

Three Blind Mice and Other Stories

Agatha Christie

1948

Three Blind Mice

Strange Jest

Tape-Measure Murder

The Case of the Perfect Maid

The Case of the Caretaker

The Third-Floor Flat

The Adventure of Johnnie Waverly

Four and Twenty Blackbirds

The Love Detectives

The Third-Floor Flat

'Bother!' said Pat.

With a deepening frown she rummaged wildly in the silken trifle she called an evening bag. Two young men and another girl watched her anxiously. They were all standing outside the closed door of Patricia Garnett's flat.

'It's no good,' said Pat. 'It's not there. And now what shall we do?'

'What is life without a latchkey?' murmured Jimmy Faulkener.

He was a short, broad-shouldered young man, with good-tempered blue eyes.

Pat turned on him angrily. 'Don't make jokes, Jimmy. This is serious.'

'Look again, Pat,' said Donovan Bailey. 'It must be there somewhere.'

He had a lazy, pleasant voice that matched his lean, dark figure.

'If you ever brought it out,' said the other girl, Mildred Hope.

'Of course I brought it out,' said Pat. 'I believe I gave it to one of you two.' She turned on the man accusingly. 'I told Donovan to take it for me.'

But she was not to find a scapegoat so easily. Donovan put in a firm disclaimer, and Jimmy backed him up.

'I saw you put it in your bag, myself,' said Jimmy.

'Well, then, one of you dropped it out when you picked up my bag. I've dropped it once or twice.'

'Once or twice!' said Donovan. 'You've dropped it a dozen times at least, besides leaving it behind on every possible occasion.'

'I can't see why everything on earth doesn't drop out of it the whole time,' said Jimmy.

'The point is - how are we going to get in?' said Mildred.

She was a sensible girl, who kept to the point, but she was not nearly so attractive as the impulsive and troublesome Pat.

All four of them regarded the closed door blankly.

'Couldn't the porter help?' suggested Jimmy. 'Hasn't he got a master key or something of that kind?'

Pat shook her head. There were only two keys. One was inside the flat hung up in the kitchen and the other was - or should be in the maligned bag.

'If only the flat were on the ground floor,' wailed Pat. 'We could have broken open a window or something. Donovan, you wouldn't like to be a cat burglar, would you?'

Donovan declined firmly but politely to be a cat burglar.

'A flat on the fourth floor is a bit of an undertaking,' said Jimmy.

'How about a fire-escape?' suggested Donovan.

'There isn't one.'

'There should be,' said Jimmy. 'A building five storeys high ought to have a fire escape.'

'I dare say,' said Pat. 'But what should be doesn't help us. How am I ever to get into my flat?'

'Isn't there a sort of thingummybob?' said Donovan. 'A thing the tradesmen send up chops and brussels sprouts in?'

'The service lift,' said Pat. 'Oh yes, but it's only a sort of wire-basket thing. Oh! wait - I know. What about the coal lift?'

'Now that,' said Donovan, 'is an idea.'

Mildred made a discouraging suggestion. 'It'll be bolted,' she said. 'In Pat's kitchen, I mean, on the inside.'

But the idea was instantly negated.

'Don't you believe it,' said Donovan.

'Not in Pat's kitchen,' said Jimmy. 'Pat never locks and bolts things.'

'I don't think it's bolted,' said Pat. 'I took the dustbin off this morning, and I'm sure I never bolted it afterwards, and I don't think I've been near it since.'

'Well,' said Donovan, 'that fact's going to be very useful to us tonight, but, all the same, young Pat, let me point out to you that these slack habits are leaving you at the mercy of burglars - non-feline - every night.'

Pat disregarded these admonitions.

'Come on,' she cried, and began racing down the four flights of stairs. The others followed her. Pat led them through a dark recess, apparently full to overflowing of perambulators, and through another door into the well of the flats, and guided them to the right lift.

There was, at the moment, a dustbin on it. Donovan lifted it off and stepped gingerly on to the platform in its place. He wrinkled up his nose.

'A little noisome,' he remarked. 'But what of that? Do I go alone on this venture or is anyone coming with me?'

'I'll come, too,' said Jimmy.

He stepped on by Donovan's side.

'I suppose the lift will bear me,' he added doubtfully.

'You can't weigh much more than a ton of coal,' said Pat, who had never been particularly strong on her weights-and-measures table.

