

Agatha Christie

The Adventure
of the Christmas
Pudding

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Foreword

By Agatha Christie

This book of Christmas fare may be described as 'The Chef's Selection'. I am the Chef!

There are two main courses: The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding and The Mystery of the Spanish Chest; a selection of Entrees: Greenshaw's Folly, The Dream and The Under Dog, and a Sorbet: Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds.

The Mystery of the Spanish Chest may be described as a Hercule Poirot Special. It is a case in which he considers he was at his best! Miss Marple, in her turn, has always been pleased with her perspicuity in Greenshaw's Folly.

The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding is an indulgence of my own, since it recalls to me, very pleasurably, the Christmases of my youth. After my father's death, my mother and I always spent Christmas with my brother-in-law's family in the north of England – and what superb Christmases they were for a child to remember! Abney Hall had everything! The garden boasted a waterfall, a stream, and a tunnel under the drive! The Christmas fare was of gargantuan proportions. I was a skinny child, appearing delicate, but actually of robust health and perpetually hungry! The boys of the family and I used to vie with each other as to who could eat most on Christmas Day. Oyster Soup and Turbot went down without undue zest, but then came Roast Turkey, Boiled Turkey and an enormous Sirloin of Beef. The boys and I had two helpings of all three! We then had Plum Pudding, Mince-pies, Trifle and every kind of dessert. During the afternoon we ate chocolates solidly. We neither felt, nor were, sick! How lovely to be eleven years old and greedy!

What a day of delight from 'Stockings' in bed in the morning, Church and all the Christmas hymns, Christmas dinner, Presents, and the final Lighting of the Christmas Tree!

And how deep my gratitude to the kind and hospitable hostess who must have worked so hard to make Christmas Day a wonderful memory to me still in my old age.

So let me dedicate this book to the memory of Abney Hall – its kindness and its hospitality.

And a happy Christmas to all who read this book.

Agatha Christie

The Dream

I

Hercule Poirot gave the house a steady appraising glance. His eyes wandered a moment to its surroundings, the shops, the big factory building on the right, the blocks of cheap mansion flats opposite.

Then once more his eyes returned to Northway House, relic of an earlier age – an age of space and leisure, when green fields had surrounded its well-bred arrogance. Now it was an anachronism, submerged and forgotten in the hectic sea of modern London, and not one man in fifty could have told you where it stood.

Furthermore, very few people could have told you to whom it belonged, though its owner's name would have been recognized as one of the world's richest men. But money can quench publicity as well as flaunt it. Benedict Farley, that eccentric millionaire, chose not to advertise his choice of residence. He himself was rarely seen, seldom making a public appearance. From time to time, he appeared at board meetings, his lean figure, beaked nose, and rasping voice easily dominating the assembled directors. Apart from that, he was just a well-known figure of legend. There were his strange meannesses, his incredible generosity, as well as more personal details – his famous patchwork dressing-gown, now reputed to be twenty-eight years old, his invariable diet of cabbage soup and caviare, his hatred of cats. All these things the public knew.

Hercule Poirot knew them also. It was all he did know of the man he was about to visit. The letter which was in his coat pocket told him little more.

After surveying this melancholy landmark of a past age for a minute or two in silence, he walked up the steps to the front door and pressed the bell, glancing as he did so at the neat wrist-watch which had at last replaced an old favourite – the large turnip-faced watch of earlier days. Yes, it was exactly nine-thirty. As ever, Hercule Poirot was exact to the minute.

The door opened after just the right interval. A perfect specimen of the genus butler stood outlined against the lighted hall.

'Mr Benedict Farley?' asked Hercule Poirot.

The impersonal glance surveyed him from head to foot, inoffensively but effectively.

En gros et en détail, thought Hercule Poirot to himself with appreciation.

'You have an appointment, sir?' asked the suave voice.

'Yes.'

'Your name, sir?'

'Monsieur Hercule Poirot.'

The butler bowed and drew back. Hercule Poirot entered the house. The butler closed the door behind him.

But there was yet one more formality before the deft hands took hat and stick from the visitor.

'You will excuse me, sir. I was to ask for a letter.' With deliberation Poirot took from his pocket the folded letter and handed it to the butler. The latter gave it a mere glance, then returned it with a bow. Hercule Poirot returned it to his pocket. Its contents were simple.

Northway House, W.8

M. Hercule Poirot

Dear Sir,

Mr Benedict Farley would like to have the benefit of your advice. If convenient to yourself he would be glad if you would call upon him at the above address at 9.30 tomorrow (Thursday) evening.

Yours truly,

Hugo Cornworthy

(Secretary)

P.S. Please bring this letter with you.

