" said Poirot helpfully.

"But my sister-in-law got it into her head to be - well - jealous, I suppose. Not that she ever showed anything. But after Car's death, when there was a question of Miss Grey staying on - well, Charlotte cut up rough. Of course, it's partly the illness and the morphia and all that - Nurse Capstick says so - she says we mustn't blame Charlotte for getting these ideas into her head -"

He paused.

"Yes?

"What I want you to understand, M. Poirot, is that there isn't anything in it at all. It's just a sick woman's imaginings. Look here -" he fumbled in his pocket - "here's a letter I received from my brother when I was in the Malay States. I'd like you to read it because it shows exactly what terms they were on."

Poirot took it. Franklin came over beside him and with a pointing finger read some of the extracts out loud.

- things go on here much as usual. Charlotte is moderately free from pain. I wish one could say more. You may remember Thora Grey? She is a dear girl and a greater comfort to me that I can tell you. I should not have known what to do through this bad time but for her. Her sympathy and interest are unfailing. She has an exquisite taste and flair for beautiful things and shares my passion for Chinese art. I was indeed lucky to find her. No daughter could be a closer or more sympathetic companion. Her life had been a difficult and not always a happy one, but I am glad to feel that here she has a home and a true affection.

"You see," said Franklin. "That's how my brother felt to her. He thought of her like a daughter. What I feel so unfair is the fact that the moment my brother is dead, his wife practically turns her out of the house! Women really are devils, M. Poirot."

"Your sister-in-law is ill and in pain, remember."

"I know. That's what I keep saying to myself. One mustn't judge her. All the same, I thought I'd show you this. I don't want you to get a false impression of Thora from anything Lady Clarke may have said."

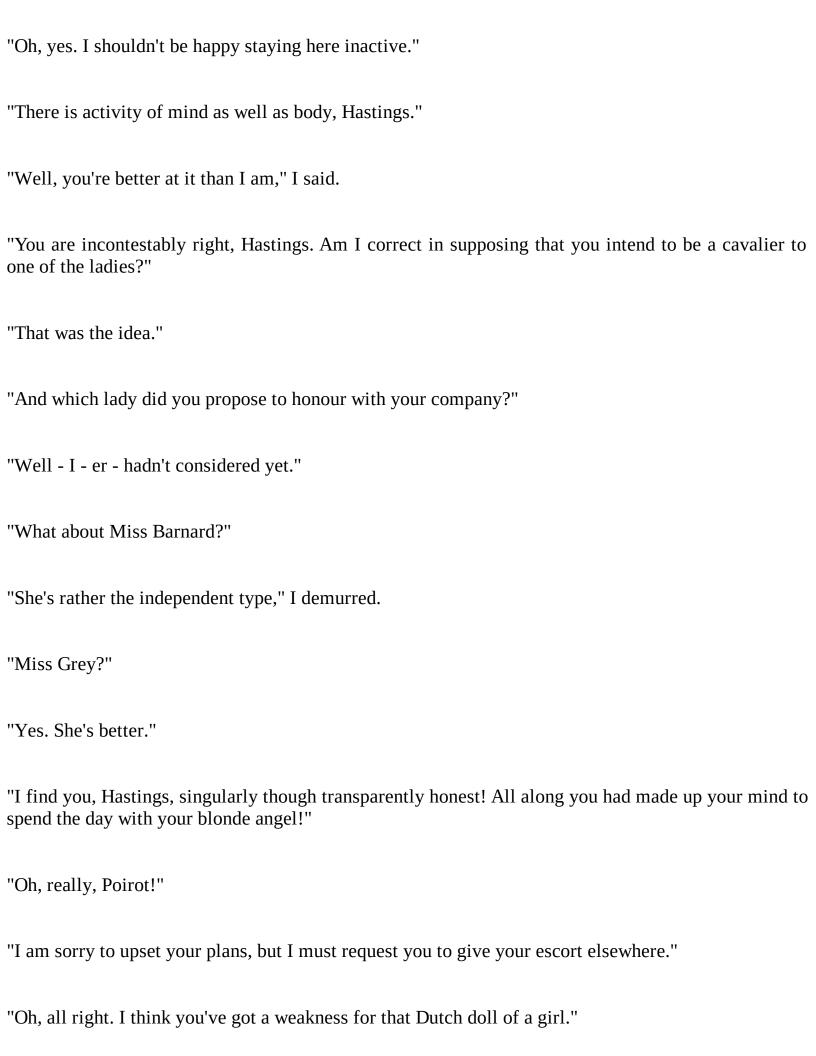
Poirot returned the letter.

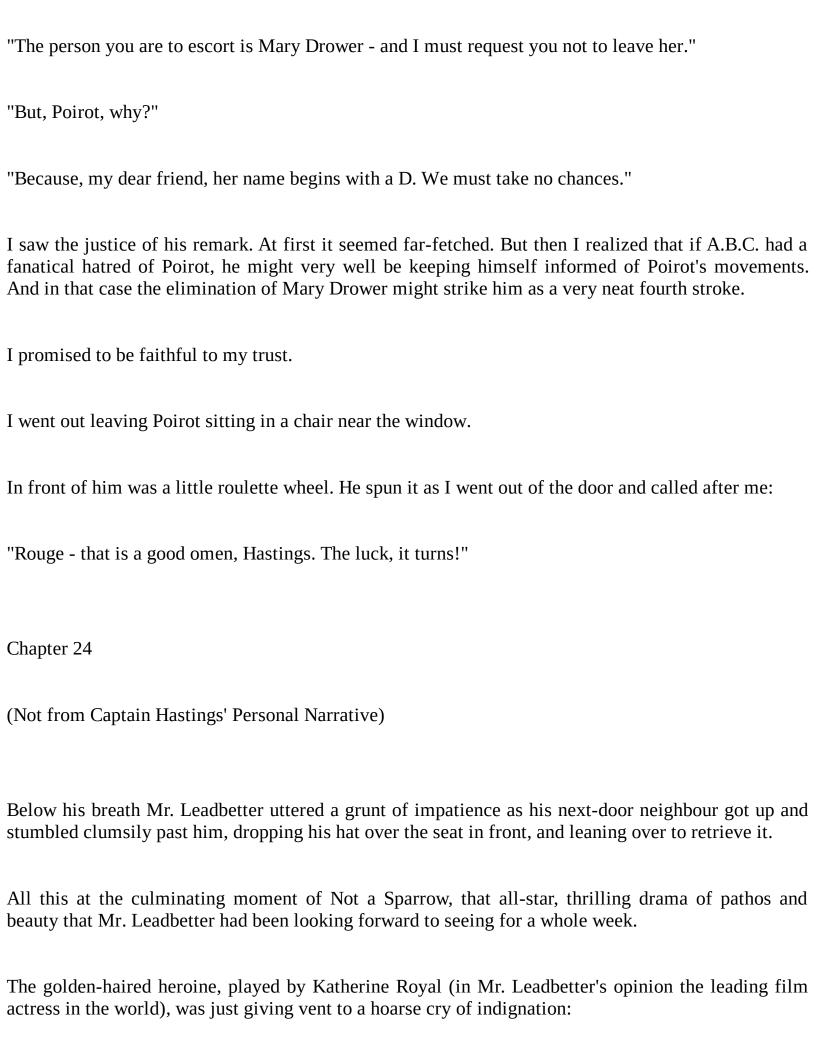
"I can assure you," he said, smiling, "that I never permit myself to get false impressions from anything any one tells me. I form my own judgments."

"Well," said Clarke, stowing away the letter, "I'm glad I showed it to you anyway. Here come the girls. We'd better be off."

As we left the room, Poirot called me back.

"You are determined to accompany the expedition, Hastings?"





"Never. I would sooner starve. But I shan't starve. Remember those words: not a sparrow falls -"

Mr. Leadbetter moved his head irritably from right to left. People! Why on earth people couldn't wait till the end of a film... and to leave at this soul-stirring moment.

Ah, that was better. The annoying gentleman had passed on and out. Mr. Leadbetter had a full view of the screen and of Katherine Royal standing by the window in the Van Schreiner Mansion in New York.

And now she was boarding the train - the child in her arms... What curious trains they had in America - not at all like English trains.

Ah, there was Steve again in his shack in the mountains...

The film pursued its course to its emotional and semi-religious end. Mr. Leadbetter breathed a sigh of satisfaction as the lights went up.

He rose slowly to his feet, blinking a little.

He never left the cinema very quickly. It always took him a moment or two to return to the prosaic reality of everyday life.

He glanced round. Not many people this afternoon - naturally. They were all at the races. Mr. Leadbetter did not approve of racing or of playing cards or of drinking or of smoking. This left him more energy to enjoy going to the pictures.

Every one was hurrying towards the exit. Mr. Leadbetter prepared to follow suit. The man in the seat in front of him was asleep - slumped down in his chair. Mr. Leadbetter felt indignant to think that any one could sleep with such a drama as Not a Sparrow going on.

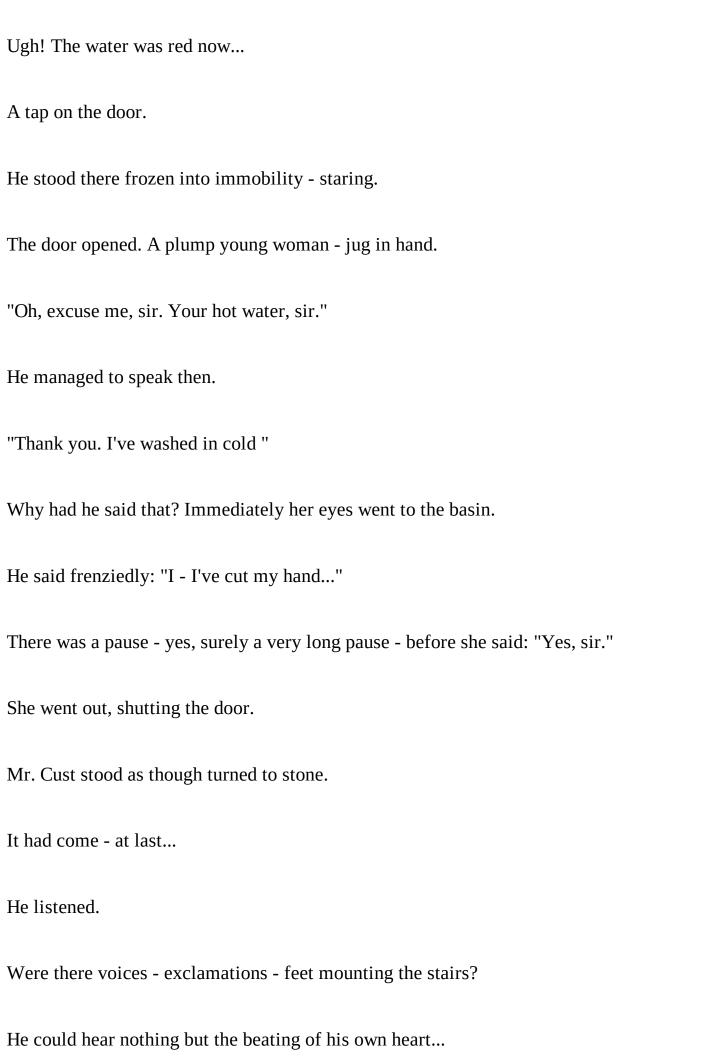
An irate gentleman was saying to the sleeping man whose legs were stretched out blocking the way:

"Excuse me, sir."

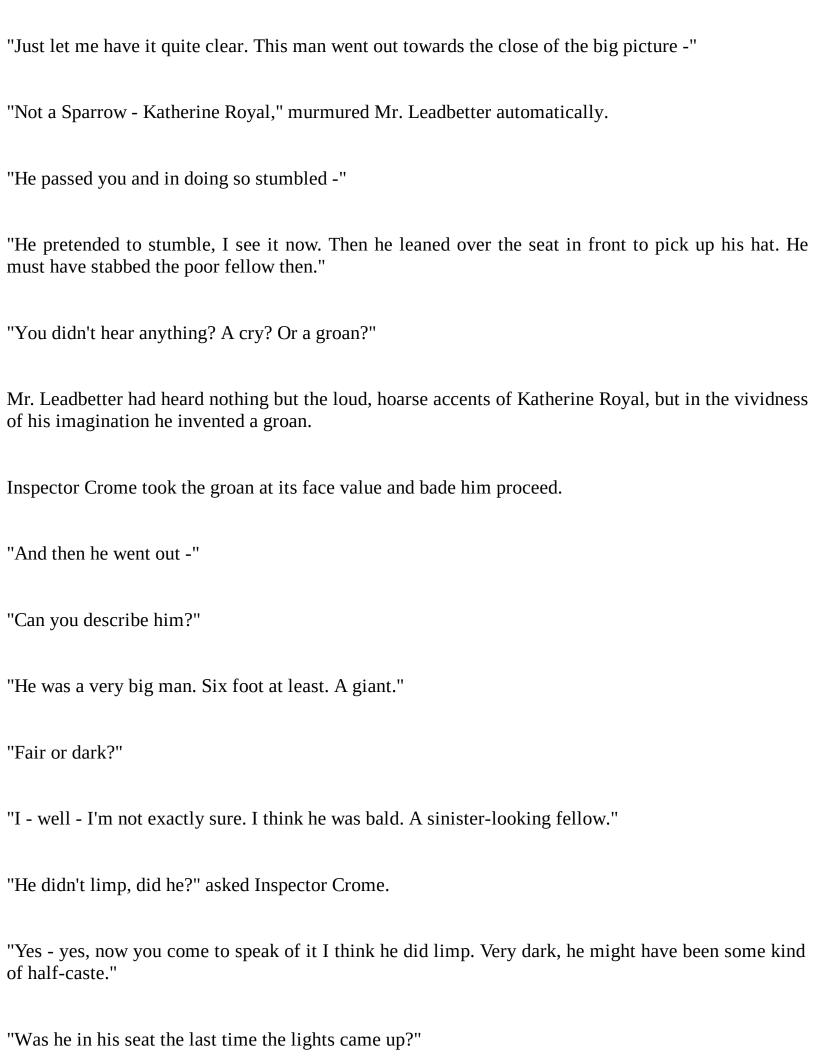
Mr. Leadbetter reached the exit. He looked back.



