

'This is very interesting, Miss Caroline,' said Colonel Carter. 'All your own idea, eh?'

'Well, not exactly. I'll tell you about it. You know that big map of the county we have in the hall?'

We all said Yes.

'As M. Poirot was going out the other day, he stopped and looked at it, and he made some remark—I can't remember exactly what it was. Something about Cranchester being the only big town anywhere near us—which is true, of course. But after he had gone—it came to me suddenly.'

'What came to you?'

'His meaning. Of course Ralph is in Cranchester.'

It was at that moment that I knocked down the rack that held my pieces. My sister immediately reproved me for clumsiness, but half-heartedly. She was intent on her theory.

'Cranchester, Miss Caroline?' said Colonel Carter. 'Surely not Cranchester! It's so near.'

'That's exactly it,' cried Caroline triumphantly. 'It seems quite clear by now that he didn't get away from here by train. He must simply have walked into Cranchester. And I believe he's there still. No one would dream of his being so near at hand.'

I pointed out several objections to the theory, but when once Caroline has got something firmly into her head, nothing dislodges it.

'And you think M. Poirot has the same idea,' said Miss Ganett thoughtfully. 'It's a curious coincidence, but I was out for a walk this afternoon on the Cranchester road, and he passed me in a car coming from that direction.'

We all looked at each other.

'Why, dear me,' said Miss Ganett suddenly, 'I'm Mah Jong all the time, and I never noticed it.'

Caroline's attention was distracted from her own inventive exercises. She pointed out to Miss Ganett that a hand consisting of mixed suits and too many Chows was hardly worth going Mah Jong on. Miss Ganett listened imperturbably and collected her counters.

'Yes, dear, I know what you mean,' she said. 'But it rather depends on what kind of a hand you have to start with, doesn't it?'

'You'll never get the big hands if you don't go for them,' urged Caroline.

'Well, we must all play our own way, mustn't we?' said Miss Ganett. She looked down at her counters. 'After all, I'm up, so far.'

Caroline, who was considerably down, said nothing.

East Wind passed, and we set to once more. Annie brought in the tea things. Caroline and Miss Ganett were both slightly ruffled as is often the case during one of these festive evenings.

'If you would only play a little quicker, dear,' said Caroline, as Miss Ganett hesitated over her discard. 'The Chinese put down the tiles so quickly it sounds like little birds pattering.'

For some few minutes we played like the Chinese.

'You haven't contributed much to the sum of information, Sheppard,' said Colonel Carter genially. 'You're a sly dog. Hand in glove with the great detective, and not a hint as to the way things are going.'

'James is an extraordinary creature,' said Caroline. 'He can not bring himself to part with information.'

She looked at me with some disfavour.

'I assure you, I said, 'that I don't know anything. Poirot keeps his own counsel.'

'Wise man,' said the colonel with a chuckle. 'He doesn't give himself away. But they're wonderful fellows, these foreign detectives. Up to all sorts of dodges, I believe.'

'Pung,' said Miss Ganett, in a tone of quiet triumph. 'And Mah Jong.'

The situation became more strained. It was annoyance at Miss Ganett's going Mah Jong for the third time running which prompted Caroline to say to me as we built a fresh wall:—

'You are too tiresome, James. You sit there like a dead head, and say nothing at all!'

'But, my dear,' I protested, 'I have really nothing to say—that is, of the kind you mean.'

'Nonsense,' said Caroline, as she sorted her hand. 'You must know something interesting.'

I did not answer for a moment. I was overwhelmed and intoxicated. I had read of there being such a thing as the Perfect Winning—going Mah Jong on one's original hand. I had never hoped to hold the hand myself. With suppressed triumph I laid my hand face upwards on the table.

'As they say in the Shanghai Club,' I remarked, 'Tin-ho—the Perfect Winning!'

The colonel's eyes nearly bulged out of his head.

'Upon my soul,' he said, 'What an extraordinary thing. I never saw that happen before!'

It was then that I went on, goaded by Caroline's gibes, and rendered reckless by my triumph.