Deftly the butler relieved Poirot of hat, stick and overcoat. He said:

'Will you please come up to Mr Cornworthy's room?'

He led the way up the broad staircase. Poirot followed him, looking with appreciation at such *objets d'art* as were of an opulent and florid nature! His taste in art was always somewhat bourgeois.

On the first floor the butler knocked on a door.

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows rose very slightly. It was the first jarring note. For the best butlers do not knock at doors – and yet indubitably this was a first-class butler!

It was, so to speak, the first intimation of contact with the eccentricity of a millionaire.

A voice from within called out something. The butler threw open the door. He announced (and again Poirot sensed the deliberate departure from orthodoxy):

'The gentleman you are expecting, sir.'

Poirot passed into the room. It was a fair-sized room, very plainly furnished in a workmanlike fashion. Filing cabinets, books of reference, a couple of easy-chairs, and a large and imposing desk covered with neatly docketed papers. The corners of the room were dim, for the only light came from a big green-shaded reading lamp which stood on a small table by the arm of one of the easy-chairs. It was placed so as to cast its full light on anyone approaching from the door. Hercule Poirot blinked a little, realizing that the lamp bulb was at least 150 watts. In the arm-chair sat a thin figure in a patchwork dressing-gown – Benedict Farley. His head was stuck forward in a characteristic attitude, his beaked nose projecting like that of a bird. A

crest of white hair like that of a cockatoo rose above his forehead. His eyes glittered behind thick lenses as he peered suspiciously at his visitor.

'Hey,' he said at last – and his voice was shrill and harsh, with a rasping note in it.

'So you're Hercule Poirot, hey?'

'At your service,' said Poirot politely and bowed, one hand on the back of the chair.

'Sit down – sit down,' said the old man testily.

Hercule Poirot sat down – in the full glare of the lamp. From behind it the old man seemed to be studying him attentively.

'How do I know you're Hercule Poirot – hey?' he demanded fretfully. 'Tell me that – hey?'

Once more Poirot drew the letter from his pocket and handed it to Farley.

'Yes,' admitted the millionaire grudgingly. 'That's it. That's what I got Comworthy to write.' He folded it up and tossed it back. 'So you're the fellow, are you?'

With a little wave of his hand Poirot said:

'I assure you there is no deception!'

Benedict Farley chuckled suddenly.

'That's what the conjurer says before he takes the goldfish out of the hat! Saying that is part of the trick, you know!'

Poirot did not reply. Farley said suddenly:

'Think I'm a suspicious old man, hey? So I am. Don't trust anybody! That's my motto. Can't trust anybody when you're rich. No, no, it doesn't do.'

'You wished,' Poirot hinted gently, 'to consult me?'

The old man nodded.

'Go to the expert and don't count the cost. You'll notice, M. Poirot, I haven't asked you your fee. I'm not going to! Send me in the bill later – I shan't cut up rough over it. Damned fools at the dairy thought they could charge me two and nine for eggs when two and seven's the market price – lot of swindlers! I won't be swindled. But the man at the top's different. He's worth the money. I'm at the top myself – I know.'

Hercule Poirot made no reply. He listened attentively, his head poised a little on one side.

Behind his impassive exterior he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. He could not exactly put his finger on it. So far Benedict Farley had run true to type – that is, he had conformed to the popular idea of himself; and yet – Poirot was disappointed.

'The man,' he said disgustedly to himself, 'is a mountebank – nothing but a mountebank!'

He had known other millionaires, eccentric men too, but in nearly every case he had been conscious of a certain force, an inner energy that had commanded his respect. If they had worn a patchwork dressing-gown, it would have been because they liked wearing such a dressing-gown. But the dressing-gown of Benedict Farley,

or so it seemed to Poirot, was essentially a stage property. And the man himself was essentially stagy. Every word he spoke was uttered, so Poirot felt assured, sheerly for effect.

He repeated again unemotionally, 'You wished to consult me, Mr Farley?'

Abruptly the millionaire's manner changed.

He leaned forward. His voice dropped to a croak.

'Yes. Yes . . . I want to hear what you've got to say – what you think . . . Go to the top! That's my way! The best doctor – the best detective – it's between the two of them.'

'As yet, Monsieur, I do not understand.'

'Naturally,' snapped Farley. 'I haven't begun to tell you.'

He leaned forward once more and shot out an abrupt question.

'What do you know, M. Poirot, about dreams?'

The little man's eyebrows rose. Whatever he had expected, it was not this.

'For that, M. Farley, I should recommend Napoleon's *Book of Dreams* – or the latest practising psychologist from Harley Street.'

Benedict Farley said soberly, 'I've tried both . . .'