He had always been fond of that quotation. Only there were times, very often, when he had felt it wasn't true. He trotted along the street smiling to himself until he came to the Black Swan where he was staying. He climbed the stairs to his bedroom, a stuffy little room on the second floor, giving over a paved inner court and garage. As he entered the room, his smile faded suddenly. There was a stain on his sleeve near the cuff. He touched it tentatively - wet and red - blood... His hand dipped into his pocket and brought out something - a long, slender knife. The blade of that, too, was sticky and red... Mr. Cust sat there a long time. Once his eyes shot round the room like those of a hunted animal. His tongue passed feverishly over his lips... "It isn't my fault," said Mr. Cust. He sounded as though he were arguing with somebody - a schoolboy pleading to his schoolmaster. He passed his tongue over his lips again... Again, tentatively, he felt his coat sleeve. His eyes crossed the room to the washbasin. A minute later he was pouring out water from the old-fashioned jug into the basin. Removing his coat, he rinsed the sleeve, carefully squeezing it out...



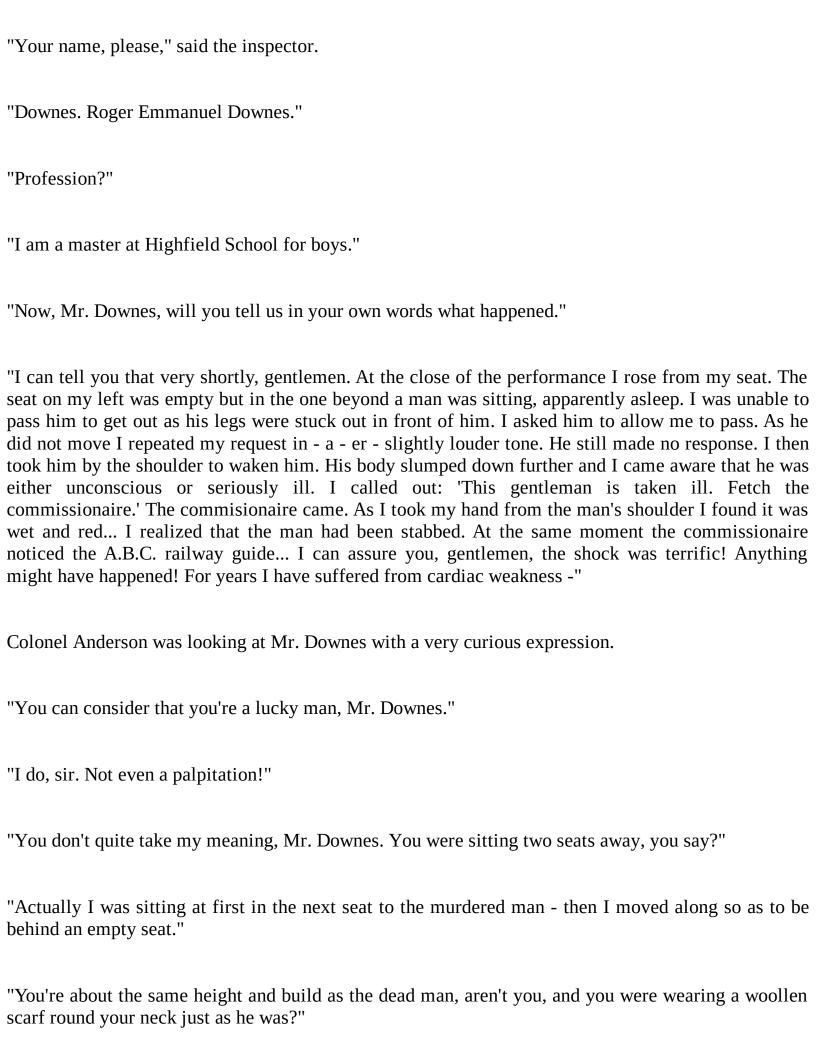
Then, suddenly, from frozen immobility he leaped into activity.
He slipped on his coat, tiptoed to the door and opened it. No noise as yet except the familiar murmur arising from the bar. He crept down the stairs
Still no one. That was luck. He paused at the foot of the stairs. Which way now?
He made up his mind, darted quickly along a passage and out by the door that gave into the yard. A couple of chauffeurs were there tinkering with cars and discussing winners and losers.
Mr. Cust hurried across the yard and out into the street.
Round the first corner to the right - then to the left - right again
Dare he risk the station?
Yes - there would be crowds there - special trains - if luck were on his side he would do it all right
If only luck were with him
Chapter 26
(Not from Captain Hastings' Personal Narrative)
Inspector Crome was listening to the excited utterances of Mr. Leadbetter.
"I assure you, inspector, my heart misses a beat when I think of it. He must actually have been sitting beside me all through the programme!"
Inspector Crome, completely indifferent to the behaviour of Mr. Leadbetter's heart, said:



"No. He came in after the big picture began."
Inspector Crome nodded, handed Mr. Leadbetter a statement to sign and got rid of him.
"That's about as bad a witness as you'll find," he remarked pessimistically. "He'd say anything with a little leading. It's perfectly clear that he hasn't the faintest idea what our man looks like. Let's have the commissionaire back."
The commissionaire, very stiff and military, came in and stood to attention, his eyes fixed on Colonel Anderson.
"Now, then, Jameson, let's hear your story."
Jameson saluted.
"Yes, sir. Close of the performance, sir, I was told there was a gentleman taken ill, sir. Gentleman was in the two and fourpennies, slumped down in his seat like. Other gentlemen standing around. Gentleman looked bad to me, sir. One of the gentlemen standing by put his hand to the ill gentleman's coat and drew my attention. Blood, sir. It was clear the gentleman was dead - stabbed, sir. My attention was drawn to an A.B.C. railway guide, sir, under the seat. Wishing to act correctly, I did not touch same, but reported to the police immediately that a tragedy had occurred."
"Very good, Jameson, you acted very properly."
"Thank you, sir."
"Did you notice a man leaving the two and fourpennies about five minutes earlier?"
"There were several, sir."
"Could you describe them?"
"Afraid not, sir. One was Mr. Geoffrey Parnell. And there was a young fellow, Sam Baker, with his young lady. I didn't notice anybody else particular."







"I fail to see -" began Mr. Downes stiffly.

"I'm telling you, man," said Colonel Anderson, "just where your luck came in. Somehow or other, when the murderer followed you in, he got confused. He picked on the wrong back. I'll eat my hat, Mr. Downes, if that knife wasn't meant for you!"

However well Mr. Downes' heart had stood former tests, it was unable to stand up to this one. Mr. Downes sank on a chair, gasped, and turned purple in the face.

"Water," he gasped. "Water..."

A glass was brought him. He sipped it whilst his complexion gradually returned to normal.

"Me?" he said. "Why me?"

"It looks like it," said Crome. "In fact, it's the only explanation."

"You mean that this man - this - this fiend incarnate - this blood-thirsty madman has been following me about waiting for an opportunity?"

"I should say that was the way of it."

"But in heaven's name, why me?" demanded the outraged schoolmaster.

Inspector Crome struggled with the temptation to reply: "Why not?" and said instead: "I'm afraid it's no good expecting a lunatic to have reasons for what he does."

"God bless my soul," said Mr. Downes, sobered into whispering.
He got up. He looked suddenly old and shaken.
"If you don't want me any more, gentlemen, I think I'll go home. I - I don't feel very well."
"That's quite all right, Mr. Downes. I'll send a constable with you - just to see you're all right."
"Oh, no - no, thank you. That's not necessary."
"Might as well," said Colonel Anderson gruffly.
His eyes slid sideways, asking an imperceptible question of the inspector.
The latter gave an equally imperceptible nod.
Mr. Downes went out shakily.
"Just as well he didn't tumble to it," said Colonel Anderson.
"There'll be a couple of them - eh?"
"Yes, sir. Your Inspector Rice has made arrangements. The house will be watched."
"You think," said Poirot, "that when A.B.C. finds out his mistake he might try again?"
Anderson nodded.
"It's a possibility," he said. "Seems a methodical sort of chap, A.B.C. It will upset him if things don't go according to programme."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.
"Wish we could get a description of the fellow," said Colonel Anderson irritably. "We're as much in the dark as ever."
"It may come," said Poirot.
"Think so? Well, it's possible. Damn it all, hasn't any one got eyes in his head?"
"Have patience," said Poirot.
"You seem very confident, M. Poirot. Got any reason for this optimism?"
"Yes, Colonel Anderson. Up to now, the murderer has not made a mistake. He is bound to make one soon."
"If that's all you've got to go on," began the Chief Constable with a snort, but he was interrupted.

"Mr. Ball of the Black Swan is here with a young woman, sir. He reckons he's got summat to say

Mr. Ball of the Black Swan was a large, slow-thinking, heavily-moving man. He exhaled a strong odour of beer. With him was a plump young woman with round eyes clearly in a state of high

"Hope I'm not intruding or wasting valuable time," said Mr. Ball a slow, thick voice. "But this wench,

"Bring them along. Bring them along. We can do with anything helpful."

Mary here, reckons she's got something to tell as you ought to know."

"Well, my girl, what is it?" said Anderson. "What's your name?"

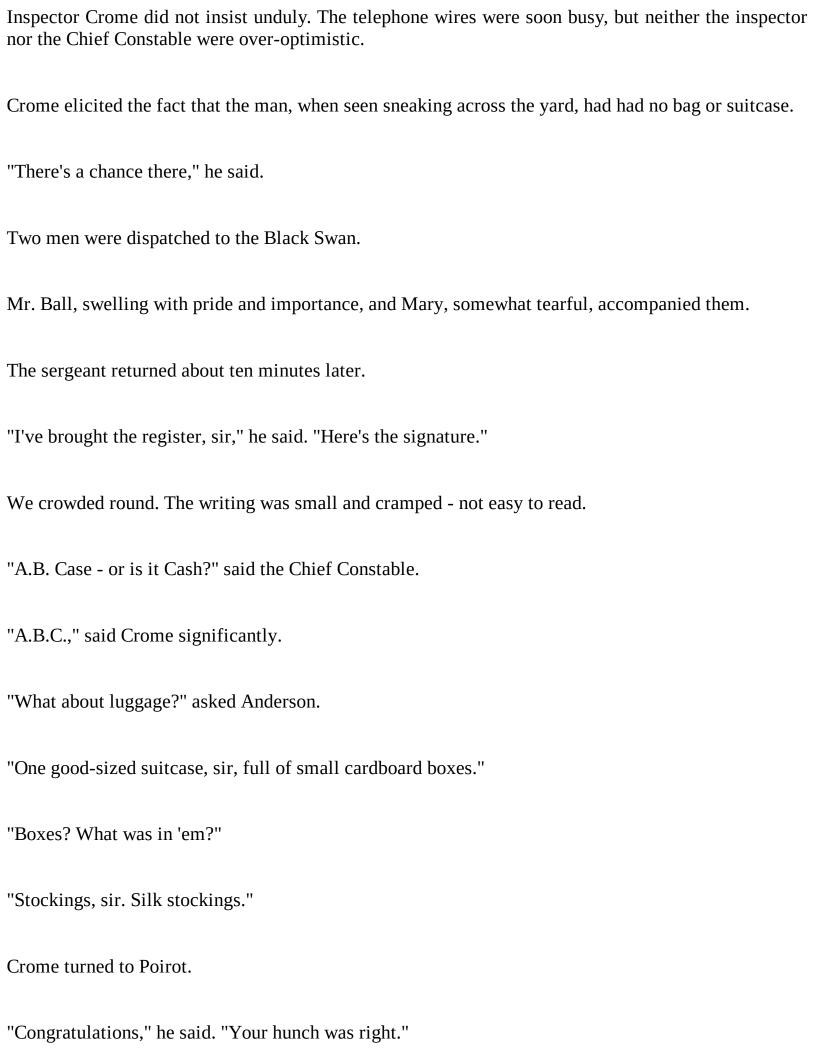
might help you."