'And as to anything interesting,' I said, 'What about a gold wedding ring with a date and "From R." inside.'

I pass over the scene that followed. I was made to say exactly where this treasure was found. I was made to reveal the date.

'March 13th,' said Caroline. 'Just six months ago. Ah!'

Out of the babel of excited suggestions and suppositions three theories were evolved:—

1. That of Colonel Carter: that Ralph was secretly married to Flora. The first or most simple solution.

2. That of Miss Ganett: that Roger Ackroyd had been secretly married to Mrs Ferrars.

3. That of my sister: that Roger Ackroyd had married his housekeeper, Miss Russell.

A fourth or super-theory was propounded by Caroline later as we went up to bed.

'Mark my words,' she said suddenly, 'I shouldn't be at all surprised if

Geoffrey Raymond and Flora weren't married.'

'Surely it would be "From G," not "From R" then,' I suggested.

'You never know. Some girls call men by their surnames. And you heard what Miss Ganett said this evening—about Flora's carryings on.'

Strictly speaking, I had not heard Miss Ganett say anything of the kind, but I respected Caroline's knowledge of innuendoes.

'How about Hector Blunt,' I hinted. 'If it's anybody—'

'Nonsense,' said Caroline. 'I dare say he admires her—may even be in love with her. But depend upon it a girl isn't going to fall in love with a man old enough to be her father when there's a good-looking young secretary about. She may encourage Major Blunt just as a blind. Girls are very artful. But there's one thing I do tell you, James Sheppard. Flora

Outwardly very respectful—but she shut me up in the most barefaced way.'

Miss Ganett stopped for breath, and the colonel, who was totally uninterested in the servant question, remarked that in the Shanghai Club brisk play was the invariable rule.

We had a round of brisk play.

'That Miss Russell,' said Caroline. 'She came here pretending to consult James on Friday morning. It's my opinion she wanted to see where the poisons were kept. Five Characters.'

'Chow,' said Miss Ganett. 'What an extraordinary idea? I wonder if you can be right.'

'Talking of poisons,' said the colonel. 'Eh—what? Haven't I discarded? Oh! Eight Bamboos.'

'Mah Jong!' said Miss Ganett.

Caroline was very much annoyed.

'One Red Dragon,' she said regretfully, 'and I should have had a hand of three doubles.'

'I've had two Red Dragons all the time,' I mentioned.

'So exactly like you, James,' said Caroline reproachfully. 'You've no conception of the spirit of the game.'

I myself thought I had played rather cleverly. I should have had to pay Caroline an enormous amount if she had gone Mah Jong. Miss Ganett's Mah Jong was of the poorest variety possible, as Caroline did not fail to point out to her.

East Wind passed, and we started a new hand in silence.

'What I was going to tell you just now was this,' said Caroline.

'Yes?' said Miss Ganett encouragingly.

'My idea about Ralph Paton, I mean.'

'Yes, dear,' said Miss Ganett, still more encouragingly. 'Chow!'

'It's a sign of weakness to Chow so early,' said Caroline severely. 'You should go for a big hand.'

'I know,' said Miss Ganett. 'You were saying—about Ralph Paton, you know?'

'Yes. Well, I've a pretty shrewd idea where he is.'

We all stopped to stare at her.

'East Wind passes,' said Caroline. 'I've got an idea of my own about Ralph Paton. Three Characters. But I'm keeping it to myself for the present.'

'Are you, dear?' said Miss Ganett. 'Chow—I mean Pung.'

'Yes,' said Caroline firmly.

'Was it all right about the boots?' asked Miss Ganett. 'Their being black, I mean?'

'Quite all right,' said Caroline.

'What was the point, do you think?' asked Miss Ganett.

Caroline pursed up her lips, and shook her head with an air of knowing all about it.

'Pung,' said Miss Ganett. 'No—Unpung. I suppose that now the doctor's in with M. Poirot he knows all the secrets?'

'Far from it,' I said.

'James is so modest,' said Caroline. 'Ah! a concealed Kong.'

The colonel gave vent to a whistle. For the moment gossip was forgotten.