There was a pause, then the millionaire spoke, at first almost in a whisper, then with a voice growing higher and higher.

'It's the same dream – night after night. And I'm afraid, I tell you – I'm afraid . . . It's always the same. I'm sitting in my room next door to this. Sitting at my desk, writing. There's a clock there and I glance at it and see the time – exactly twenty-eight minutes past three. Always the same time, you understand.

'*And when I see the time, M. Poirot, I know I've got to do it.* I don't want to do it – I loathe doing it – but I've got to . . .'

His voice had risen shrilly.

Unperturbed, Poirot said, 'And what is it that you have to do?'

'At twenty-eight minutes past three,' Benedict Farley said hoarsely, 'I open the second drawer down on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it and walk over to the window. And then – and then –'

'Yes?'

Benedict Farley said in a whisper:

'*Then I shoot myself . . .'*

There was silence.

Then Poirot said, 'That is your dream?'

'Yes.'

'The same every night?'

'Yes.'

'What happens after you shoot yourself?'

'I wake up.'

Poirot nodded his head slowly and thoughtfully. 'As a matter of interest, do you keep a revolver in that particular drawer?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I have always done so. It is as well to be prepared.'

'Prepared for what?'

Farley said irritably, 'A man in my position has to be on his guard. All rich men have enemies.'

Poirot did not pursue the subject. He remained silent for a moment or two, then he said:

'Why exactly did you send for me?'

'I will tell you. First of all I consulted a doctor – three doctors to be exact.'

'Yes?'

'The first told me it was all a question of diet. He was an elderly man. The second was a young man of the modern school. He assured me that it all hinged on a certain event that took place in infancy at that particular time of day – three twenty-eight. I am so determined, he says, not to remember the event, that I symbolize it by destroying myself. That is his explanation.'

'And the third doctor?' asked Poirot.

Benedict Farley's voice rose in shrill anger.

'He's a young man too. He has a preposterous theory! He asserts that I, myself, am tired of life, that my life is so unbearable to me that I deliberately want to end it! But since to acknowledge that fact would be to acknowledge that essentially I am a failure, I refuse in my waking moments to face the truth. But when I am asleep, all inhibitions are removed, and I proceed to do that *which I really wish to do*. I put an end to myself.'

'His view is that you really wish, unknown to yourself, to commit suicide?' said Poirot.

Benedict Farley cried shrilly:

'And that's impossible – impossible! I'm perfectly happy! I've got everything I want – everything money can buy! It's fantastic – unbelievable even to suggest a thing like that!'

Poirot looked at him with interest. Perhaps something in the shaking hands, the trembling shrillness of the voice, warned him that the denial was *too* vehement, that its very insistence was in itself suspect. He contented himself with saying:

'And where do I come in, Monsieur?'

Benedict Farley calmed down suddenly. He tapped with an emphatic finger on the table beside him.

'There's another possibility. And if it's right, you're the man to know about it! You're famous, you've had hundreds of cases – fantastic, improbable cases! You'd know if anyone does.'

'Know what?'

Farley's voice dropped to a whisper.

'Supposing someone wants to kill me . . . Could they do it this way? Could they make me dream that dream night after night?'

'Hypnotism, you mean?'

'Yes.'

Hercule Poirot considered the question.

'It would be possible, I suppose,' he said at last. 'It is more a question for a doctor.'

'You don't know of such a case in your experience?'

'Not precisely on those lines, no.'

'You see what I'm driving at? I'm made to dream the same dream, night after night, night after night – and then – one day the suggestion is too much for me – *and I act upon it*. I do what I've dreamed of so often – kill myself!'

Slowly Hercule Poirot shook his head.

'You don't think that is possible?' asked Farley.

'*Possible?* Poirot shook his head. 'That is not a word I care to meddle with.'

'But you think it improbable?'

'Most improbable.'

Benedict Farley murmured. 'The doctor said so too . . .' Then his voice rising shrilly again, he cried out, 'But why do I have this dream? Why? Why?'

Hercule Poirot shook his head. Benedict Farley said abruptly, 'You're sure you've never come across anything like this in your experience?'

'Never.'

'That's what I wanted to know.'

Delicately, Poirot cleared his throat.

'You permit,' he said, 'a question?'

'What is it? What is it? Say what you like.'

'Who is it you suspect of wanting to kill you?' Farley snapped out, 'Nobody. Nobody at all.'

'But the idea presented itself to your mind?' Poirot persisted.

'I wanted to know – if it was a possibility.'

'Speaking from my own experience, I should say No. Have you ever been hypnotized, by the way?'

'Of course not. D'you think I'd lend myself to such tomfoolery?'

'Then I think one can say that your theory is definitely improbable.'