'And, anyway, we shall soon find out,' said Donovan cheerfully, as he hauled on the rope.

With a grinding noise they disappeared from sight.

'This thing makes an awful noise,' remarked Jimmy, as they passed up through blackness. 'What will the people in the other flats think?'

'Ghosts or burglars, I expect,' said Donovan. 'Hauling this rope is quite heavy work. The porter of Friars Mansions does more work than I ever suspected. I say, Jimmy, old son, are you counting the floors?'

'Oh, Lord! No. I forgot about it.'

'Well, I have, which is just as well. That's the third we're passing now. The next is ours.'

'And now, I suppose,' grumbled Jimmy, 'we shall find that Pat did bolt the door after all.'

But these fears were unfounded. The wooden door swung back at a touch, and Donovan and Jimmy stepped out into the inky blackness of Pat's kitchen.

'We ought to have a torch for this wild night work,' explained Donovan. 'If I know Pat, everything's on the floor, and we shall smash endless crockery before I can get to the light switch. Don't move about, Jimmy, till I get the light on.'

He felt his way cautiously over the floor, uttering one fervent 'Damn!' as a corner of the kitchen table took him unawares in the ribs. He reached the switch, and in another moment another 'Damn!' floated out of the darkness.

'What's the matter?' asked Jimmy.

'Light won't come on. Dud bulb, I suppose. Wait a minute. I'll turn the sitting-room light on.'

The sitting-room was the door immediately across the passage. Jimmy heard Donovan go out of the door, and presently fresh muffled curses reached him. He himself edged his way cautiously across the kitchen.

'What's the matter?'

'I don't know. Rooms get bewitched at night, I believe. Everything seems to be in a different place. Chairs and tables where you least expected them. Oh, hell! Here's another!'

But at this moment Jimmy fortunately connected with the electric-light switch and pressed it down. In another minute two young men were looking at each other in silent horror.

This room was not Pat's sitting-room. They were in the wrong flat.

To begin with, the room was about ten times more crowded than Pat's, which explained Donovan's pathetic bewilderment at repeatedly cannoning into chairs and tables. There was a large round table in the centre of the room covered with a baize cloth, and there was an aspidistra in the window. It was, in fact, the kind of room whose owner, the young men felt sure, would be difficult to explain to. With silent horror they gazed down at the table, on which lay a little pile of letters.

'Mrs Ernestine Grant,' breathed Donovan, picking them up and reading the name. 'Oh, help! Do you think she's heard us?'

'It's a miracle she hasn't heard you,' said Jimmy. 'What with your language and the way you've been crashing into the furniture. Come on, for the Lord's sake, let's get out of here quickly.'

They hastily switched off the light and retraced their steps on tiptoe to the lift. Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief as they regained the fastness of its depths without further incident.

'I do like a woman to be a good, sound sleeper,' he said approvingly. 'Mrs Ernestine Grant has her points.'

'I see it now,' said Donovan; 'why we made the mistake in the floor, I mean. Out in that well we started up from the basement.' He heaved on the rope, and the lift shot up. 'We're right this time.'

'I devoutly trust we are,' said Jimmy as he stepped out into another inky void. 'My nerves won't stand many more shocks of this kind.'

But no further nerve strain was imposed. The first click of the light showed them Pat's kitchen, and in another minute they were opening the front door and admitting the two girls who were waiting outside.

'You have been a long time,' grumbled Pat. 'Mildred and I have been waiting here ages.'

'We've had an adventure,' said Donovan. 'We might have been hauled off to the police-station as dangerous malefactors.'

Pat had passed on into the sitting-room, where she switched on the light and dropped her wrap on the sofa. She listened with lively interest to Donovan's account of his adventures.

'I'm glad she didn't catch you,' she commented. 'I'm sure she's an old curmudgeon. I got a note from her this morning - wanted to see me some time - something she had to complain about - my piano, I suppose. People who don't like pianos over their heads shouldn't come and live in flats. I say, Donovan, you've hurt your hand. It's all over blood. Go and wash it under the tap.'

Donovan looked down at his hand in surprise. He went out of the room obediently and presently his voice called to Jimmy.

'Hullo,' said the other, 'what's up? You haven't hurt yourself badly, have you?'

'I haven't hurt myself at all.'

There was something so queer in Donovan's voice that Jimmy stared at him in surprise. Donovan held out his washed hand and Jimmy saw that there was no mark or cut of any kind on it.