'Your own wind, too,' he said. 'And you've got two Pungs of Dragons. We must be careful. Miss Caroline's out for a big hand.'

We played for some minutes with no irrelevant conversation.

'This M. Poirot now,' said Colonel Carter, 'is he really such a great detective?'

'The greatest the world has ever known,' said Caroline solemnly. 'He had to come here incognito to avoid publicity.'

'Chow,' said Miss Ganett. 'Quite wonderful for our little village, I'm sure. By the way, Clara—my maid, you know—is great friends with Elsie, the housemaid at Fernly, and what do you think Elsie told her? That there's been a lot of money stolen, and it's her opinion—Elsie's—I mean, that the parlourmaid had something to do with it. She's leaving at the month, and she's crying a good deal at night. If you ask me, the girl is very likely in league with a gang. She's always been a queer girl—she's not friends with any of the girls round here. She goes off by herself on her days out—very unnatural, I call it, and most suspicious. I asked her once to come to our Girls' Friendly Evenings, but she refused, and then I asked her a few questions about her home and her family—all that sort of thing, and I'm bound to say I considered her manner most impertinent.

Ackroyd does not care a penny piece for Ralph Paton, and never has. You can take it from me.'

I took it from her meekly.

‘Really,’ said Caroline interestedly. ‘Is that it? Well, it doesn’t surprise me in the least.’

‘We’re waiting for you to discard, Miss Caroline,’ said the colonel. He sometimes affects the pose of the bluff male, intent on the game and indifferent to gossip. But nobody is deceived.

‘If you ask me,’ said Miss Ganett. (‘Was that a Bamboo you discarded, dear? Oh! no, I see now—it was a Circle.’) As I was saying, if you ask me, Flora’s been exceedingly lucky. Exceedingly lucky she’s been.’

‘How’s that, Miss Ganett?’ asked the colonel. ‘I’ll Pung that Green Dragon. How do you make out that Miss Flora’s been lucky? Very charming girl and all that, I know.’

‘I mayn’t know very much about crime,’ said Miss Ganett, with the air of one who knows everything there is to know, ‘but I can tell you one thing. The first question that’s always asked is “Who last saw the deceased alive?” And the person who did is regarded with suspicion. Now, Flora Ackroyd last saw her uncle alive. It might have looked very nasty for her—very nasty indeed. It’s my opinion—and I give it for what it’s worth, that Ralph Paton is staying away on her account, to draw suspicion away from her.’

‘Come, now,’ I protested mildly, ‘you surely can’t suggest that a young girl like Flora Ackroyd is capable of stabbing her uncle in cold blood?’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ said Miss Ganett. ‘I’ve just been reading a book from the library about the underworld of Paris, and it says that some of the worst women criminals are young girls with the faces of angels.’

‘That’s in France,’ said Caroline instantly.

‘Just so,’ said the colonel. ‘Now, I’ll tell you a very curious thing—a story that was going round the Bazaars in India...’

The colonel’s story was one of interminable length, and of curiously little interest. A thing that happened in India many years ago cannot compare for a moment with an event that took place in King’s Abbot the day before yesterday.

It was Caroline who brought the colonel’s story to a close by fortunately going Mah Jong. After the slight unpleasantness always occasioned by my corrections of Caroline’s somewhat faulty arithmetic, we started a new hand.

Caroline and Miss Ganett joined us at this minute. Miss Ganett drank coffee whilst Caroline got out the Mah Jong box and poured out the tiles upon the table.

‘Washing the tiles,’ said the colonel facetiously. ‘That’s right—washing the tiles, as we used to say in the Shanghai Club.’

It is the private opinion of both Caroline and myself that Colonel Carter has never been in the Shanghai Club in his life. More, that he has never been farther east than India, where he juggled with tins of bully beef and plum and apple jam during the Great War. But the colonel is determinedly military, and in King’s Abbot we permit people to indulge their little idiosyncrasies freely.

‘Shall we begin?’ said Caroline.