'But the dream, you fool, the dream.'

'The dream is certainly remarkable,' said Poirot thoughtfully. He paused and then went on. 'I should like to see the scene of this drama – the table, the clock, and the revolver.'

'Of course, I'll take you next door.'

Wrapping the folds of his dressing-gown round him, the old man half-rose from his chair. Then suddenly, as though a thought had struck him, he resumed his seat.

'No,' he said. 'There's nothing to see there. I've told you all there is to tell.'

'But I should like to see for myself –'

'There's no need,' Farley snapped. 'You've given me your opinion. That's the end.'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. 'As you please.' He rose to his feet. 'I am sorry, Mr Farley, that I have not been able to be of assistance to you.'

Benedict Farley was staring straight ahead of him. 'Don't want a lot of hanky-panky around,' he growled out. 'I've told you the facts – you can't make anything of them. That closes the matter. You can send me a bill for the consultation fee.'

'I shall not fail to do so,' said the detective drily. He walked towards the door.

'Stop a minute.' The millionaire called him back. 'That letter – I want it.'

'The letter from your secretary?'

'Yes.'

Poirot's eyebrows rose. He put his hand into his pocket, drew out a folded sheet, and handed it to the old man. The latter scrutinized it, then put it down on the table beside him with a nod.

Once more Hercule Poirot walked to the door. He was puzzled. His busy mind was going over and over the story he had been told. Yet in the midst of his mental preoccupation, a nagging sense of something wrong obtruded itself. And that something had to do with himself – not with Benedict Farley.

With his hand on the door knob, his mind cleared. He, Hercule Poirot, had been guilty of an error! He turned back into the room once more.

'A thousand pardons! In the interest of your problem I have committed a folly! That letter I handed to you – by mischance I put my hand into my right-hand pocket instead of the left –'

'What's all this? What's all this?'

'The letter that I handed you just now – an apology from my laundress concerning the treatment of my collars.' Poirot was smiling, apologetic. He dipped into his left-hand pocket. 'This is *your* letter.'

Benedict Farley snatched at it – grunted: 'Why the devil can't you mind what you're doing?'

Poirot retrieved his laundress's communication, apologized gracefully once more, and left the room.

He paused for a moment outside on the landing. It was a spacious one. Directly facing him was a big old oak settle with a refectory table in front of it. On the table were magazines. There were also two arm-chairs and a table with flowers. It reminded him a little of a dentist's waiting-room.

The butler was in the hall below waiting to let him out.

'Can I get you a taxi, sir?'

'No, I thank you. The night is fine. I will walk.'

Hercule Poirot paused a moment on the pavement waiting for a lull in the traffic before crossing the busy street.

A frown creased his forehead. 'No,' he said to himself. 'I do not understand at all. Nothing makes sense. Regrettable to have to admit it, but I, Hercule Poirot, am completely baffled.'

That was what might be termed the first act of the drama. The second act followed a week later. It opened with a telephone call from one John Stillingfleet, MD.

He said with a remarkable lack of medical decorum:

'That you, Poirot, old horse? Stillingfleet here.'

'Yes, my friend. What is it?'

'I'm speaking from Northway House – Benedict Farley's.'

'Ah, yes?' Poirot's voice quickened with interest. 'What of – Mr Farley?'

'Farley's dead. Shot himself this afternoon.'

There was a pause, then Poirot said:

'Yes . . .'

'I notice you're not overcome with surprise. Know something about it, old horse?'

'Why should you think that?'

'Well, it isn't brilliant deduction or telepathy or anything like that. We found a note from Farley to you making an appointment about a week ago.'

'I see.'

'We've got a tame police inspector here – got to be careful, you know, when one of these millionaire blokes bumps himself off. Wondered whether you could throw any light on the case. If so, perhaps you'd come round?'

'I will come immediately.'

'Good for you, old boy. Some dirty work at the crossroads – eh?'

Poirot merely repeated that he would set forth immediately.

'Don't want to spill the beans over the telephone? Quite right. So long.'

A quarter of an hour later Poirot was sitting in the library, a low long room at the back of Northway House on the ground floor. There were five other persons in the room: Inspector Barnett, Dr Stillingfleet, Mrs Farley, the widow of the millionaire, Joanna Farley, his only daughter, and Hugo Cornworthy, his private secretary.

Of these, Inspector Barnett was a discreet soldierly-looking man. Dr Stillingfleet, whose professional manner was entirely different from his telephonic style, was a tall, long-faced young man of thirty. Mrs Farley was obviously very much younger than her husband. She was a handsome dark-haired woman. Her mouth was hard and her black eyes gave absolutely no clue to her emotions. She appeared perfectly self-possessed. Joanna Farley had fair hair and a freckled face. The prominence of her nose and chin was clearly inherited from her father. Her eyes were intelligent

and shrewd. Hugo Cornworthy was a good-looking young fellow, very correctly dressed. He seemed intelligent and efficient.