'That's odd,' he said, frowning. 'There was quite a lot of blood. Where did it come from?' And then suddenly he realized what his quicker-witted friend had already seen. 'By Jove,' he said. 'It must have come from that flat.' He stopped, thinking over the possibilities his words implied. 'You're sure it was - er - blood?' he said. 'Not paint?'

Donovan shook his head. 'It was blood, all right,' he said, and shivered.

They looked at each other. The same thought was clearly in each of their minds. It was Jimmy who voiced it first.

'I say,' he said awkwardly. 'Do you think we ought to - well go down again - and have - a - a look around? See it's all right, you know?'

'What about the girls?'

'We won't say anything to them. Pat's going to put on an apron and make us an omelette. We'll be back by the time they wonder where we are.'

'Oh, well, come on,' said Donovan. 'I suppose we've got to go through with it. I dare say there isn't anything really wrong.' But his tone lacked conviction. They got into the lift and descended to the floor below. They found their way across the kitchen without much difficulty and once more switched on the sitting-room light.

'It must have been in here,' said Donovan, 'that - that I got the stuff on me. I never touched anything in the kitchen.'

He looked round him. Jimmy did the same, and they both frowned. Everything looked neat and commonplace and miles removed from any suggestion of violence or gore.

Suddenly Jimmy started violently and caught his companion's arm.

'Look!'

Donovan followed the pointing finger, and in his turn uttered an exclamation. From beneath the heavy rep curtains there protruded a foot - a woman's foot in a gaping patent-leather shoe.

Jimmy went to the curtains and drew them sharply apart. In the recess of the window a woman's huddled body lay on the floor, a sticky dark pool beside it. She was dead, there was no doubt of that. Jimmy was attempting to raise her up when Donovan stopped him.

'You'd better not do that. She oughtn't to be touched till the police come.'

'The police. Oh, of course. I say, Donovan, what a ghastly business. Who do you think she is? Mrs Ernestine Grant?'

'Looks like it. At any rate, if there's anyone else in the flat they're keeping jolly quiet.'

'What do we do next?' asked Jimmy. 'Run out and get a policeman or ring up from Pat's flat?'

'I should think ringing up would be best. Come on, we might as well go out the front door. We can't spend the whole night going up and down in that evil-smelling lift.'

Jimmy agreed. Just as they were passing through the door he hesitated. 'Look here; do you think one of us ought to stay - just to keep an eye on things - till the police come?'

'Yes, I think you're right. If you'll stay I'll run up and telephone.'

He ran quickly up the stairs and rang the bell of the flat above. Pat came to open it, a very pretty Pat with a flushed face and a cooking apron on. Her eyes widened in surprise.

'You? But how - Donovan, what is it? Is anything the matter?'

He took both her hands in his. 'It's all right, Pat - only we've made rather an unpleasant discovery in the flat below. A woman - dead.'

'Oh!' She gave a little gasp. 'How horrible. Has she had a fit or something?'

'No. It looks - well - it looks rather as though she had been murdered.'

'Oh, Donovan!'

'I know. It's pretty beastly.'

Her hands were still in his. She had left them there - was even clinging to him. Darling Pat - how he loved her. Did she care at all for him? Sometimes he thought she did. Sometimes he was afraid that Jimmy Faulkener - remembrances of Jimmy waiting patiently below made him start guiltily.

'Pat, dear, we must telephone to the police.'

'Monsieur is right,' said a voice behind him. 'And in the meantime, while we are waiting their arrival, perhaps I can be of some slight assistance.'

They had been standing in the doorway of the flat, and now they peered out on to the landing. A figure was standing on the stairs a little way above them. It moved down and into their range of vision.

They stood staring at a little man with a very fierce moustache and an egg-shaped head. He wore a resplendent dressing-gown and embroidered slippers. He bowed gallantly to Patricia.

'Mademoiselle!' he said. 'I am, as perhaps you know, the tenant of the flat above. I like to be up high - the air - the view over London. I take the flat in the name of Mr O'Connor. But I am not an Irishman. I have another name. That is why I venture to put myself at your service. Permit me.' With a flourish he pulled out a card and handed it to Pat. She read it.

'M. Hercule Poirot. Oh!' She caught her breath. 'The M. Poirot! The great detective? And you will really help?'

'That is my intention, mademoiselle. I nearly offered my help earlier in the evening.'

Pat looked puzzled.