We sat round the table. For some five minutes there was complete silence, owing to the fact that there is tremendous secret competition amongst us as to who can build their wall quickest.

‘Go on, James,’ said Caroline at last. ‘You’re East Wind.’

I discarded a tile. A round or two proceeded, broken by the monotonous remarks of ‘Three Bamboos,’ ‘Two Circles,’ ‘Pung,’ and frequently from Miss Ganett ‘Unpung,’ owing to that lady’s habit of too hastily claiming tiles to which she had no right.

‘I saw Flora Ackroyd this morning,’ said Miss Ganett. ‘Pung—no—Unpung. I made a mistake.’

‘Four Circles,’ said Caroline. ‘Where did you see her?’

‘She didn’t see me,’ said Miss Ganett, with that tremendous significance only to be met with in small villages.

‘Ah!’ said Caroline interestedly. ‘Chow.’

‘I believe,’ said Miss Ganett, temporarily diverted, ‘that it’s the right thing nowadays to say “Chee” not “Chow.”’

‘Nonsense,’ said Caroline. ‘I have always said “Chow.”’

‘In the Shanghai Club,’ said Colonel Carter, ‘they say “Chow.”’

Miss Ganett retired, crushed.

‘What were you saying about Flora Ackroyd?’ asked Caroline, after a moment or two devoted to the game. ‘Was she with any one?’

‘Very much so,’ said Miss Ganett.

The eyes of the two ladies met, and seemed to exchange information.

Chapter 17

Parker

IT occurred to me the next morning that under the exhilaration produced by Tin-ho, or the Perfect Winning, I might have been slightly indiscreet. True, Poirot had not asked me to keep the discovery of the ring to myself. On the other hand, he had said nothing about it whilst at Fernly, and as far as I knew, I was the only person aware that it had been found. I felt distinctly guilty. The fact was by now spreading through King’s Abbot like wildfire. I was expecting wholesale reproaches from Poirot any minute.

The joint funeral of Mrs Ferrars and Roger Ackroyd was fixed for eleven o’clock. It was a melancholy and impressive ceremony. All the party from Fernly were there.

After it was over, Poirot, who had also been present, took me by the arm, and invited me to accompany him back to The Larches. He was looking very grave, and I feared that my indiscretion of the night before had got round to his ears. But it soon transpired that his thoughts were occupied by something of a totally different nature.

‘See you,’ he said. ‘We must act. With your help I propose to examine a witness. We will question him, we will put such fear into him that the truth is bound to come out.’

‘What witness are you talking of?’ I asked, very much surprised.

‘Parker!’ said Poirot. ‘I asked him to be at my house this morning at twelve o’clock. He should await us there at this very minute.’

‘What do you think,’ I ventured, glancing sideways at his face.

‘I know this—that I am not satisfied.’

‘You think that it was he who blackmailed Mrs Ferrars?’

‘Either that, or—’

‘Well?’ I said, after waiting a minute or two.

‘My friend, I will say this to you—I hope it was he.’

The gravity of his manner, and something indefinable that tinged it, reduced me to silence.

On arrival at The Larches, we were informed that Parker was already there awaiting our return. As we entered the room, the butler rose respectfully.

‘Good morning, Parker,’ said Poirot pleasantly. ‘One instant, I pray of you.’

He removed his overcoat and gloves.

‘Allow me, sir,’ said Parker, and sprang forward to assist him. He deposited the articles neatly on a chair by the door. Poirot watched him with approval.

‘Thank you, my good Parker,’ he said. ‘Take a seat, will you not? What I have to say may take some time.’

Parker seated himself with an apologetic bend of the head.

‘Now what do you think I asked you to come here for this morning—eh?’

Parker coughed.

‘I understood, sir, that you wished to ask me a few questions about my late master—private like.’

‘Précisément,’ said Poirot, beaming. ‘Have you made many experiments in blackmail?’

‘Sir!’

The butler sprang to his feet.

‘Do not excite yourself,’ said Poirot placidly. ‘Do not play the farce of the honest, injured man. You know all there is to know about the blackmail, is it not so?’