After greetings and introductions, Poirot narrated simply and clearly the circumstances of his visit and the story told him by Benedict Farley. He could not complain of any lack of interest.

'Most extraordinary story I've ever heard!' said the inspector. 'A dream, eh? Did you know anything about this, Mrs Farley?'

She bowed her head.

'My husband mentioned it to me. It upset him very much. I – I told him it was indigestion – his diet, you know, was very peculiar – and suggested his calling in Dr Stillingfleet.'

The young man shook his head. 'He didn't consult me. From M. Poirot's story, I gather he went to Harley Street.'

'I would like your advice on that point, Doctor,' said Poirot. 'Mr Farley told me that he consulted three specialists. What do you think of the theories they advanced?'

Stillingfleet frowned.

'It's difficult to say. You've got to take into account that what he passed on to you wasn't exactly what had been said to him. It was a layman's interpretation.'

'You mean he had got the phraseology wrong?'

'Not exactly. I mean they would put a thing to him in professional terms, he'd get the meaning a little distorted, and then recast it in his own language.'

'So that what he told me was not really what the doctors said.'

'That's what it amounts to. He's just got it all a little wrong, if you know what I mean.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. 'Is it known whom he consulted?' he asked.

Mrs Farley shook her head, and Joanna Farley remarked:

'None of us had any idea he had consulted anyone.'

'Did he speak to *you* about his dream?' asked Poirot.

The girl shook her head.

'And you, Mr Cornworthy?'

'No, he said nothing at all. I took down a letter to you at his dictation, but I had no idea why he wished to consult you. I thought it might possibly have something to do with some business irregularity.'

Poirot asked: 'And now as to the actual facts of Mr Farley's death?'

Inspector Barnett looked interrogatively at Mrs Farley and at Dr Stillingfleet, and then took upon himself the role of spokesman.

'Mr Farley was in the habit of working in his own room on the first floor every afternoon. I understand that there was a big amalgamation of business in prospect –'

He looked at Hugo Cornworthy who said, 'Consolidated Coachlines.'

'In connection with that,' continued Inspector Barnett, 'Mr Farley had agreed to give an interview to two members of the Press. He very seldom did anything of the kind – only about once in five years, I understand. Accordingly two reporters, one from the Associated Newsgroups, and one from Amalgamated Press-sheets, arrived at a quarter past three by appointment. They waited on the first floor outside Mr Farley's door – which was the customary place for people to wait who had an appointment with Mr Farley. At twenty past three a messenger arrived from the office of Consolidated Coachlines with some urgent papers. He was shown into Mr Farley's room where he handed over the documents. Mr Farley accompanied him to the door, and from there spoke to the two members of the Press. He said:

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, to have to keep you waiting, but I have some urgent business to attend to. I will be as quick as I can."

'The two gentlemen, Mr Adams and Mr Stoddart, assured Mr Farley that they would await his convenience. He went back into his room, shut the door – and was never seen alive again!'

'Continue,' said Poirot.

'At a little after four o'clock,' went on the inspector, 'Mr Cornworthy here came out of his room which is next door to Mr Farley's and was surprised to see the two reporters still waiting. He wanted Mr Farley's signature to some letters and thought he had also better remind him that these two gentlemen were waiting. He accordingly went into Mr Farley's room. To his surprise he could not at first see Mr Farley and thought the room was empty. Then he caught sight of a boot sticking out behind the desk (which is placed in front of the window). He went quickly across and discovered Mr Farley lying there dead, with a revolver beside him.

'Mr Cornworthy hurried out of the room and directed the butler to ring up Dr Stillingfleet. By the latter's advice, Mr Cornworthy also informed the police.'

'Was the shot heard?' asked Poirot.

'No. The traffic is very noisy here, the landing window was open. What with lorries and motor horns it would be most unlikely if it had been noticed.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. 'What time is it supposed he died?' he asked.

Stillingfleet said:

'I examined the body as soon as I got here – that is, at thirty-two minutes past four. Mr Farley had been dead at least an hour.'

Poirot's face was very grave.

'So then, it seems possible that his death could have occurred at the time he mentioned to me – that is, at twenty-eight minutes past three.'

'Exactly,' said Stillingfleet.

'Any fingermarks on the revolver?'

'Yes, his own.'

'And the revolver itself?'

The inspector took up the tale.