'I heard you discussing how to gain admission to your flat. Me, I am very clever at picking locks. I could, without doubt, have opened your door for you, but I hesitated to suggest it. You would have had the grave suspicions of me.'

Pat laughed.

'Now, monsieur,' said Poirot to Donovan. 'Go in, I pray of you, and telephone to the police. I will descend to the flat below.'

Pat came down the stairs with him. They found Jimmy on guard, and Pat explained Poirot's presence. Jimmy, in his turn, explained to Poirot his and Donovan's adventures. The detective listened attentively.

'The lift door was unbolted, you say? You emerged into the kitchen, but the light it would not turn on.'

He directed his footsteps to the kitchen as he spoke. His fingers pressed the switch.

'Tiens! Voilà ce qui est curieux!' he said as the light flashed on. 'It functions perfectly now. I wonder -'

He held up a finger to ensure silence and listened. A faint sound broke the stillness - the sound of an unmistakable snore.

'Ah!' said Poirot. 'La chambre de domestique.'

He tiptoed across the kitchen into a little pantry, out of which led a door. He opened the door and switched on the light. The room was the kind of dog kennel designed by the builders of flats to accommodate a human being. The floor space was almost entirely occupied by the bed. In the bed was a rosy-cheeked girl lying on her back with her mouth wide-open, snoring placidly.

Poirot switched off the light and beat a retreat.

'She will not wake,' he said. 'We will let her sleep till the police come.'

He went back to the sitting-room. Donovan had joined them.

'The police will be here almost immediately, they say,' he said breathlessly. 'We are to touch nothing.'

Poirot nodded. 'We will not touch,' he said. 'We will look, that is all.'

He moved into the room. Mildred had come down with Donovan, and all four young people stood in the doorway and watched him with breathless interest.

'What I can't understand, sir, is this,' said Donovan. 'I never went near the window - how did the blood come on my hand?'

'My young friend, the answer to that stares you in the face. Of what colour is the tablecloth? Red, is it not? and doubtless you did put your hand on the table.'

'Yes, I did. Is that -' He stopped.

Poirot nodded. He was bending over the table. He indicated with his hand a dark patch on the red.

'It was here that the crime was committed,' he said solemnly. 'The body was moved afterwards.'

Then he stood upright and looked slowly round the room. He did not move, he handled nothing, but nevertheless the four watching felt as though every object in that rather frowsty place gave up its secret to his observant eye.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head as though satisfied. A little sigh escaped him. 'I see,' he said.

'You see what?' asked Donovan curiously.

'I see,' said Poirot, 'what you doubtless felt - that the room is overfull of furniture.'

Donovan smiled ruefully. 'I did go barging about a bit,' he confessed. 'Of course, everything was in a different place to Pat's room, and I couldn't make it out.'

'Not everything,' said Poirot.

Donovan looked at him inquiringly.

'I mean,' said Poirot apologetically, 'that certain things are always fixed. In a block of flats the door, the window, the fireplace - they are in the same place in the rooms which are below each other.'

'Isn't that rather splitting hairs?' asked Mildred. She was looking at Poirot with faint disapproval.

'One should always speak with absolute accuracy. That is a little - how do you say? - fad of mine.'

There was the noise of footsteps on the stairs, and three men came in. They were a police inspector, a constable, and the divisional surgeon. The inspector recognized Poirot and greeted him in an almost reverential manner. Then he turned to the others.

'I shall want statements from everyone,' he began, 'but in the first place -'

Poirot interrupted. 'A little suggestion. We will go back to the flat upstairs and mademoiselle here shall do what she was planning to do - make us an omelette. Me, I have a passion for the omelettes. Then, M. l'Inspecteur, when you have finished here, you will mount to us and ask questions at your leisure.'

It was arranged accordingly, and Poirot went up with them.

'M. Poirot,' said Pat, 'I think you're a perfect dear. And you shall have a lovely omelette. I really make omelettes frightfully well.'

'That is good. Once, mademoiselle, I loved a beautiful young English girl, who resembled you greatly - but alas! - she could not cook. So perhaps everything was for the best.'

There was a faint sadness in his voice, and Jimmy Faulkener looked at him curiously.

Once in the flat, however, he exerted himself to please and amuse. The grim tragedy below was almost forgotten.

The omelette had been consumed and duly praised by the time that Inspector Rice's footsteps were heard. He came in accompanied by the doctor, having left the constable below.