‘Sir, I—I’ve never—never been—’

‘Insulted,’ suggested Poirot, ‘in such a way before. Then why, my excellent Parker, were you so anxious to overhear the conversation in Mr Ackroyd’s study the other evening, after you had caught the word blackmail?’

‘I wasn’t—I—’

‘Who was your last master?’ rapped out Poirot suddenly.

‘My last master?’

Chapter 16

An Evening at Mah Jong

THAT night we had a little Mah Jong party. This kind of simple entertainment is very popular in King’s Abbot. The guests arrive in galoshes and waterproofs after dinner. They partake of coffee and later of cake, sandwiches, and tea.

On this particular night our guests were Miss Ganett and Colonel Carter, who lives near the church. A good deal of gossip is handed round at these evenings, sometimes seriously interfering with the game in progress. We used to play bridge—chatry bridge of the worst description. We find Mah Jong much more peaceful. The irritated demand as to why on earth your partner did not lead a certain card is entirely done away with, and though we still express criticisms frankly, there is not the same acrimonious spirit.

‘Very cold evening, eh, Sheppard?’ said Colonel Carter, standing with his back to the fire. Caroline had taken Miss Ganett to her own room, and was there assisting her to disentangle herself from her many wraps. ‘Reminds me of the Afghan passes.’

‘Indeed?’ I said politely.

‘Very mysterious business this about poor Ackroyd,’ continued the colonel, accepting a cup of coffee. ‘A deuce of a lot behind it—that’s what I say. Between you and me, Sheppard, I’ve heard the word blackmail mentioned!’

The colonel gave me the look which might be tabulated ‘one man of the world to another.’

‘A woman in it, no doubt,’ he said. ‘I depend upon it, a woman in it.’

Poirot stood in the middle of the hall frowning. Flora came down and joined us.

'Has your experiment been successful?' she asked. 'I don't quite understand, you know—'

Poirot smiled admiringly at her.

'It is not necessary that you should,' he said. 'But tell me, were there indeed two glasses on Parker's tray that night?'

Flora wrinkled her brows a minute.

'I really can't remember,' she said. 'I think there were. Is—is that the object of your experiment?'

Poirot took her hand and patted it.

'Put it this way,' he said. 'I am always interested to see if people will speak the truth.'

'And did Parker speak the truth?'

'I rather think he did,' said Poirot thoughtfully.

A few minutes later saw us retracing our steps to the village.

'What was the point of that question about the glasses?' I asked curiously.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'One must say something,' he remarked. 'That particular question did as well as any other.'

I stared at him.

'At any rate, my friend,' he said more seriously, 'I know now something I wanted to know. Let us leave it at that.'

'Yes, the master you were with before you came to Mr Ackroyd.'

'A Major Ellerby, sir—'

Poirot took the words out of his mouth.

'Just so, Major Ellerby. Major Ellerby was addicted to drugs, was he not? You travelled about with him. When he was in Bermuda there was some trouble—a man was killed. Major Ellerby was partly responsible. It was hushed up. But you knew about it. How much did Major Ellerby pay you to keep your mouth shut?'

Parker was staring at him open-mouthed. The man had gone to pieces, his cheeks shook flabbily.

'You see, me, I have made inquiries,' said Poirot pleasantly. 'It is as I say. You got a good sum then as blackmail, and Major Ellerby went on paying you until he died. Now I want to hear about your latest experiment.'

Parker still stared.

'It is useless to deny. Hercule Poirot knows. It is so, what I have said about Major Ellerby, is it not?'

As though against his will, Parker nodded reluctantly once. His face was ashen pale.

'But I never hurt a hair of Mr Ackroyd's head,' he moaned. 'Honest to God, sir, I didn't. I've been afraid of this coming all the time. And I tell you I didn't—I didn't kill him.'

His voice rose almost to a scream.

'I am inclined to believe you, my friend,' said Poirot. 'You have not the nerve—the courage. But I must have the truth.'