'Was one which he kept in the second right-hand drawer of his desk, just as he told you. Mrs Farley has identified it positively. Moreover, you understand, there is only one entrance to the room, the door giving on to the landing. The two reporters were sitting exactly opposite that door and they swear that no one entered the room from the time Mr Farley spoke to them, until Mr Cornworthy entered it at a little after four o'clock.'

'So that there is every reason to suppose that Mr Farley committed suicide.'

Inspector Barnett smiled a little.

'There would have been no doubt at all but for one point.'

'And that?'

'The letter written to you.'

Poirot smiled too.

'I see! Where Hercule Poirot is concerned – immediately the suspicion of murder arises!'

'Precisely,' said the inspector drily. 'However, after your clearing up of the situation –'

Poirot interrupted him. 'One little minute.' He turned to Mrs Farley. 'Had your husband ever been hypnotized?'

'Never.'

'Had he studied the question of hypnotism? Was he interested in the subject?'

She shook her head. 'I don't think so.'

Suddenly her self-control seemed to break down. 'That horrible dream! It's uncanny! That he should have dreamed that – night after night – and then – it's as though he were – *hounded* to death!'

Poirot remembered Benedict Farley saying – '*I proceed to do that which I really wish to do. I put an end to myself.*'

He said, 'Had it ever occurred to you that your husband might be tempted to do away with himself?'

'No – at least – sometimes he was very queer . . .'

Joanna Farley's voice broke in clear and scornful. 'Father would never have killed himself. He was far too careful of himself.'

Dr Stillingfleet said, 'It isn't the people who threaten to commit suicide who usually do it, you know, Miss Farley. That's why suicides sometimes seem unaccountable.'

Poirot rose to his feet. 'Is it permitted,' he asked, 'that I see the room where the tragedy occurred?'

'Certainly. Dr Stillingfleet –'

The doctor accompanied Poirot upstairs.

Benedict Farley's room was a much larger one than the secretary's next door. It was luxuriously furnished with deep leather-covered arm-chairs, a thick pile carpet, and a superb outsize writing-desk.

Poirot passed behind the latter to where a dark stain on the carpet showed just before the window. He remembered the millionaire saying, *'At twenty-eight minutes past three I open the second drawer on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it, and walk over to the window. And then – and then I shoot myself.'*

He nodded slowly. Then he said:

'The window was open like this?'

'Yes. But nobody could have got in that way.'

Poirot put his head out. There was no sill or parapet and no pipes near. Not even a cat could have gained access that way. Opposite rose the blank wall of the factory, a dead wall with no windows in it.

Stillingfleet said, 'Funny room for a rich man to choose as his own sanctum, with that outlook. It's like looking out on to a prison wall.'

'Yes,' said Poirot. He drew his head in and stared at the expanse of solid brick. 'I think,' he said, 'that that wall is important.'

Stillingfleet looked at him curiously. 'You mean – psychologically?'

Poirot had moved to the desk. Idly, or so it seemed, he picked up a pair of what are usually called lazy-tongs. He pressed the handles; the tongs shot out to their full length. Delicately, Poirot picked up a burnt match stump with them from beside a chair some feet away and conveyed it carefully to the waste-paper basket.

'When you've finished playing with those things . . .' said Stillingfleet irritably.

Hercule Poirot murmured, 'An ingenious invention,' and replaced the tongs neatly on the writing-table. Then he asked:

'Where were Mrs Farley and Miss Farley at the time of the – death?'

'Mrs Farley was resting in her room on the floor above this. Miss Farley was painting in her studio at the top of the house.'

Hercule Poirot drummed idly with his fingers on the table for a minute or two. Then he said:

'I should like to see Miss Farley. Do you think you could ask her to come here for a minute or two?'

'If you like.'

Stillingfleet glanced at him curiously, then left the room. In another minute or two the door opened and Joanna Farley came in.

'You do not mind, Mademoiselle, if I ask you a few questions?'

She returned his glance coolly. 'Please ask anything you choose.'

'Did you know that your father kept a revolver in his desk?'

'No.'

'Where were you and your mother – that is to say your stepmother – that is right?'

'Yes, Louise is my father's second wife. She is only eight years older than I am. You were about to say –?'

'Where were you and she on Thursday of last week? That is to say, on Thursday night.'

She reflected for a minute or two. 'Thursday? Let me see. Oh, yes, we had gone to the theatre. To see *Little Dog Laughed*.'

'Your father did not suggest accompanying you?'

'He never went out to theatres.'

'What did he usually do in the evenings?'

'He sat in here and read.'

'He was not a very sociable man?'

The girl looked at him directly. 'My father,' she said, 'had a singularly unpleasant personality. No one who lived in close association with him could possibly be fond of him.'