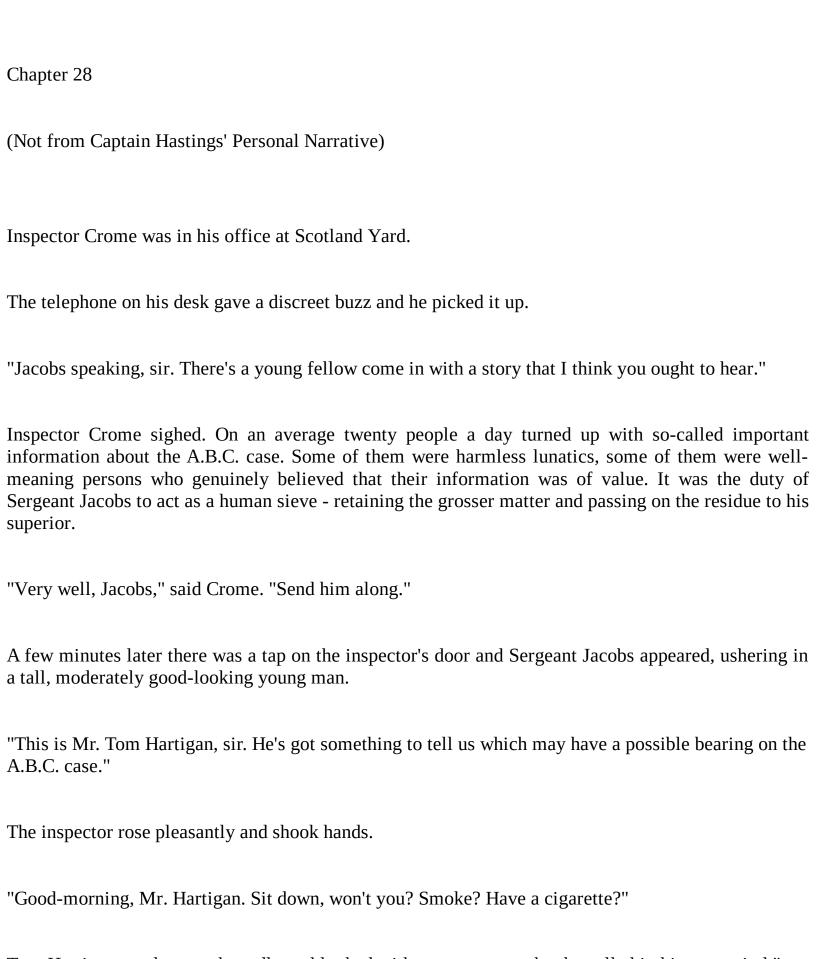
excitement.

Mary giggled in a half-hearted way.

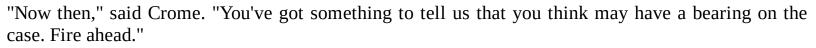








Tom Hartigan sat down awkwardly and looked with some awe at what he called in his own mind "one of the bigwigs." The appearance of the inspector vaguely disappointed him. He looked quite an ordinary person.



Tom began nervously.

"Of course it may be nothing at all. It's just an idea of mine. I may be wasting your time."

Again, Inspector Crome sighed imperceptibly. The amount of time he had to waste in reassuring people!

"We're the best judge of that. Let's have the facts, Mr. Hartigan."

"Well, it's like this, sir. I've got a young lady, you see, and her mother lets rooms. Up Camden Town way. Their second floor back has been let for over a year to a man called Cust."

"Cust - eh?"

"That's right, sir. A sort of middle-aged bloke what's rather vague and soft - and come down in the world a bit, I should say. Sort of creature who wouldn't hurt a fly, you'd say - and I'd never of dreamed of anything being wrong if it hadn't been for something rather odd."

In a somewhat confused manner and repeating himself once or twice, Tom described his encounter with Mr. Cust at Euston Station and the incident of the dropped ticket.

"You see, sir, look at it how you will, it's funny like. Lily, that's my young lady, sir - she was quite positive that it was Cheltenham he said, and her mother says the same - says she remembers distinct talking about it the morning he went off. Of course, I didn't pay much attention to it at the time. Lily - my young lady said as how she hoped he wouldn't cop it for this A.B.C. fellow going to Doncaster - and then she says it's rather a coincidence because he was down Churston way at the time of the last crime. Laughing like, I asks her whether he was at Bexhill the time before, and she says she don't know where he was, but he was away at the seaside - that she does know. And then I said to her it would be odd if he was the A.B.C. himself and she said poor Mr. Cust wouldn't hurt a fly - and that was all at the time. We didn't think no more about it. At least, in a sort of way I did, sir, underneath like. I began wondering about this Cust fellow and thinking that, after all, harmless as he seemed, he might be a bit batty."

Tom took a breath and then went on. Inspector Crome was listening intently now.

"And then after the Doncaster murder, sir, it was in all the papers that information was wanted as to the whereabouts of a certain A.B. Case or Cash, and it gave a description that fitted well enough. First evening off I had, I went round to Lily's and asked her what her Mr. Cust's initials were. She couldn't remember at first, but her mother did.

Said they were A.B. right enough. Then we got down to it and tried to figure out if Cust had been away at the time of the first murder at Andover. Well, as you know, sir, it isn't too easy to remember things three months back. We had a job of it, but we got it fixed down in the end, because Mrs. Marbury had a brother come from Canada to see her on June 21st. He arrived unexpected like and she wanted to give him a bed, and Lily suggested that as Mr. Cust was away Bert Marbury might have his bed. But Mrs. Marbury wouldn't agree, because she said it wasn't acting right by her lodger, and she always liked to act fair and square. But we fixed the date all right because of Bert Marbury's ship docking at Southampton that day."

Inspector Crome had listened very attentively, jotting down an occasional note.

"That's all?" he asked.

"That's all, sir. I hope you don't think I'm making a lot of nothing." Tom flushed slightly.

"Not at all. You were quite right to come here. Of course, it's very slight evidence - these dates may be mere coincidence and the likeness of the name, too. But it certainly warrants my having an interview with your Mr. Cust. Is he at home now?"

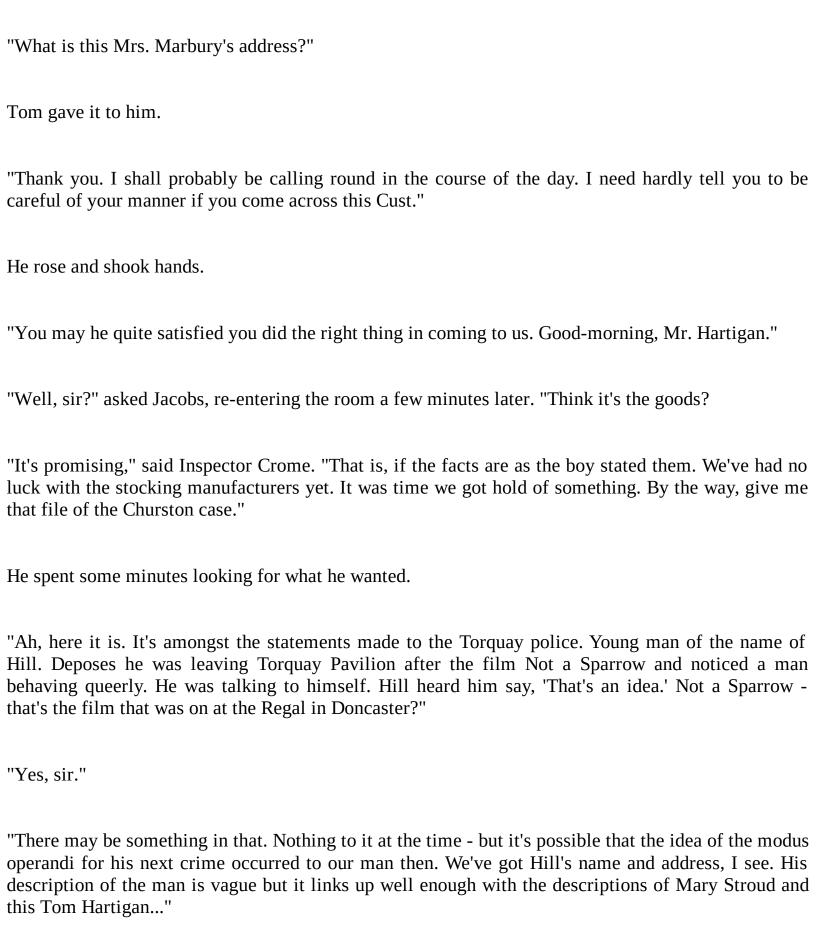
"Yes, sir."

"When did he return?"

"The evening of the Doncaster murder, sir."

"What's he been doing since?"

"He's stayed in mostly, sir. And he's been looking very queer, Mrs. Marbury says. He buys a lot of newspapers - goes out early and gets the morning ones, and then after dark he goes out and gets the evening ones. Mrs. Marbury says he talks a lot to himself, too. She thinks he's getting queerer."



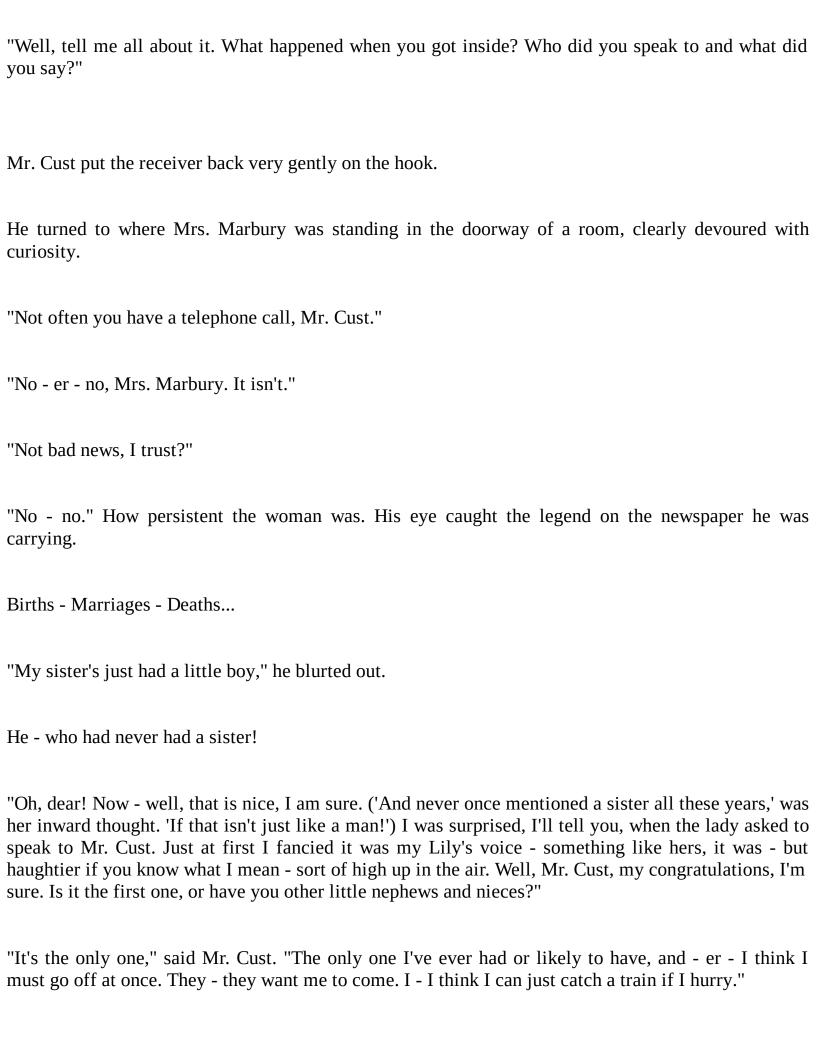
"We're getting warm," said Inspector Crome - rather inaccurately, for he himself was always slightly

He nodded thoughtfully.



'It does seem awful," she observed.
'Well, now you're going to come and have a bite of lunch, my girl. Just you think that if we're right I expect my name will be in the papers!"
'Oh, Tom, will it?"
'Rather. And yours, too. And your mother's. And I dare say you'll have your picture in, too."
'Oh, Tom." Lily squeezed his arm in an ecstasy.
'And in the meantime, what do you say to a bite at the Corner House?"
Lily squeezed tighter.
'Come on then!"
'All right - half a minute. I must just telephone from the station."
'Who to?''
'A girl I was going to meet." She slipped across the road, and rejoined him three minutes later, ooking rather flushed.
'Now then, Tom." She slipped her arm in his. "Tell me more about Scotland Yard. You didn't see the other one there?"
'What other one7''
'The Belgian gentleman. The one that A.B.C. writes to always."

"No. He wasn't there."



"Will you be away long, Mr. Cust?" called Mrs. Marbury as he ran up the stairs.
"Oh, no - two or three days - that's all."
He disappeared into his bedroom. Mrs. Marbury retired into the kitchen, thinking sentimentally of "the dear little mite."
Her conscience gave her a sudden twinge.
Last night Tom and Lily and all the hunting back over dates! Trying to make out that Mr. Cust was that dreadful monster, A.B.C. Just because of his initials and because of a few coincidences.
"I don't suppose they meant it seriously," she thought comfortably. "And now I hope they'll be ashamed of themselves."
In some obscure way that she could not have explained, Mr. Cust's statement that his sister had had a baby had effectually removed any doubts Mrs. Marbury might have had of her lodger's bonafides.
"I hope she didn't have too bad a time of it, poor dear," thought Mrs. Marbury, testing an iron against her cheek before beginning to iron out Lily's silk slip.
Her mind ran comfortably on a well-worn obstetric track.
Mr. Cust came quietly down the stairs, a bag in his hand. His eyes rested a minute on the telephone.
That brief conversation re-echoed in his brain.
"Is that you, Mr. Cust? I thought you might like to know there's an inspector from Scotland Yard may be coming to see you."
What had he said? He couldn't remember.
"Thank you - thank you, my dear very kind of you -"

Something like that.
Why had she telephoned to him? Could she possibly have guessed? Or did she just want to make sure he would stay in for the inspector's visit?
But how did she know the inspector was coming?
And her voice - she'd disguised her voice from her mother It looked - it looked - as though she knew But surely if she knew, she wouldn't
She might, though. Women were very queer. Unexpectedly cruel and unexpectedly kind. He'd seen Lily once letting a mouse out of a mouse trap.
A kind girl
A kind, pretty girl
He paused by the hall stand with its load of umbrellas and coats.
Should he -?
A slight noise from the kitchen decided him
No, there wasn't time
Mrs. Marbury might come out
He opened the front door, passed through and closed it behind him.
Where?
Chapter 29

AT SCOTLAND YARD

Conference again.