'Well, Monsieur Poirot,' he said. 'It all seems clear and above-board - not much in your line, though we may find it hard to catch the man. I'd just like to hear how the discovery came to be made.'

Donovan and Jimmy between them recounted the happenings of the evening. The inspector turned reproachfully to Pat.

'You shouldn't leave your lift door unbolted, miss. You really shouldn't.'

'I shan't again,' said Pat, with a shiver. 'Somebody might come in and murder me like that poor woman below.'

'Ah, but they didn't come in that way, though,' said the inspector.

'You will recount to us what you have discovered, yes?' said Poirot.

'I don't know as I ought to - but seeing it's you, M. Poirot -'

'Précisément,' said Poirot. 'And these young people - they will be discreet.'

'The newspapers will get hold of it, anyway, soon enough,' said the inspector. 'There's no real secret about the matter. Well, the dead woman's Mrs Grant, all right. I had the porter up to identify her. Woman of about thirty-five. She was sitting at the table, and she was shot with an automatic pistol of small calibre, probably by someone sitting opposite her at table. She fell forward, and that's how the bloodstain came on the table.'

'But wouldn't someone have heard the shot?' asked Mildred.

'The pistol was fitted with a silencer. No, you wouldn't hear anything. By the way, did you hear the screech the maid let out when we told her her mistress was dead? No. Well, that just shows how unlikely it was that anyone would hear the other.'

'Has the maid no story to tell?' asked Poirot.

'It was her evening out. She's got her own key. She came in about ten o'clock. Everything was quiet. She thought her mistress had gone to bed.'

'She did not look in the sitting-room, then?'

'Yes, she took the letters in there which had come by the evening post, but she saw nothing unusual - any more than Mr Faulkener and Mr Bailey did. You see, the murderer had concealed the body rather neatly behind the curtains.'

'But it was a curious thing to do, don't you think?'

Poirot's voice was very gentle, yet it held something that made the inspector look up quickly.

'Didn't want the crime discovered till he'd had time to make his getaway.'

'Perhaps, perhaps - but continue with what you were saying.'

'The maid went out at five o'clock. The doctor here puts the time of death as - roughly - about four to five hours ago. That's right, isn't it?'

The doctor, who was a man of few words, contented himself with jerking his head affirmatively.

'It's a quarter to twelve now. The actual time can, I think, be narrowed down to a fairly definite hour.'

He took out a crumpled sheet of paper.

'We found this in the pocket of the dead woman's dress. You needn't be afraid of handling it. There are no fingerprints on it.'

Poirot smoothed out the sheet. Across it some words were printed in small, prim capitals.

I WILL COME TO SEE YOU THIS EVENING AT HALF PAST SEVEN. - J.F.

'A compromising document to leave behind,' commented Poirot, as he handed it back.

'Well, he didn't know she'd got it in her pocket,' said the inspector. 'He probably thought she'd destroyed it. We've evidence that he was a careful man, though. The pistol she was shot with we found under the body - and there again no fingerprints. They'd been wiped off very carefully with a silk handkerchief.'

'How do you know,' said Poirot, 'that it was a silk handkerchief?'

'Because we found it,' said the inspector triumphantly. 'At the last, as he was drawing the curtains, he must have let it fall unnoticed.'

He handed across a big white silk handkerchief - a good-quality handkerchief. It did not need the inspector's finger to draw Poirot's attention to the mark on it in the centre. It was neatly marked and quite legible. Poirot read the name out.

'John Fraser.'

'That's it,' said the inspector. 'John Fraser - J.F. in the note. We know the name of the man we have to look for, and I dare say when we find out a little about the dead woman, and her relations come forward, we shall soon get a line on him.'

'I wonder,' said Poirot. 'No, mon cher, somehow I do not think he will be easy to find, your John Fraser. He is a strange man - careful, since he marks his handkerchiefs and wipes the pistol with which he has committed the crime - yet careless since he loses his handkerchief and does not search for a letter that might incriminate him.'

'Flurried, that's what he was,' said the inspector.

'It is possible,' said Poirot. 'Yes, it is possible. And he was not seen entering the building?'

'There are all sorts of people going in and out at the time. These are big blocks. I suppose none of you -' he addressed the four collectively - 'saw anyone coming out of the flat?'

Pat shook her head. 'We went out earlier - about seven o'clock.'