'I'll tell you anything, sir, anything you want to know. It's true that I tried to listen that night. A word or two I heard made me curious. And Mr Ackroyd's wanting not to be disturbed, and shutting himself up with the doctor the way he did. It's God's own truth what I told the police. I heard the word blackmail, sir, and well—'

He paused.

'You thought there might be something in it for you?' suggested Poirot smoothly.

'Well—well, yes, I did, sir. I thought that if Mr Ackroyd was being blackmailed, why shouldn't I have a share of the pickings?'

A very curious expression passed over Poirot's face. He leaned forward.

'Had you any reason to suppose before that night that Mr Ackroyd was being blackmailed?'

'No, indeed, sir. It was a great surprise to me. Such a regular gentleman in all his habits.'

'How much did you overhear?'

'Not very much, sir. There seemed what I might call a spice against me. Of course I had to attend to my duties in the pantry. And when I did creep along once or twice to the study it was no use. The first time Dr Sheppard came out and almost caught me in the act, and another time Mr Raymond passed me in the big hall and went that way, so I knew it was no use; and when I went with the tray, Miss Flora headed me off.'

Poirot stared for a long time at the man, as if to test his sincerity. Parker returned his gaze earnestly.

'I hope you believe me, sir. I've been afraid all along the police would take up that old business with Major Ellerby and be suspicious of me in consequence.'

'Eh bien,' said Poirot at last. 'I am disposed to believe you. But there is one thing I must request of you—to show me your bank-book. You have a bank-book, I presume?'

'Yes, sir, as a matter of fact, I have it with me now.'

With no sign of confusion, he produced it from his pocket. Poirot took the slim, green-covered book and perused the entries.

'Ah! I perceive you have purchased £500 of National Savings Certificates this year?'

'Yes, sir. I have already over a thousand pounds saved—the result of my connection with—er—my late master, Major Ellerby. And I have had quite a little flutter on some horses this year—very successful. If you remember, sir, a rank outsider won the Jubilee. I was fortunate enough to back it—£20.'

Poirot handed him back the book.

'I will wish you good-morning. I believe that you have told me the truth. If you have not—so much the worse for you, my friend.'

When Parker had departed, Poirot picked up his overcoat once more.

'Going out again?' I asked.

'Yes, we will pay a little visit to the good M. Hammond.'

'You believe Parker's story?'

doorway carrying a tray with a siphon, a decanter of whisky, and two glasses on it.

'One moment,' cried Poirot, raising his hand and seemingly very excited. 'We must have everything in order. Just as it occurred. It is a little method of mine.'

'A foreign custom, sir,' said Parker. 'Reconstruction of the crime they call it, do they not?'

He was quite imperturbable as he stood there politely waiting on Poirot's orders.

'Ah! he knows something, the good Parker,' cried Poirot. 'He has read of these things. Now, I beg you, let us have everything of the most exact. You came from the outer hall—so. Mademoiselle was—where?'

'Here,' said Flora, taking up her stand just outside the study door.

'Quite right, sir,' said Parker.

'I had just closed the door,' continued Flora.

'Yes, miss,' agreed Parker. 'Your hand was still on the handle as it is now.'

'Then allez,' said Poirot. 'Play me the little comedy.'

Flora stood with her hand on the door handle, and Parker came stepping through the door from the hall, bearing the tray.

He stopped just inside the door. Flora spoke.

'Oh! Parker. Mr Ackroyd doesn't want to be disturbed again to-night.'

'Is that right?' she added in an undertone.

'To the best of my recollection, Miss Flora,' said Parker, 'but I fancy you used the word evening instead of night.' Then, raising his voice in a somewhat theatrical fashion: 'Very good, miss. Shall I lock up as usual?'

'Yes, please.'

Parker retired through the door, Flora followed him, and started to ascend the main staircase.

'Is that enough?' she asked over her shoulder.

'Admirable,' declared the little man, rubbing his hands. 'By the way, Parker, are you sure there were two glasses on the tray that evening? Who was the second one for?'

'I always bring two glasses, sir,' said Parker. 'Is there anything further?'

'Nothing. I thank you.'

Parker withdrew, dignified to the last.