The Assistant Commissioner, Inspector Crome, Poirot and myself. The A.C. was saying:

"A good tip that of yours, M. Poirot, about checking a large sale of stockings."

Poirot spread out his hands.

"It was indicated. This man could not be a regular agent. He sold outright instead of touting for orders."

"Got everything clear so far, inspector?

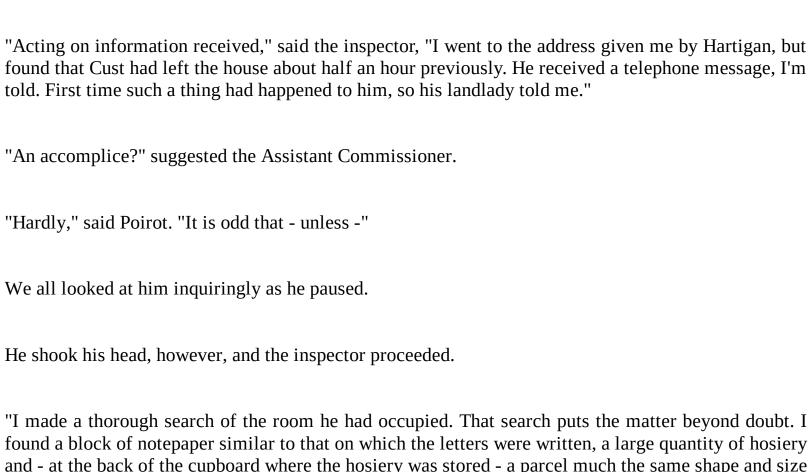
"I think so, sir." Crome consulted a file. "Shall I run over the position to date?"

"Yes, please."

"I've checked up with Churston, Paignton and Torquay. Got a list of people where he went and offered stockings. I must say he did the thing thoroughly. Stayed at the Pitt, small hotel near Torre Station. Returned to the hotel at 10:30 on the night of the murder. Could have taken a train from Churston at 10:05, getting to Paignton at 10:15. No one answering to his description noticed on train or at stations, but that Thursday was Dartmouth Regatta and the trains back from Kingswear were pretty full.

"Bexhill much the same. Stayed at the Glove under his own name. Offered stockings to about a dozen addresses, including Mrs. Barnard and including the Ginger Cat. Left hotel early in the evening. Arrived back in London about 11:30 the following morning. As to Andover, same procedure. Stayed at the Feathers. Offered stockings to Mrs. Fowler, next door to Mrs. Ascher, and to half a dozen other people in the street. The pair Mrs. Ascher had I got from the niece (name of Drower) - they're identical with Cust's supply."

"So far, good," said the A.C.



and - at the back of the cupboard where the hosiery was stored - a parcel much the same shape and size but which turned out to contain - not hosiery - but eight new A.B.C. railway guides!"

"Proof positive," said the Assistant Commissioner.

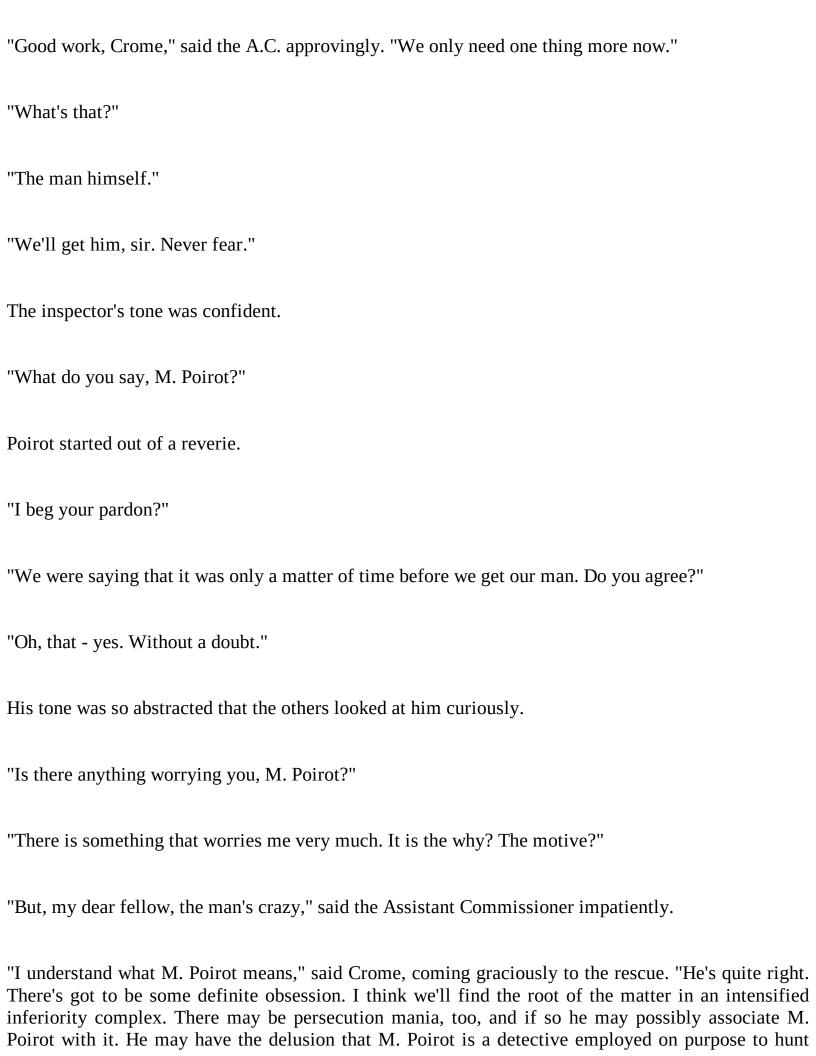
"I've found something else, too," said the inspector - his voice becoming suddenly almost human with triumph. "Only found it this morning, sir. Not had time to report yet. There was no sign of the knife in his room -"

"It would be the act of an imbecile to bring that back with him," remarked Poirot.

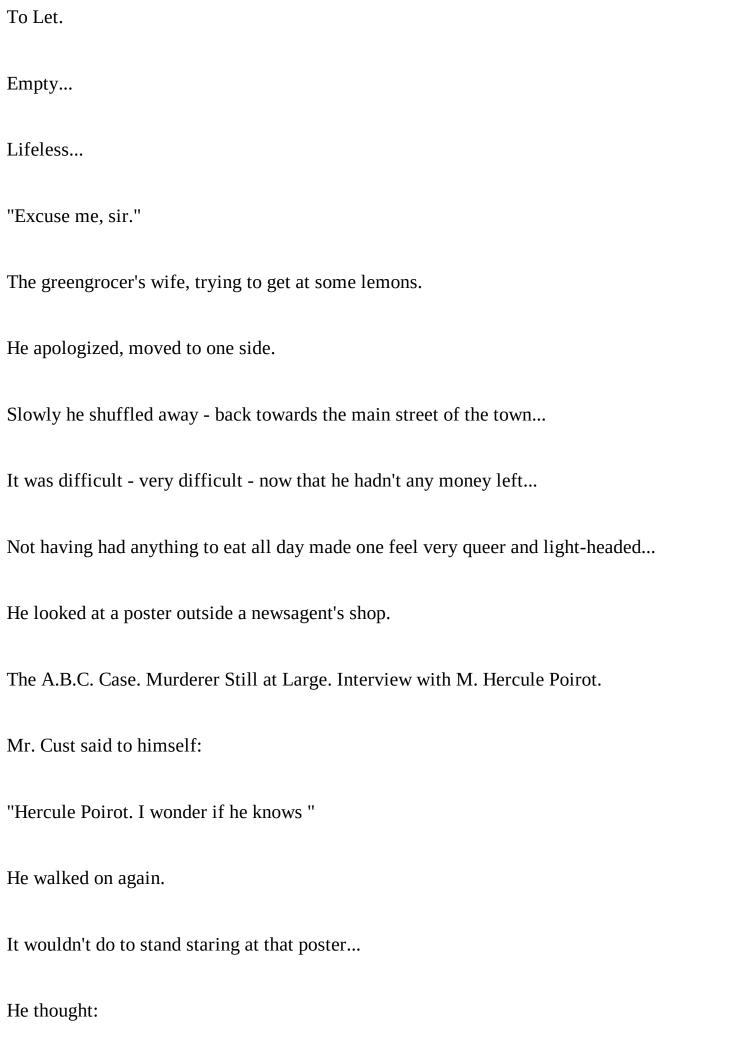
"After all, he's not a reasonable human being," remarked the Inspector. "Anyway, it occurred to me that he might just possibly have brought it back to the house and then realized the danger of hiding it (as M. Poirot points out) in his room, and have looked about elsewhere. What place in the house would he be likely to select? I got it straightaway. The hall stand - no one ever moves a hall stand. With a lot of trouble I got it moved out from the wall - and there it was!"

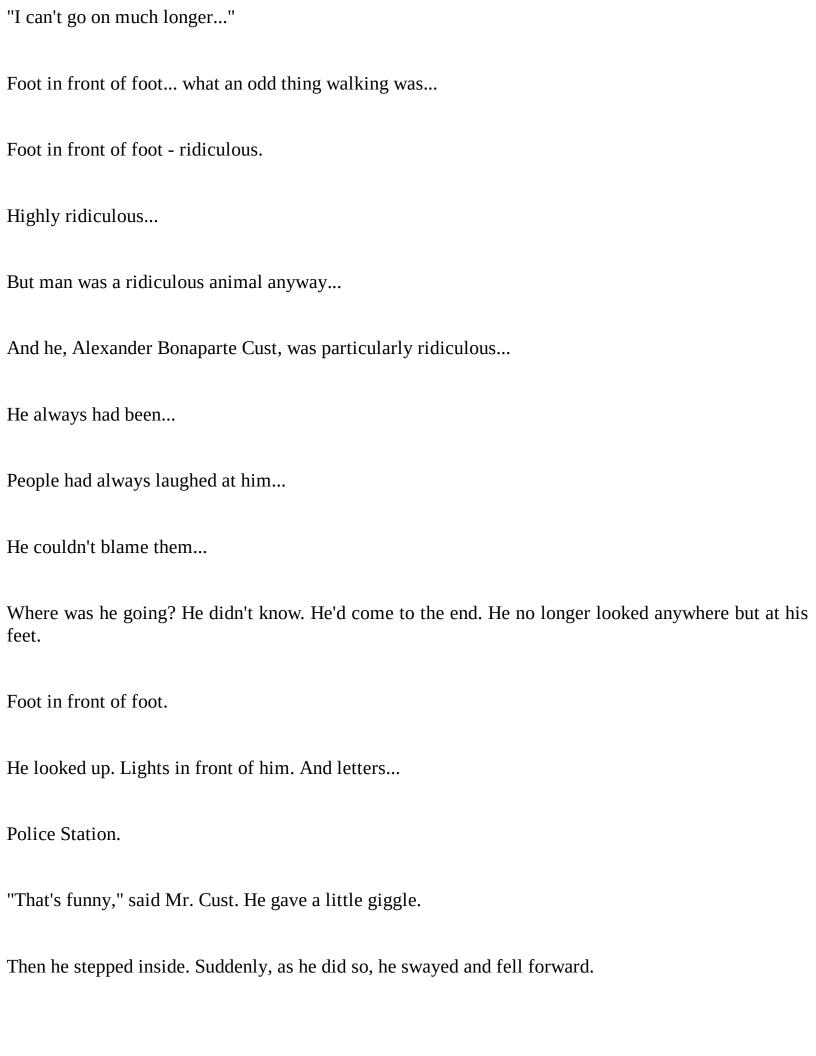
"The knife?"

"The knife. Not a doubt of it. The dried blood's still on it."



him down."
"H'm," said the A.C. "That's the jargon that's talked nowadays. In my day if a man was mad he was mad and we didn't look about for scientific terms to soften it down. I suppose a thoroughly up-to-date doctor would suggest putting a man like A.B.C. in a nursing home, telling him what a fine fellow he was for forty-five days on end and then letting him out as a responsible member of society."
Poirot smiled but did not answer.
The conference broke up.
"Well," said the Assistant Commissioner. "As you say, Crome, pulling him in is only a matter of time."
"We'd have had him before now," said the inspector, "if he wasn't so ordinary-looking. We've worried enough perfectly inoffensive citizens as it is."
"I wonder where he is at this minute," said the Assistant Commissioner.
Chapter 30
(Not from Captain Hastings' Personal Narrative)
Mr. Cust stood by a greengrocer's shop.
He stared across the road.
Yes, that was it.
Mrs. Ascher. Newsagent and Tobacconist In the empty window was a sign.





Chapter 31

HERCULE POIROT ASKS QUESTIONS

It was a clear November day. Dr. Thompson and Chief Inspector Japp had come round to acquaint Poirot with the result of the police court proceedings in the case of Rex v. Alexander Bonaparte Cust.