'I see.' The inspector rose. Poirot accompanied him to the door.

'As a little favour, may I examine the flat below?'

'Why, certainly, M. Poirot. I know what they think of you at headquarters. I'll leave you a key. I've got two. It will be empty. The maid cleared out to some relatives, too scared to stay there alone.'

'I thank you,' said M. Poirot. He went back into the flat, thoughtful.

'You're not satisfied, M. Poirot?' said Jimmy.

'No,' said Poirot. 'I am not satisfied.'

Donovan looked at him curiously. 'What is it that - well, worries you?'

Poirot did not answer. He remained silent for a minute or two, frowning, as though in thought, then he made a sudden impatient movement of shoulders.

'I will say good night to you, mademoiselle. You must be tired. You have had much cooking to do - eh?'

Pat laughed. 'Only the omelette. I didn't do dinner. Donovan and Jimmy came and called for us, and we went out to a little place in Soho.'

'And then without doubt, you went to a theatre?'

'Yes. The Brown Eyes of Caroline.'

'Ah!' said Poirot. 'It should have been blue eyes - the blue eyes of mademoiselle.'

He made a sentimental gesture, and then once more wished Pat good night, also Mildred, who was staying the night by special request, as Pat admitted frankly that she would get the horrors, if left alone on this particular night.

The two young men accompanied Poirot. When the door was shut, and they were preparing to say goodbye to him on the landing, Poirot forestalled them.

'My young friends, you heard me say that I was not satisfied! Eh bien, it is true - I am not. I go now to make some little investigations of my own. You would like to accompany me - yes?'

An eager assent greeted this proposal. Poirot led the way to the flat below and inserted the key the inspector had given him in the lock. On entering, he did not, as the others had expected, enter the sitting-room. Instead he went straight to the kitchen. In a little recess which served as a scullery a big iron bin was standing. Poirot uncovered this and, doubling himself up, began to rootle in it with the energy of a ferocious terrier.

Both Jimmy and Donovan stared at him in amazement.

Suddenly with a cry of triumph he emerged. In his hand he held aloft a small stoppered bottle.

'Voilà!' he said. 'I find what I seek.' He sniffed at it delicately. 'Alas! I am enrhumé - I have the cold in the head.'

Donovan took the bottle from him and sniffed in his turn, but could smell nothing. He took out the stopper and held the bottle to his nose before Poirot's warning cry could stop him.

Immediately he fell like a log. Poirot, by springing forward, partly broke his fall.

'Imbecile!' he cried. 'The idea. To remove the stopper in that foolhardy manner! Did he not observe how delicately I handled it? Monsieur - Faulkener - is it not? Will you be so good as to get me a little brandy? I observed a decanter in the sitting-room.'

Jimmy hurried off, but by the time he returned, Donovan was sitting up and declaring himself quite all right again. He had to listen to a short lecture from Poirot on the necessity of caution in sniffing at possibly poisonous substances.

'I think I'll be off home,' said Donovan, rising shakily to his feet. 'That is, if I can't be any more use here. I feel a bit wonky still.'

'Assuredly,' said Poirot. 'That is the best thing you can do. M. Faulkener, attend me here a little minute. I will return on the instant.'

He accompanied Donovan to the door and beyond. They remained outside on the landing talking for some minutes. When Poirot at last re-entered the flat he found Jimmy standing in the sitting-room gazing round him with puzzled eyes.

'Well, M. Poirot,' he said, 'what next?'

'There is nothing next. The case is finished.'

'What?'

'I know everything - now.'

Jimmy stared at him. 'That little bottle you found?'

'Exactly. That little bottle.'

Jimmy shook his head. 'I can't make head or tail of it. For some reason or other I can see you are dissatisfied with the evidence against this John Fraser, whoever he may be.'

'Whoever he may be,' repeated Poirot softly. 'If he is anyone at all - well, I shall be surprised.'

'I don't understand.'

'He is a name - that is all - a name carefully marked on a handkerchief!'

'And the letter?'

'Did you notice that it was printed? Now, why? I will tell you. Handwriting might be recognized, and a typewritten letter is more easily traced than you would imagine - but if a real John Fraser wrote that letter those two points would not have appealed to him! No, it was written on purpose, and put in the dead woman's pocket for us to find. There is no such person as John Fraser.'

Jimmy looked at him inquiringly.