'That, Mademoiselle, is a very candid statement.'

'I am saving you time, M. Poirot. I realize quite well what you are getting at. My stepmother married my father for his money. I live here because I have no money to live elsewhere. There is a man I wish to marry – a poor man; my father saw to it that he lost his job. He wanted me, you see, to marry well – an easy matter since I was to be his heiress!'

'Your father's fortune passes to you?'

'Yes. That is, he left Louise, my stepmother, a quarter of a million free of tax, and there are other legacies, but the residue goes to me.' She smiled suddenly. 'So you see, M. Poirot, I had every reason to desire my father's death!'

'I see, Mademoiselle, that you have inherited your father's intelligence.'

She said thoughtfully, 'Father was clever . . . One felt that with him – that he had force – driving power – but it had all turned sour – bitter – there was no humanity left . . .'

Hercule Poirot said softly, '*Grand Dieu*, but what an imbecile I am . . .'

Joanna Farley turned towards the door. 'Is there anything more?'

'Two little questions. These tongs here,' he picked up the lazy-tongs, 'were they always on the table?'

'Yes. Father used them for picking up things. He didn't like stooping.'

'One other question. Was your father's eyesight good?'

She stared at him.

'Oh, no – he couldn't see at all – I mean he couldn't see without his glasses. His sight had always been bad from a boy.'

'But with his glasses?'

'Oh, he could see all right then, of course.'

'He could read newspapers and fine print?'

'Oh, yes.'

'That is all, Mademoiselle.'

She went out of the room.

Poirot murmured, 'I was stupid. It was there, all the time, under my nose. And because it was so near I could not see it.'

He leaned out of the window once more. Down below, in the narrow way between the house and the factory, he saw a small dark object.

Hercule Poirot nodded, satisfied, and went downstairs again.

The others were still in the library. Poirot addressed himself to the secretary:

'I want you, Mr Cornworthy, to recount to me in detail the exact circumstances of Mr Farley's summons to me. When, for instance, did Mr Farley dictate that letter?'

'On Wednesday afternoon – at five-thirty, as far as I can remember.'

'Were there any special directions about posting it?'

'He told me to post it myself.'

'And you did so?'

'Yes.'

'Did he give any special instructions to the butler about admitting me?'

'Yes. He told me to tell Holmes (Holmes is the butler) that a gentleman would be calling at nine-thirty. He was to ask the gentleman's name. He was also to ask to see the letter.'

'Rather peculiar precaution to take, don't you think?'

Cornworthy shrugged his shoulders.

'Mr Farley,' he said carefully, 'was rather a peculiar man.'

'Any other instructions?'

'Yes. He told me to take the evening off.'

'Did you do so?'

'Yes, immediately after dinner I went to the cinema.'

'When did you return?'

'I let myself in about a quarter past eleven.'

'Did you see Mr Farley again that evening?'

'No.'

'And he did not mention the matter the next morning?'

'No.'

Poirot paused a moment, then resumed, 'When I arrived I was not shown into Mr Farley's own room.'

'No. He told me that I was to tell Holmes to show you into my room.'

'Why was that? Do you know?'

Cornworthy shook his head. 'I never questioned any of Mr Farley's orders,' he said drily. 'He would have resented it if I had.'

'Did he usually receive visitors in his own room?'

'Usually, but not always. Sometimes he saw them in my room.'

'Was there any reason for that?'

Hugo Cornworthy considered.

'No – I hardly think so – I've never really thought about it.'

Turning to Mrs Farley, Poirot asked:

'You permit that I ring for your butler?'

'Certainly, M. Poirot.'

Very correct, very urbane, Holmes answered the bell.

'You rang, madam?'

Mrs Farley indicated Poirot with a gesture. Holmes turned politely. 'Yes, sir?'

'What were your instructions, Holmes, on the Thursday night when I came here?'

Holmes cleared his throat, then said:

'After dinner Mr Cornworthy told me that Mr Farley expected a Mr Hercule Poirot at nine-thirty. I was to ascertain the gentleman's name, and I was to verify the information by glancing at a letter. Then I was to show him up to Mr Cornworthy's room.'

'Were you also told to knock on the door?'

An expression of distaste crossed the butler's countenance.

'That was one of Mr Farley's orders. I was always to knock when introducing visitors – business visitors, that is,' he added.

'Ah, that puzzled me! Were you given any other instructions concerning me?'

'No, sir. When Mr Cornworthy had told me what I have just repeated to you he went out.'

'What time was that?'

'Ten minutes to nine, sir.'

'Did you see Mr Farley after that?'

'Yes, sir, I took him up a glass of hot water as usual at nine o'clock.'