Poirot himself had had a slight bronchial chill which had prevented his attending. Fortunately he had not insisted on having my company.

"Committed for trial," said Japp. "So that's that."

"Isn't it unusual," I asked, "for a defence to be offered at this stage? I thought prisoners always reserved their defence."

"It's the usual course," said Japp. "I suppose young Lucas thought he might rush it through. He's a trier, I will say. Insanity's the only defence possible."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"With insanity there can be no acquittal. Imprisonment during Her Majesty's pleasure is hardly preferable to death."

"I suppose Lucas thought there was a chance," said Japp. "With a first-class alibi for the Bexhill murder, the whole case might be weakened. I don't think he realized how strong our case is. Anyway Lucas goes in for originality. He's a young man, and he wanted to hit the public eye."

Poirot turned to Thompson.

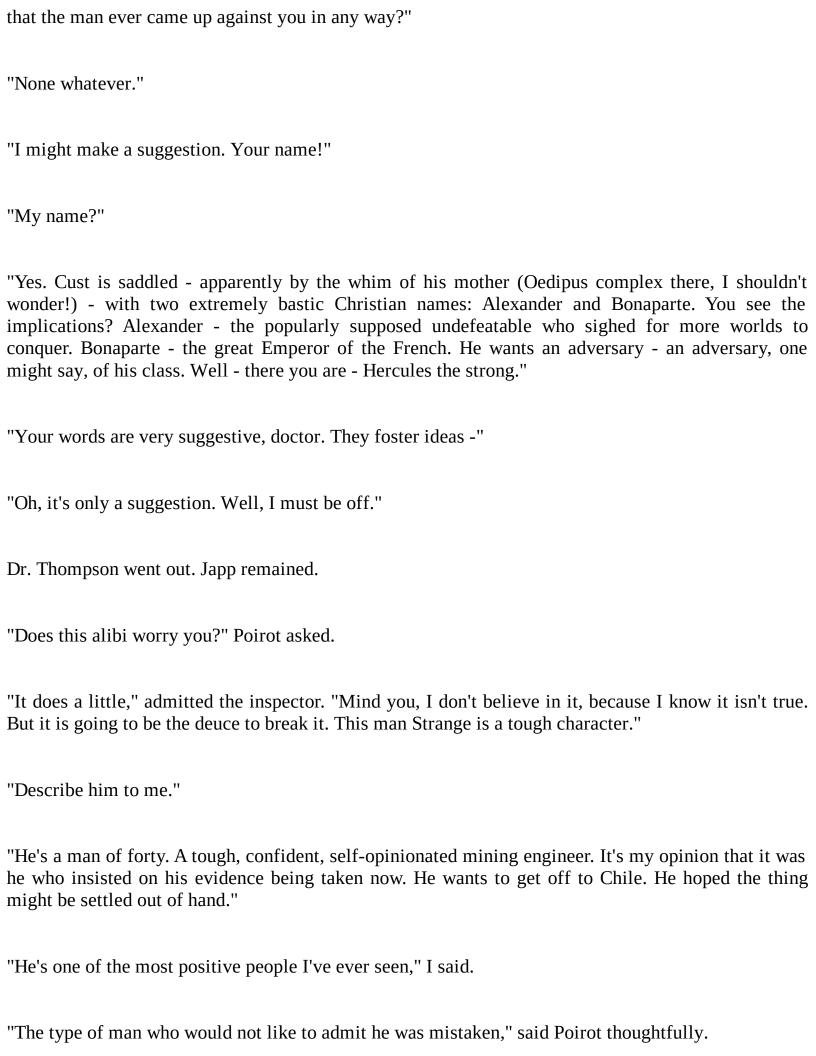
"What's your opinion, doctor?"

"Of Cust? Upon my soul, I don't know what to say. He's playing the sane man remarkably well. He's an epileptic, of course."

- "What an amazing denouement that was," I said.

 "His falling into the Andover police station in a fit? Yes it was a fitting dramatic curtain to the drama. A.B.C. had always timed his effects well."

 "Is it possible to commit a crime and be unaware of it?" I asked. "His denials seem to have a ring of truth in them."
- Dr. Thompson smiled a little.
- "You mustn't be taken in by that theatrical 'I swear by God' pose. It's my opinion that Cust knows perfectly well he committed the murders."
- "When they're as fervent as that they usually do," said Japp.
- "As to your question," went on Thompson, "it's perfectly possible for an epileptic subject in a state of somnambulism to commit an action and be entirely unaware of having done so. But it is the general opinion that such an action must 'not be contrary to the will of the person in the waking state."
- He went on discussing the matter, speaking of grand mal and petit mal and, to tell the truth, confusing me hopelessly as is often the case when a learned person holds forth on his own subject.
- "However, I'm against the theory that Cust committed these crimes without knowing he'd done them. You might put that theory forward if it weren't for the letters. The letters knock the theory on the head. They show premeditation and a careful planning of the crime."
- "And of the letters we have still no explanation," said Poirot.
- "That interests you?"
- "Naturally since they were written to me. And on the subject of the letters Cust is persistently dumb. Until I get at the reason for those letters being written to me, I shall not feel that the case is solved."
- "Yes I can understand that from your point of view. There doesn't seem to be any reason to believe



"He sticks to his story and he's not one to be heckled. He swears by all that's blue that he picked up Cust in the Whitecross Hotel at Eastbourne on the evening of July 24th. He was poorly and wanted some one to talk to. As far as I can see, Cust made an ideal listener. He didn't interrupt! After dinner he and Cust played dominoes. It appears Strange was a whale on dominoes and to his surprise Cust was pretty hot stuff too. Queer game, dominoes. People go mad about it. They'll play for hours. That's what Strange and Cust did apparently. Cust wanted to go to bed but Strange wouldn't hear of it - swore they'd keep it up until midnight at least. And that's what they did do. They separated at ten minutes past midnight. And if Cust was in the Whitecross Hotel at Eastbourne at ten minutes past midnight on the morning of the 25th be couldn't very well be strangling Betty Barnard on the beach at Bexhill between midnight and one o'clock."

"The problem certainly seems insuperable," said Poirot thoughtfully. "Decidedly, it gives one to think."

"It's given Crome something to think about," said Japp.

"This man Strange is very positive?

"Yes. He's an obstinate devil. And it's difficult to see just where the flaw is. Supposing Strange is making a mistake and the man wasn't Cust - why on earth should he say his name is Cust? And the writing in the hotel register is his all right. You can't say he's an accomplice - homicidal lunatics don't have accomplices! Did the girl die later? The doctor was quite firm in his evidence, and anyway it would take some time for Cust to get out of the hotel at Eastbourne without being seen and get over to Bexhill - fourteen miles away -"

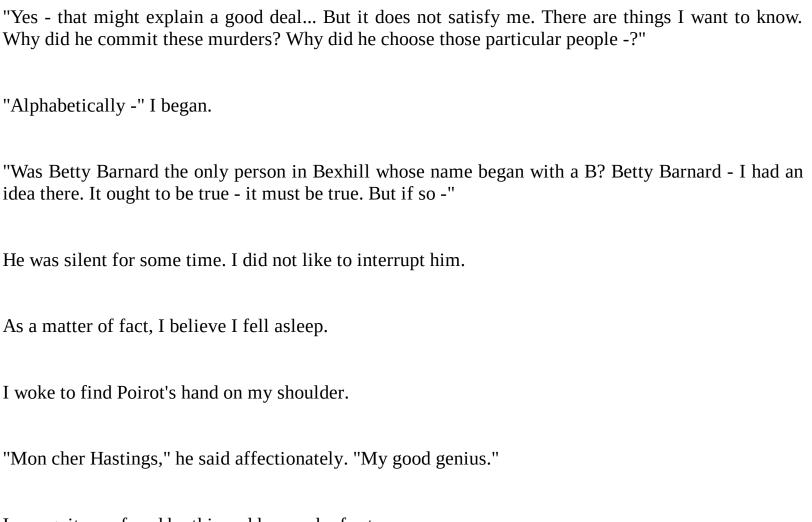
"It is a problem - yes," said Poirot.

"Of course, strictly speaking, it oughtn't to matter. We've got Cust on the Doncaster murder - the blood-stained coat, the knife - not a loophole there. You couldn't bounce any jury into acquitting him. But it spoils a pretty case. He did the Doncaster murder. He did the Churston murder. He did the Andover murder. Then, by hell, he must have done the Bexhill murder. But I don't see how!"

He shook his head and got up.

"Now's your chance, M. Poirot," he said. "Crome's in a fog. Exert those cellular arrangements of yours I used to hear so much about. Show us the way he did it."





I was quite confused by this sudden mark of esteem.

"It is true," Poirot insisted. "Always - always - you help me - you bring me luck. You inspire me."

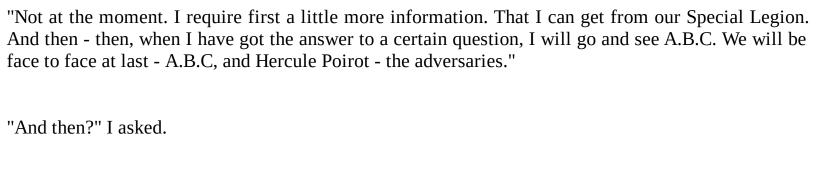
"How have I inspired you this time?" I asked.

"While I was asking myself certain questions I remembered a remark of yours - a remark absolutely shimmering in its clear vision. Did I not say to you once that you had a genius for stating the obvious? It is the obvious that I have neglected."

"What is this brilliant remark of mine?" I asked

"It makes everything as clear as crystal. I see the answers to questions. The reason for Mrs. Ascher (that, it is true, I glimpsed long ago), the reason for Sir Carmichael Clarke, the reason for the Doncaster murder, and finally and supremely important, the reason for Hercule Poirot."

"Could you kindly explain?" I asked.



"And then," said Poirot, "we will talk! Je vous assure, Hastings - there is nothing so dangerous for any one who has something to hide as conversation! Speech, so a wise old Frenchman said to me once, is an invention of man's to prevent him from thinking. It is also an infallible means of discovering that which he wishes to hide. A human being, Hastings, cannot resist the opportunity to reveal himself and express his personality which conversation gives him. Every time he will give himself away."

"What do you expect Cust to tell you?"

Hercule Poirot smiled.

"A lie," he said. "And by it, I shall know the truth!"

Chapter 32

AND CATCH A FOX

During the next few days Poirot was very busy. He made mysterious absences, talked very little, frowned to himself, and consistently refused to satisfy my natural curiosity as to the brilliance I had, according to him, displayed in the past.

I was not invited to accompany him on his mysterious comings and goings - a fact which I somewhat resented.

Towards the end of the week, however, he announced his intention of paying a visit to Bexhill and neighbourhood and suggested that I should come with him. Needless to say, I accepted with alacrity.

The invitation, I discovered, was not extended to me alone. The members of our Special Legion were

also invited.

They were as intrigued by Poirot as I was. Nevertheless, by the end of the day, I had at any rate an idea as to the direction in which Poirot's thoughts were tending.

He first visited Mr. and Mrs. Barnard and got an exact account from her as to the hour at which Mr. Cust had called on her and exactly what he had said. He then went to the hotel at which Cust had put up and extracted a minute description of that gentleman's departure. As far as I could judge, no new facts were elicited by his questions but he himself seemed quite satisfied.

Next he went to the beach - to the place where Betty Barnard's body had been discovered. Here he walked round in circles for some minutes studying the shingle attentively. I could see little point in this, since the tide covered the spot twice a day.

However I have learnt by this time that Poirot's actions are dictated by an idea - however meaningless they may seem.

He then walked from the beach to the nearest point at which a car could have been parked. From there again he went to the place where the Eastbourne buses waited before leaving Bexhill.

Finally he took us all to the Ginger Cat café where we had a somewhat stale tea served by the plump waitress, Milly Higley.

Her he complimented in a flowing Gallic style on the shape of her ankles.

"The legs of the English - always they are too thin! But you, mademoiselle, have the perfect leg. It has shape - it has an ankle!"

Milly Higley giggled a good deal and told him not to go on so. She knew what French gentlemen were like.

Poirot did not trouble to contradict her mistake as to his nationality. He merely ogled her in such a way that I was startled and almost shocked.