'And so,' went on Poirot, 'I went back to the point that first struck me. You heard me say that certain things in a room were always in the same place under given circumstances. I gave three instances. I might have mentioned a fourth - the electric-light switch, my friend.'

Jimmy still stared uncomprehendingly. Poirot went on.

'Your friend Donovan did not go near the window - it was by resting his hand on this table that he got it covered in blood! But I asked myself at once - why did he rest it there? What was he doing groping about this room in darkness? For remember, my friend, the electric-light switch is always in the same place - by the door. Why, when he came to this room, did he not at once feel for the light and turn it on? That was the natural, the normal thing to do. According to him, he tried to turn on the light in the kitchen, but failed. Yet when I tried the switch it was in perfect working order. Did he, then, not wish the light to go on just then? If it had gone on you would both have seen at once that you were in the wrong flat. There would have been no reason to come into this room.'

'What are you driving at, M. Poirot? I don't understand. What do you mean?'

'I mean - this.'

Poirot held up a Yale door key.

'The key of this flat?'

'No, mon ami, the key of the flat above. Mademoiselle Patricia's key, which M. Donovan Bailey abstracted from her bag some time during the evening.'

'But why - why?'

'Parbleu! So that he could do what he wanted to do - gain admission to this flat in a perfectly unsuspecting manner. He made sure that the lift door was unbolted earlier in the evening.'

'Where did you get the key?'

Poirot's smile broadened. 'I found it just now - where I looked for it - in M. Donovan's pocket. See you, that little bottle I pretended to find was a ruse. M. Donovan is taken in. He does what I knew he would do - unstoppers it and sniffs. And in that little bottle is ethyl chloride, a very powerful instant anaesthetic. It gives me just the moment or two of unconsciousness I need. I take from his pocket the two things that I knew would be there. This key was one of them - the other -'

He stopped and then went on.

'I questioned at the time the reason the inspector gave for the body being concealed behind the curtain. To gain time? No, there was more than that. And so I thought of just one thing - the post, my friend. The evening post that comes at half past nine or thereabouts. Say the murderer does not find something he expects to find, but that something may be delivered by post later. Clearly, then, he must come back. But the crime must not be discovered by the maid when she comes in, or the police would take possession of the flat, so he hides the body behind the curtain. And the maid suspects nothing and lays the letters on the table as usual.'

'The letters?'

'Yes, the letters.' Poirot drew something from his pocket. 'This is the second article I took from M. Donovan when he was unconscious.' He showed the superscription - a typewritten envelope addressed to Mrs Ernestine Grant. 'But I will ask you one thing first, M. Faulkener, before we look at the contents of this letter. Are you or are you not in love with Mademoiselle Patricia?'

'I care for Pat damnably - but I've never thought I had a chance.'

'You thought that she cared for M. Donovan? It may be that she had begun to care for him - but it was only a beginning, my friend. It is for you to make her forget - to stand by her in her trouble.'

'Trouble?' said Jimmy sharply.

'Yes, trouble. We will do all we can to keep her name out of it, but it will be impossible to do so entirely. She was, you see, the motive.'

He ripped open the envelope that he held. An enclosure fell out. The covering letter was brief, and was from a firm of solicitors.

Dear Madam,

The document you enclose is quite in order, and the fact of the marriage having taken place in a foreign country does not invalidate it in any way.

Yours truly, etc.

Poirot spread out the enclosure. It was a certificate of marriage between Donovan Bailey and Ernestine Grant, dated eight years ago.

'Oh, my God!' said Jimmy. 'Pat said she'd had a letter from the woman asking to see her, but she never dreamed it was anything important.'

Poirot nodded. 'M. Donovan knew - he went to see his wife this evening before going to the flat above - a strange irony, by the way, that led the unfortunate woman to come to this building where her rival lived - he murdered her in cold blood, and then went on to his evening's amusement. His wife must have told him that she had sent the marriage certificate to her solicitors and was expecting to hear from them. Doubtless he himself had tried to make her believe that there was a flaw in the marriage.'

'He seemed in quite good spirits, too, all the evening. M. Poirot, you haven't let him escape?' Jimmy shuddered.

'There is no escape for him,' said Poirot gravely. 'You need not fear.'

'It's Pat I'm thinking about mostly,' said Jimmy. 'You don't think - she really cared.'

'Mon ami, that is your part,' said Poirot gently. 'To make her turn to you and forget. I do not think you will find it very difficult!'