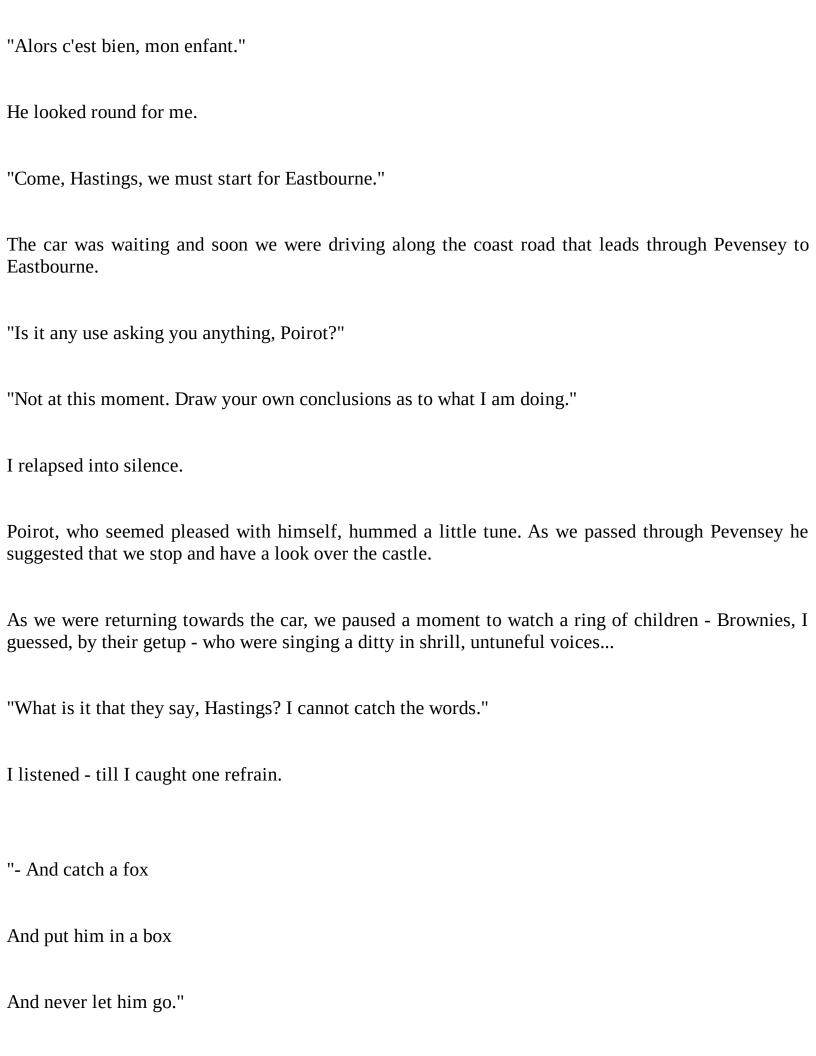
"Voilá" said Poirot, "I have finished in Bexhill. Presently I go to Eastbourne. One little inquiry there - that is all. Unnecessary for all to accompany me. In the meantime come back to the hotel and let us

have a cocktail. That Carlton tea, it was abominable!"
As we were sipping our cocktails Franklin Clarke said curiously:
"I suppose we can guess what you are after? You're out to break that alibi. But I can't see what you're so pleased about. You haven't got a new fact of any kind."
"No - that is true."
"Well, then?"
"Patience. Everything arranges itself, given time."
"You seem quite pleased with yourself anyway."
"Nothing so far has contradicted my little idea - that is why."
His face grew serious.
"My friend Hastings told me once that he had, as a young played a game called The Truth. It was a game where every one in turn was asked three questions - two of which must be answered truthfully. The third one could be barred. The questions, naturally, were of the most indiscreet kind. But to begin with every one had to swear that they would indeed speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."
He paused.
"Well?" said Megan.
"Eh bien - me, I want to play that game. Only it is not necessary to have three questions. One will be enough. One question to each of you."
"Of course," said Clarke impatiently. "We'll answer anything."

"Ah, but I want it to be more serious than that. Do you all swear to speak the truth?"
He was so solemn about it that the others, puzzled, became solemn themselves. They all swore as he demanded.
"Bon, "said Poirot briskly. "Let us begin -"
"I'm ready," said Thora Grey.
"Ah, but ladies first - this time it would not be the politeness. We will start elsewhere."
He turned to Franklin Clarke.
"What, mon cher M. Clarke, did you think of the hats the ladies wore at Ascot this year?"
Franklin Clarke stared at him.
"Is this a joke?"
"Certainly not."
"Is that seriously your question?"
"It is."
Clarke began to grin.
"Well, M. Poirot, I didn't actually go to Ascot, but from what I could see of them driving in cars, women's hats for Ascot were an even bigger joke than the hats they wear ordinarily."
"Fantastic?"

"Quite fantastic."
Poirot smiled and turned to Donald Fraser.
"When did you take your holiday this year, Monsieur?"
It was Fraser's turn to stare.
"My holiday? The first two weeks in August."
His face quivered suddenly. I guessed that the question had brought the loss of the girl he loved back to him.
Poirot, however, did not seem to pay much attention to the reply. He turned to Thora Grey and I heard the slight difference in his voice. It had tightened up. His question came sharp and clear.
"Mademoiselle, in the event of Lady Clarke's death, would you have married Sir Carmichael if he had asked you?"
The girl sprang up.
"How dare you ask me such a question. It's - it's insulting!"
"Perhaps. But you have sworn to speak the truth. Eh bien - Yes or no?"
"Sir Carmichael was wonderfully kind to me. He treated me almost like a daughter. And that's how I felt to him - just affectionate and grateful."
"Pardon me, but that is not answering yes or no, mademoiselle."
She hesitated.
"The answer, of course, is no!"





"And catch a fox and put him in a box and never let him go!" repeated Poirot.
His face had gone suddenly grave and stern.
"It is very terrible that, Hastings." He was silent a minute. "You hunt the fox here?"
"I don't. I've never been able to afford to hunt. And I don't think there's much hunting in this part of the world."
"I meant in England generally. A strange sport. The waiting at the covert side - then they sound the tally-ho, do they not? - and the run begins - across the country - over the hedges and ditches - and the fox he runs - and sometimes he doubles back - but the dogs -"
"Hounds!"
"- hounds are on his trail, and at last they catch him and he dies - quickly and horribly."
"I suppose it does sound cruel, but really -"
"The fox enjoys it? Do not say les bêtises, my friend. Tout de même - it is better that - the quick, cruel death - than what those children were singing
"To be shut away - in a box - for ever No, it is not good, that."
He shook his head. Then he said, with a change of tone:
"Tomorrow, I am to visit the man Cust," and he added to the chauffeur: "Back to London."
"Aren't you going to Eastbourne?" I cried.
"What need? I know - quite enough for my purpose."

Chapter 33

ALEXANDER BONAPARTE CUST

I was not present at the interview that took place between Poirot and that strange man - Alexander Bonaparte Cust. Owing to his association with the police and the peculiar circumstances of the case, Poirot had no difficulty in obtaining a Home Office order - but that order did not extend to me, and in any case it was essential, from Poirot's point of view, that that interview should be absolutely private - the two men face to face.

He has given me, however, such a detailed account of what passed between them that I set it down with as much confidence on paper as though I had actually been present.

Mr. Cust seemed to have shrunk. His stoop was more apparent. His fingers plucked vaguely at his coat.

For some time, I gather, Poirot did not speak.

He sat and looked at the man opposite him.

The atmosphere became restful - soothing - full of infinite leisure.

It must have been a dramatic moment - this meeting of the two adversaries in the long drama. In Poirot's place I should have felt the dramatic thrill.

Poirot, however, is nothing if not matter-of-fact. He was absorbed in producing a certain effect upon the man opposite him.

At last he said gently:

"Do you know who I am?"

The other shook his head.
"No - no - I can't say I do. Unless you are Mr. Lucas's - what do they call it? - junior. Or perhaps you come from Mr. Maynard?"
(Maynard & Cole were the defending solicitors.)
His tone was polite but not very interested. He seemed absorbed in some inner abstraction.
"I am Hercule Poirot"
Poirot said the words very gently and watched for the effect.
Mr. Cust raised his head a little.
"Oh, yes?"
He said it as naturally as Inspector Crome might have said it - but without the superciliousness.
Then, a minute later, he repeated his remark.
"Oh, yes?" he said, and this time his tone was different - it held an awakened interest. He raised his head and looked at Poirot.
Hercule Poirot met his gaze and nodded his own head gently once or twice.
"Yes," he said. "I am the man to whom you wrote the letters."
At once the contact was broken. Mr. Cust dropped his eyes and spoke irritably and fretfully.
"I never wrote to you. Those letters weren't written by me. I've said so again and again."

"I know," said Poirot. "But if you did not write them, who did?"
"An enemy. I must have an enemy. They are all against me. The police - every one - all against me. It's a gigantic conspiracy."
Poirot did not reply.
Mr. Cust said:
"Every one's hand has been against me - always."
"Even when you were a child?"
Mr. Cust seemed to consider.
"No - no - not exactly then. My mother was very fond of me. But she was ambitious - terribly ambitious. That's why she gave me those ridiculous names. She had some absurd idea that I'd cut a figure in the world. She was always urging me to assert myself - talking about will power saying any one could be master of his fate she said I could do anything!"
He was silent for a minute.
"She was quite wrong, of course. I realized that myself quite soon. I wasn't the sort of person to get on in life. I was always doing foolish things - making myself look ridiculous. And I was timid - afraid of people. I had a bad time at school - the boys found out my Christian names - they used to tease me about them. I did very badly at school - in games and work and everything."
He shook his head.
"Just as well poor mother died. She'd have been disappointed Even when I was at the Commercial College I was stupid - it took me longer to learn typing and shorthand than any one else. And yet I didn't feel stupid - if you know what I mean."

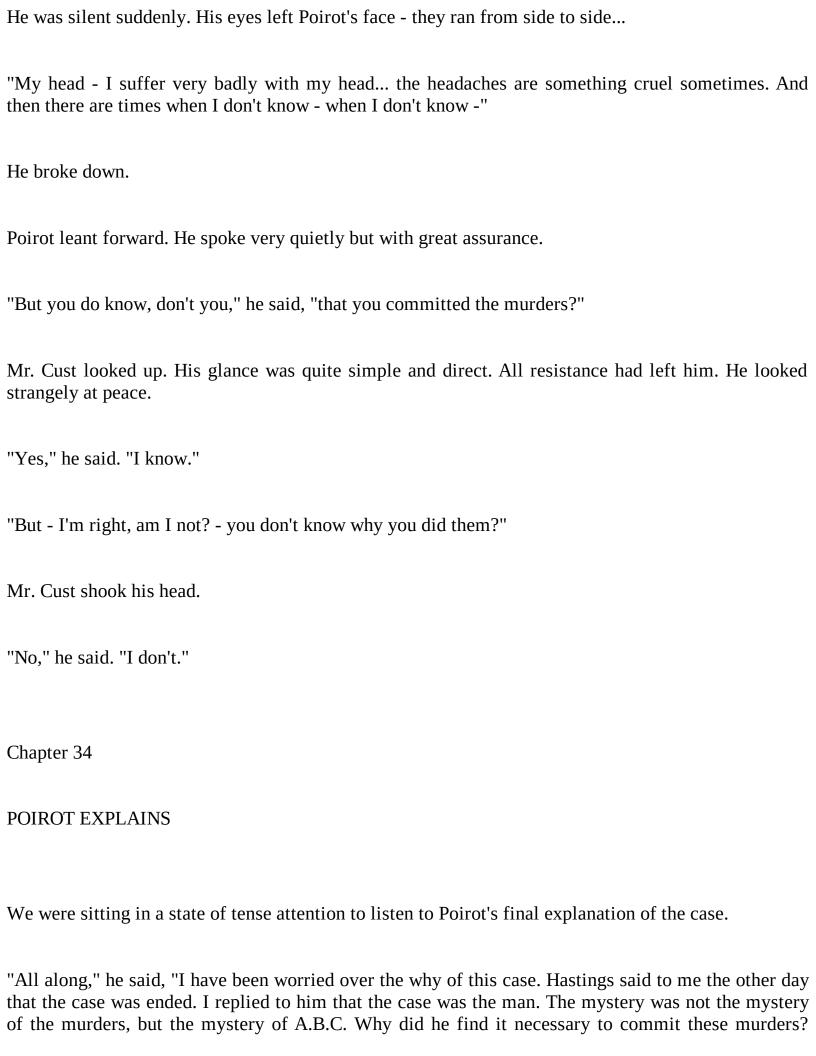
He cast a sudden appealing look at the other man.

"I know what you mean," said Poirot. "Go on."
"It was just the feeling that everybody else thought me stupid. Very paralyzing. It was the same thing later in the office."
"And later still in the war?" prompted Poirot.
Mr. Cust's face lightened up suddenly.
"You know," he said, "I enjoyed the war. What I had of it, that was. I felt, for the first time, a man like anybody else. We were all in the same box. I was as good as any one else."
His smile faded.
"And then I got that wound on the head. Very slight. But they found out I had fits I'd always known, of course, that there were times when I hadn't been quite sure what I was doing. Lapses, you know. And of course, once or twice I'd fallen down. But I don't really think they ought to have discharged me for that. No, I don't think it was right."
"And afterwards?" asked Poirot.
"I got a place as a clerk. Of course there was good money to be got just then. And I didn't do so badly after the war. Of course, a smaller salary And - I didn't seem to get on. I was always being passed over for promotion. I wasn't going ahead enough. It grew very difficult - really very difficult Especially when the slump came. To tell you the truth, I'd got hardly enough to keep body and soul together (and you've got to look presentable as a clerk) when I got the offer of this stocking job. A salary and commission!"
Poirot said gently:
"But you are aware, are you not, that the firm who you say employed you deny the fact?"
Mr. Cust got excited again.
"That's because they're in the conspiracy - they must be in the conspiracy."

He went on:
"I've got written evidence - written evidence. I've got their letters to me, giving me instructions as to what places to go and a list of people to call on."
"Not written evidence exactly - typewritten evidence."
"It's the same thing. Naturally a big firm of wholesale manufacturers typewrite their letters."
"Don't you know, Mr. Cust, that a typewriter can be identified? All those letters were typed by one particular machine."
"What of it?"
"And that machine was your own - the one found in your room."
"It was sent me by the firm at the beginning of my job."
"Yes, but these letters were received afterwards. So it looks, does it not, as though you typed them yourself and posted them to yourself?"
"No, no! It's all part of the plot against me!"
He added suddenly:
"Besides, their letters would be written on the same kind of machine."
"The same kind, but not the same actual machine."
Mr. Cust repeated obstinately:
"It's a plot!"



"I - I - well, I believe I do." "It is a very absorbing game, is it not, with a lot of skill in it?" "Oh, there's a lot of play in it - a lot of play! We used to play a lot in the city, in the lunch hour. You'd be surprised the way total strangers come together over a game of dominoes." He chuckled. "I remember one man - I've never forgotten him because of something he told me - we just got talking over a cup of coffee, and we started dominoes. Well, I felt after twenty minutes that I'd known that man all his life." "What was it that he told you?" asked Poirot. Mr. Cust's face clouded over. "It gave me a turn - a nasty turn. Talking of your fate being written in your hand, he was. And he showed me his hand and the lines that showed he'd have two near escapes of being drowned - and he had had two near escapes. And then he looked at mine and he told me some amazing things. Said I was going to be one of the most celebrated men in England before I died. Said the whole country would be talking about me. But he said - he said -" Mr. Cust broke down - faltered... "Yes?" Poirot's gaze held a quiet magnetism. Mr. Cust looked at him, looked away, then back again like a fascinated rabbit. "He said - he said - that it looked as though I might die a violent death - and he laughed and said: 'Almost looks as though you might die on the scaffold,' and then he laughed and said that was only his joke..."



Why did he select me as his adversary?

"It is no answer to say that the man was mentally unhinged. To say a man does mad things because he is mad is merely unintelligent and stupid. A madman is as logical and reasoned in his action as a sane man - given his peculiar biased point of view. For example, if a man insists on going out and squatting about in nothing but a loin cloth his conduct seems eccentric in the extreme. But once you know that the man himself is firmly convinced that he is Mahatma Gandhi, then his conduct becomes perfectly reasonable and logical.

"What was necessary in this case was to imagine a mind so constituted that it was logical and reasonable to commit four or more murders and to announce them beforehand by letters written to Hercule Poirot.

"My friend, Hastings, will tell you that from the moment I received the first letter I was upset and disturbed. It seemed to me at once that there was something very wrong about the letter."

"You were quite right," said Franklin Clarke dryly.

"Yes. But there, at the very start, I made a grave error. I permitted my feeling - my very strong feeling about the letter to remain a mere impression. I treated it as though it had been an intuition. In a well-balanced, reasoning mind them is no such thing as an intuition - an inspired guess! You can guess, of course - and a guess is either right or wrong. If it is right you call it an intuition. If it is wrong you usual do not speak of it again. But what is often called an intuition is really an impression based on logical deduction or experience. When an expert feels that there is something wrong about a picture or a piece of furniture, or the signature on a cheque he is really basing that feeling on a host of small signs and details. He has no need to go into them minutely - his experience obviates that - the net result is the definite impression that something is wrong. But it is not a guess, it is an impression based on experience.

"Eh bien, I admit that I did not regard that first letter in the way I should. It just made me extremely uneasy. The police regarded it as a hoax. I myself took it seriously. I was convinced that a murder would take place in Andover as stated. As you know, a murder did take place.

"There was no means at that point, as I well realized, of knowing who the person was who had done the deed. The only course open to me was to try and understand just what kind of a person had done it.

"I had certain indications. The letter - the manner of the crime - the person murdered. What I had to discover was: the motive of the crime, the motive of the letter."

"Publicity," suggested Clarke.

"Surely an inferiority complex covers that," added Thora Gray.

"That was, of course, the obvious line to take. But why me? Why Hercule Poirot? Greater publicity could be ensured by sending the letters to Scotland Yard. More again by sending them to a newspaper. A newspaper might not print the first letter, but by the time the second crime took place, A.B.C. could have been assured of all the publicity the press could give. Why, then, Hercule Poirot? Was it for some personal reason? There was, discernible in the letter, a slight anti-foreign bias - but not enough to explain the matter to my satisfaction.

"Then the second letter arrived - and was followed by the murder of Betty Barnard at Bexhill. It became clear now (what I had already suspected) that the murders were to proceed in an alphabetical plan, but that fact, which seemed final to most people, left the main question unaltered to my mind. Why did A.B.C. need to commit these murders?"

Megan Barnard stirred in her chair.

"Isn't them such a thing as - as a blood lust?" she said.

Poirot turned to her.

"You are quite right, mademoiselle. There is such a thing. The lust to kill. But that did not quite fit the facts of the case. A homicidal maniac who desires to kill usually desires to kill as many victims as possible. It is a recurring craving. The great idea of such a killer is to hide his tracks - not to advertise them. When we consider the four victims selected - or at any rate three of them (for I know very little of Mr. Downes or Mr. Earlsfield), we realize that if he had chosen, the murderer could have done away with them without incurring any suspicion. Franz Ascher, Donald Fraser or Megan Barnard, possibly Mr. Clarke - those are the people the police would have suspected even if they had been unable to get direct proof. An unknown homicidal murderer would not have been thought of! Why, then, did the murderer feel it necessary to call attention to himself? Was it the necessity of leaving on each body a copy of an A.B.C. railway guide? Was that the compulsion? Was there some complex connected with the railway guide?

"I found it quite inconceivable at this point to enter into the mind of the murderer. Surely it could not be magnanimity? A horror of responsibility for the crime being fastened on an innocent person?

"Although I could not answer the main question, certain things I did feel I was learning about the

murderer."

"Such as?" asked Fraser.

"To begin with - that he had a tabular mind. His crimes were listed by alphabetical progression - that was obviously important to him. On the other hand, he had no particular taste in victims - Mrs. Ascher, Betty Barnard, Sir Carmichael Clarke, they all differed widely from each other. There was no sex complex - no particular age complex, and that seemed to me to be a very curious fact. If a man kills indiscriminately it is usually because he removes any one who stands in his way or annoys him. But the alphabetical progression showed that such was not the case here. The other type of killer usually selects a particular type of victim - nearly always of the opposite sex. There was something haphazard about the procedure of A.B.C. that seemed to me to be at war with the alphabetical selection.

"The slight inferences I permitted myself to make. The choice of the A.B.C. suggested to me what I may call a railway-minded man. This is more common in men than women. Small boys love trains better than small girls do. It might be the sign, too, of an in some ways undeveloped mind. The 'boy' motif still predominated.

"The death of Betty Barnard and the manner of it gave me certain other indications. The manner of her death was particularly suggestive. (Forgive me, Mr. Fraser.) To begin with, she was strangled with her own belt - therefore she must almost certainly have been killed by some one with whom she was on friendly or affectionate terms. When I learnt something of her character a picture grew up in my mind.

"Betty Barnard was a flirt. She liked attention from a personal male. Therefore A.B.C., to persuade her to come out with him, must have had a certain amount of attraction - of le sex appeal! He must be able, as you English say, to 'get off.' He must be capable of the click! I visualize the scene on the beach thus: the man admires her belt. She takes it off, he passes it playfully round her neck - says, perhaps, 'I shall strangle you.' It is all very playful. She giggles - and he pulls -"

Donald Fraser sprang up. He was livid.

"M. Poirot - for God's sake."

Poirot made a gesture.

"It is finished. I say no more. It is over. We pass to the next murder, that of Sir Carmichael Clarke. Here the murderer goes back to his first method - the blow on the head. The same alphabetical

complex - but one fact worries me a little. To be consistent the murderer should have chosen his towns in some definite sequence.

"If Andover is the 155th name under A, then the B crime should be the 155th also - or it should be the 156th and the C the 157th. Here again the towns seemed to be chosen in rather too haphazard a fashion."

"Isn't that because you're rather biased on that subject, Poirot?" I suggested. "You yourself are normally methodical and orderly. It's almost a disease with you."

"No, it is not a disease! Quelle idée! But I admit that I may be over-stressing that point. Passons!

"The Churston crime gave me very little extra help. We were unlucky over it, since the letter announcing it went astray, hence no preparations could be made.

"But by the time the D crime was announced, a very formidable system of defence had been evolved. It must have been obvious that A.B.C. could not much longer hope to get away with his crimes.

"Moreover, it was at this point that the clue of the stockings came into my hands. It was perfectly clear that the presence of an individual selling stockings on and near the scene of each crime could not be a incidence. Hence the stocking-seller must be the murderer. I may say that his description, as given me by Miss Grey, did not quite correspond with my own picture of the man who strangled Betty Barnard

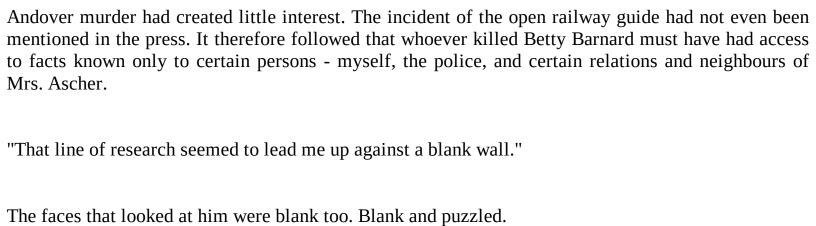
"I will pass over the next stages quickly. A fourth murder was committed - the murder of a man named George Earlsfield - it was supposed in mistake for a man named Downes, who was something of the same build and who was sitting near him in the cinema.

"And now at last comes the turn of the tide. Events play against A.B.C. instead of into his hands. He is marked down - hunted - and at last arrested.

"The case, as Hastings says, is ended!

"True enough as far as the public is concerned. The man is in prison and will eventually, no doubt, go to Broadmoor. There will be no more murders. Exit! Finis! R.I.P.

- "But not for me. I know nothing nothing at all! Neither the why nor the wherefore.
- "And there is one small vexing fact. The man Cust has an alibi for the night of the Bexhill crime."
- "That's been worrying me all along," said Franklin Clarke.
- "Yes. It worried me. For the alibi, it has the air of being genuine. But it cannot be genuine unless and now we come to two very interesting speculations.
- "Supposing, my friends, that while Cust committed three of the crimes the A, C and D crimes he did not commit the B crime."
- "M. Poirot. It isn't -"
- Poirot silenced Megan Barnard with a look.
- "Be quiet, mademoiselle. I am for the truth, I am! I have done with lies. Supposing, I say, that A.B.C. did not commit the second crime. It took place, remember, in the early hours of the 25th the day he had arrived for the crime. Supposing some one had forestalled him? What in those circumstances would he do? Commit a second murder, or lie low and accept the first as a kind of macabre present?"
- "M. Poirot!" said Megan. "That's a fantastic thought! All the crimes must have been committed by the same person!"
- He took no notice of her and went steadily on:
- "Such a hypothesis had the merit of explaining one fact the discrepancy between the personality of Alexander Bonaparte Cust (who could never have made the click with any girl) and the personality of Betty Barnard's murderer. And it has been known, before now, that would-be murderers have taken advantage of the crimes committed by other people. Not all the crimes of Jack the Ripper were committed by Jack the Ripper, for instance. So far, so good.
- "But then I came up against a definite difficulty.
- "Up to the time of the Barnard murder, no facts about the A.B.C. murders had been made public. The



Donald Fraser said thoughtfully:

"The police, after all, are human beings. And they're good-looking men -"

He stopped, looking at Poirot inquiringly.

Poirot shook his head gently.

"No - it is simpler than that. I told you that there was a second speculation.

"Supposing that Cust was not responsible for the killing of Betty Barnard? Supposing that some one else killed her. Could that some one else have been responsible for the other murders too?"

"But that doesn't make sense!" cried Clarke.

"Doesn't it? I did then what I ought to have done at first. I examined the letters I had received from a totally different point of view. I had felt from the beginning that there was something wrong with them - just as a picture expert knows a picture is wrong...

"I had assumed, without pausing to consider, that what was wrong with them was the fact that they were written by a madman.

"Now I examined them again - and this time I came to a totally different conclusion. What was wrong with them was the fact that they were written by a sane man!"

"What?" I cried.

"But yes - just that precisely! They were wrong as a picture is wrong - because they were a fake. They pretended to be the letters of a madman - of a homicidal lunatic, but in reality they were nothing of the kind."

"It doesn't make sense," Franklin Clarke repeated.

"Mais si! One must reason - reflect. What would be the object of writing such letters? To focus attention on the writer, to call attention to the murders! En verité, it did not seem to make sense at first sight. And then I saw light. It was to focus attention on several murders - on a group of murders... Is it not your great Shakespeare who has said, 'You cannot see the trees for the wood'?"

I did not correct Poirot's literary reminiscences. I was trying to see his point. A glimmer came to me. He went on:

"When do you notice a pin least? When it is in a pincushion! When do you notice an individual murder least? When it is one of a series of related murders.

"I had to deal with an intensely clever, resourceful murderer - reckless, daring and a thorough gambler. Not Mr. Cust! He could never have committed these murders! No, I had to deal with a very different stamp of man - a man with a boyish temperament (witness the schoolboy-type letters and the railway guide), an attractive man to women, and a man with a ruthless disregard for human life, a man who was necessarily a prominent person in one of the crimes! Consider when a man or woman is killed, what are the questions that the police ask? Opportunity. Where was everybody at the time of the crime? Motive. Who benefited by the deceased's death? If the motive and the opportunity are fairly obvious, what is a would-be murderer to do? Fake an alibi - that is, manipulate time in some way? But that is always a hazardous proceeding. Our murderer thought of a more fantastic defence. Create a homicidal murderer!

"I had now only to review the various crimes and find the possible guilty person. The Andover crime? The most likely suspect for that was Franz Ascher, but I could not imagine Ascher inventing and carrying out such an elaborate scheme, nor could I see him planning a premeditated murder. The Bexhill crime? Donald Fraser was a possibility. He had brains and ability, and a methodical turn of mind. But his motive for killing his sweetheart could only be jealousy - and jealousy does not tend to premeditation. Also I learned that he had his holiday early in August, which rendered it unlikely that he had anything to do with the Churston crime. We come to the Churston crime next - and at once we are on infinitely more promising ground.

"Sir Carmichael Clarke was an immensely wealthy man. Who inherits his money? His wife, who is dying, has a life interest in it, and it then goes to his brother Franklin."

Poirot turned slowly round till his eyes met those of Franklin Clarke.

"I was quite sure then. The man I had known a long time in my secret mind was the same as the man whom I had known as a person. A.B.C. and Franklin Clarke were one and the same! The daring adventurous character, the roving life, the partiality for England that had showed itself, very faintly, in the jeer at foreigners. The attractive free and easy manner - nothing easier for him than to pick up a gift in a café. The methodical tabular mind - he made a list here one day, ticked off over the headings A.B.C. - and finally, the boyish mind - mentioned by Lady Clarke and even shown by his taste in fiction - I have ascertained that there is a book in the library called The Railway Children by E. Nesbit. I had no further doubt in my own mind - A.B.C., the man who wrote the letters and committed the crimes, was Franklin Clarke."

Clarke suddenly burst out laughing.

"Very ingenious! And what about our friend Cust, caught red-handed? What about the blood on his coat? And the knife he hid in his lodgings? He may deny he committed the crimes -"

Poirot interrupted.

"You are quite wrong. He admits the fact."

"What?" Clarke looked really startled.

"Oh, yes," said Poirot gently. "I had no sooner spoken to him than I was aware that Cust believed himself to be guilty."

"And even that didn't satisfy M. Poirot?" said Clarke.

"No. Because as soon as I saw him I also knew that he could not be guilty! He has neither the nerve nor the daring - nor, I may add, the brains to plan! All along I have been aware of the dual personality of the murderer. Now I see wherein it consisted. Two people were involved - the real murderer, cunning, resourceful and dating - and the pseudo murderer, stupid, vacillating and suggestible.

"Suggestible - it is in that word that the mystery of Mr. Cust consists! It was not enough for you, Mr. Clarke, to devise this plan of a series to distract attention from a single crime. You had also to have a stalking horse.

"I think the idea first originated in your mind as the result of a chance encounter in a city coffee den with this odd personality with his bombastic Christian names. You were at that time turning over in your mind various plans for the murder of your brother."

"Really? And why?"

"Because you were seriously alarmed for the future. I do not know whether you realize it, Mr. Clarke, but you played into my hands when you showed me a certain letter written to you by your brother. In it he displayed very clearly his affection and absorption in Miss Thora Grey. His regard may have been a paternal one - or he may have preferred to think it so. Nevertheless, there was a very real danger that on the death of your sister-in-law he might, in his loneliness, turn to this beautiful girl for sympathy and comfort and it might end - as so often happens with elderly men - in his marrying her. Your fear was increased by your knowledge of Miss Grey. You are, I fancy, an excellent, if somewhat cynical judge of character. You judged, whether correctly or not, that Miss Grey was a type of young woman 'on the make.' You had no doubt that she would jump at the chance of becoming Lady Clarke. Your brother was an extremely healthy and vigorous man. There might be children and your chance of inheriting your brother's wealth would vanish.

"You have been, I fancy, in essence a disappointed man all your life. You have been the rolling stone - and you have gathered very little moss. You were bitterly jealous of your brother's wealth.

"I repeat then that, turning over various schemes in your mind, your meeting with Mr. Cust gave you an idea. His bombastic Christian names, his account of his epileptic seizures and of his headaches, his whole shrinking and insignificant personality, struck you as fitting him for the tool you wanted. The whole alphabetical plan sprang into your mind - Cust's initials - the fact that your brother's name began with a C and that he lived at Churston were the nucleus of the scheme. You even went so far as to hint to Cust at his possible end - though you could hardly hope that that suggestion would bear the rich fruit that it did.

"Your arrangements were excellent. In Cust's name you wrote for a large consignment of hosiery to be sent to him. You yourself sent a number of A.B.C.'s looking like a similar parcel. You wrote to him - a typed letter purporting to be from the same firm offering him a good salary and commission. Your plans were so well laid beforehand that you typed all the letters that were sent subsequently, and then presented him with the machine on which they had been typed.

"You had now to look about for two victims whose names began with A and B respectively and who

lived at places also beginning with those same letters.

"You hit on Andover as quite a likely spot and your preliminary reconnaissance there led you to select Mrs. Ascher's shop as the scene of the first crime. Her name was written clearly over the door, and you found by experiment that she was usually alone in the shop. Her murder needed nerve, daring and reasonable luck.

"For the letter B you had to vary your tactics. Lonely women in shops might conceivably have been warned. I should imagine that you frequented a few cafés and teashops, laughing and joking with the girls there and finding out whose name began with the right letter and who would be suitable for your purpose.

"In Betty Barnard you found just the type of girl you were looking for. You took her out once or twice, explaining to her that you were a married man, and that outings must therefore take place in a somewhat hole and corner manner.

"Then, your preliminary plans completed, you set to work! You send the Andover list to Cust, directing him to go there on a certain date and you sent off the first A.B.C. letter to me.

"On the appointed day, you went to Andover - and killed Mrs. Ascher - without anything occurring to damage your plans.

- "Murder No. 1 was successfully accomplished.
- "For the second murder, you took the precaution of committing it, in reality, the day before. I am fairly certain that Betty Barnard was killed well before midnight on the 24th July.
- "We now come to murder No. 3 the important in fact, the real murder from your point of view.
- "And here a full creed of praise is due to Hastings, who made a simple and obvious remark to which no attention was paid.
- "He suggested that the third letter went astray intentionally. And he was right!...
- "In that one simple fact lies the answer to the question that has puzzled me so all along. Why were the letters addressed in the first place to Hercule Poirot, a private detective, and not to the police?

"Erroneously I imagined some personal reason.

"Not at all! The letters were sent to me because the essence of your plan was that one of them should be wrongly addressed and go astray - but you cannot arrange for a letter addressed to the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard to go astray! It is necessary to have a private address. You chose me as a fairly well-known person, and a person who was sure to take the letters to the police - and also, in your rather insular mind, you enjoyed scoring off a foreigner.

"You addressed your envelope very cleverly - Whitehaven - Whitehorse - quite a natural slip. Only Hastings was sufficiently perspicacious to disregard subtleties and go straight for the obvious!

"Of course the letter was meant to go astray! The police were to be set on the trail only when the murder was safely over. Your brother's nightly walk provided you with the opportunity. And so successfully had the A.B.C. terror taken hold on the public mind that the possibility of your guilt never occurred to any one.

"After the death of your brother, of course, your object was accomplished. You had no wish to commit any more murders. On the other hand, if the murders stopped without reason, a suspicion of truth might come to some one.

"Your stalking horse, Mr. Cust, had so successfully lived up to his rôle of the invisible - because insignificant - man, that so far no one had noticed that the same person had been seen in the vicinity of the three murders! To your annoyance, even his visit to Combeside had not been mentioned. The matter had passed completely out of Miss Grey's head.

"Always daring, you decided that one more murder must take place but that this time the trail must be well blazed.

"You selected Doncaster for the scene of operations.

"Your plan was very simple. You yourself would be on the scene in the nature of things. Mr. Cust would be ordered to Doncaster by his firm. Your plan was to follow him round and trust to opportunity. Everything fell out well. Mr. Cust went to a cinema. That was simplicity itself. You sat a few seats away from him. When he got up to go, you did the same. You pretended to stumble, leaned over and stabbed a dozing man in the row in front, slid the A.B.C. on to his knees and managed to collide heavily with Mr. Cust in the darkened doorway, wiping the knife on his sleeve and slipping it into his pocket.

"You were not in the least at pains to choose a victim whose name began with D. Any one would do! You assumed - and quite rightly - that it would be considered to be a mistake. There was sure to be some one who name began with D not far off in the audience. It would be assumed that he had been intended to be the victim.

"And now, my friends, let us consider the matter from the point of view of the false A.B.C. - from the point of view of Mr. Cust.

"The Andover crime means nothing to him. He is shocked and surprised by the Bexhill crime - why, he himself was there about the time! Then comes the Churston crime and the headlines in the newspapers. An A.B.C. crime at Andover when he was there, an A.B.C. crime at Bexhill, and now another close by... Three crimes and he has been at the scene of each of them. Persons suffering from epilepsy often have blanks when they cannot remember what they have done... Remember that Cust was a nervous, highly neurotic subject and extremely suggestible.

"Then he receives the order to go to Doncaster.

"Doncaster! And the next A.B.C. crime is to be in Doncaster. He must have felt as though it was fate. He loses his nerve, fancies his landlady is looking at him suspiciously, and tells her he is going to Cheltenham.

"He goes to Doncaster because it is his duty. In the afternoon he goes to a cinema. Possibly he dozes off for a minute or two.

"Imagine his feelings when on his return to his inn he discovers that there is blood on his coat sleeve and a bloodstained knife in his pocket. All his vague forebodings leap into certainty.

"He - he himself - is the killer! He remembers his headaches - his lapses of memory. He is quite sure of the truth - he, Alexander Bonaparte Cust, is a homicidal lunatic.

"His conduct after that is the conduct of a hunted animal. He gets back to his lodgings in London. He is safe there - known. They think he has been in Cheltenham. He has the knife with him still - a thoroughly stupid thing to do, of course. He hides it behind the hall stand.

"Then, one day, he is warned that the police are coming. It is the end! They know!

"The hunted animal does his last run...

"I do not know why he went to Andover - a morbid desire, I think, to go and look at the place where the crime was committed - the crime he committed though he can remember nothing about it...

"He has no money left - he is worn out... his feet lead him of his own accord to the police station.

"But even a cornered beast will fight. Mr. Cust fully believes that he did the murders but he sticks strongly to his plea of innocence. And he holds with desperation to that alibi for the second murder. At least that cannot be laid to his door.

"As I say, when I saw him, I knew at once that he was not the murderer and that my name meant nothing to him. I knew too, that he thought himself the murderer!

"After he had confessed his guilt to me, I knew more strongly than ever that my own theory was right."

"Your theory," said Franklin Clarke, "is absurd!"

Poirot shook his head.

"No, Mr. Clarke. You were safe enough so long as no one suspected you. Once you were suspected proofs were easy to obtain."

"Proofs?"

"Yes, I found the stick that you used in the Andover and Churston murders in a cupboard at Combeside. An ordinary stick with a thick knob handle. A section of wood had been removed and melted lead poured in. Your photograph was picked out from half a dozen others by two people who saw you leaving the cinema when you were supposed to be on the race-course at Doncaster. You were identified at Bexhill the other day by Milly Higley and a girl from the Scarlet Runner Roadhouse, where you took Betty Barnard to dine on the fatal evening. And finally - most damning of all - you overlooked a most elementary precaution. You left a fingerprint on Cust's typewriter - the typewriter that, if you are innocent, you could never have handled."

Clarke sat quite still for a minute, then he said:



Chapter 35
FINALE
I am sorry to relate that as the door closed behind Franklin Clarke I laughed hysterically.
Poirot looked at me in mild surprise.
"It's because you told him his crime was not sporting," I gasped.
"It was quite true. It was abominable - not so much the murder of his brother - but the cruelty that condemned an unfortunate man to a living death. To catch a fox and put him in a box and never let him go. That is not le sport!"
Megan Barnard gave a deep sigh.
"I can't believe it - I can't. Is it true?"
"Yes, mademoiselle. The nightmare is over."
She looked at him and her colour deepened.
Poirot turned to Fraser.
"Mademoiselle Megan, all along, was haunted by a fear that it was you who had committed the second crime."
Donald Fraser said quietly:
"I fancied so myself at one time."
"Because of your dream?" He drew a little nearer to the young man and dropped his voice

confidentially. "Your dream has a very natural explanation. It is that you find that already the image of one sister fades in your memory and that its place is taken by the other sister. Mademoiselle Megan replaces her sister in your heart, but since you cannot bear to think of yourself being unfaithful so soon to the dead, you strive to stifle the thought, to kill it! That is the explanation of the dream."

Fraser's eyes went toward Megan.

"Do not be afraid to forget," said Poirot gently. "She was not so well worth remembering. In Mademoiselle Megan you have one in a hundred - un coeur magnifique!"

Donald Fraser's eyes lit up. "I believe you are right."

We all crowded round Poirot asking questions, elucidating this point and that.

"Those questions, Poirot? That you asked of everybody. Was there any point in them?"

"Some of them were simplement une blague. But I learnt one thing that I wanted to know - that Franklin Clarke was in London when the first letter was posted - and also I wanted to see his face when I asked my question of Mademoiselle Thora. He was off his guard. I saw all the malice and anger in his eyes."

"You hardly spared my feelings," said Thora Grey.

"I do not fancy you returned me a truthful answer, mademoiselle," said Poirot dryly. "And now your second expectation is disappointed. Franklin Clarke will not inherit his brother's money."

She flung up her head.

"Is there any need for me to stay here and be insulted?"

"None whatever," said Poirot and held the door open politely for her.

"That fingerprint clinched things, Poirot," I said thoughtfully. "He went all to pieces when you mentioned that."