'Was he then in his own room or in Mr Cornworthy's?'

'He was in his own room, sir.'

'You noticed nothing unusual about that room?'

'Unusual? No, sir.'

'Where were Mrs Farley and Miss Farley?'

'They had gone to the theatre, sir.'

'Thank you, Holmes, that will do.'

Holmes bowed and left the room. Poirot turned to the millionaire's widow.

'One more question, Mrs Farley. Had your husband good sight?'

'No. Not without his glasses.'

'He was very short-sighted?'

'Oh, yes, he was quite helpless without his spectacles.'

'He had several pairs of glasses?'

'Yes.'

'Ah,' said Poirot. He leaned back. 'I think that that concludes the case . . .'

There was silence in the room. They were all looking at the little man who sat there complacently stroking his moustache. On the inspector's face was perplexity, Dr Stillingfleet was frowning, Cornworthy merely stared uncomprehendingly, Mrs Farley gazed in blank astonishment, Joanna Farley looked eager.

Mrs Farley broke the silence.

'I don't understand, M. Poirot.' Her voice was fretful. 'The dream –'

'Yes,' said Poirot. 'That dream was very important.'

Mrs Farley shivered. She said:

'I've never believed in anything supernatural before – but now – to dream it night after night beforehand –'

'It's extraordinary,' said Stillingfleet. 'Extraordinary! If we hadn't got your word for it, Poirot, and if you hadn't had it straight from the horse's mouth –' he coughed in embarrassment, and readopting his professional manner, 'I beg your pardon, Mrs Farley. If Mr Farley himself had not told that story –'

'Exactly,' said Poirot. His eyes, which had been half-closed, opened suddenly. They were very green. '*If Benedict Farley hadn't told me –*'

He paused a minute, looking round at a circle of blank faces.

'There are certain things, you comprehend, that happened that evening which I was quite at a loss to explain. First, why make such a point of my bringing that letter with me?'

'Identification,' suggested Cornworthy.

'No, no, my dear young man. Really that idea is too ridiculous. There must be some much more valid reason. For not only did Mr Farley require to see that letter produced, but he definitely demanded that I should leave it behind me. And moreover even then he did not destroy it! It was found among his papers this afternoon. *Why did he keep it?*

Joanna Farley's voice broke in. 'He wanted, in case anything happened to him, that the facts of his strange dream should be made known.'

Poirot nodded approvingly.

'You are astute, Mademoiselle. That must be – that can only be – the point of the keeping of the letter. When Mr Farley was dead, the story of that strange dream was to be told! That dream was very important. That dream, Mademoiselle, was *vital!*

'I will come now,' he went on, 'to the second point. After hearing his story I ask Mr Farley to show me the desk and the revolver. He seems about to get up to do so, then suddenly refuses. Why did he refuse?'

This time no one advanced an answer.

'I will put that question differently. *What was there in that next room that Mr Farley did not want me to see?*

There was still silence.

'Yes,' said Poirot, 'it is difficult, that. And yet there was some reason – some *urgent* reason why Mr Farley received me in his secretary's room and refused point blank to take me into his own room. *There was something in that room he could not afford to have me see.*

'And now I come to the third inexplicable thing that happened on that evening. Mr Farley, just as I was leaving, requested me to hand him the letter I had received. By inadvertence I handed him a communication from my laundress. He glanced at it and laid it down beside him. Just before I left the room I discovered my error – and rectified it! After that I left the house and – I admit it – I was completely at sea! The whole affair and especially that last incident seemed to me quite inexplicable.'

He looked round from one to the other.

'You do not see?'

Stillingfleet said, 'I don't really see how your laundress comes into it, Poirot.'

'My laundress,' said Poirot, 'was very important. That miserable woman who ruins my collars, was, for the first time in her life, useful to somebody. Surely you see – it is so obvious. Mr Farley glanced at that communication – *one glance* would have told him that it was the wrong letter – and yet he knew nothing. Why? *Because he could not see it properly!*'

Inspector Barnett said sharply, 'Didn't he have his glasses on?'

Hercule Poirot smiled. 'Yes,' he said. 'He had his glasses on. That is what makes it so very interesting.'

He leaned forward.

'Mr Farley's dream was very important. He dreamed, you see, that he committed suicide. And a little later on, he did commit suicide. That is to say he was alone in a room and was found there with a revolver by him, and no one entered or left the room at the time that he was shot. What does that mean? It means, does it not, that it *must* be suicide!'

'Yes,' said Stillingfleet.

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

'On the contrary,' he said. 'It was murder. An unusual and a very cleverly planned murder.'

Again he leaned forward, tapping the table, his eyes green and shining.

'Why did Mr Farley not allow me to go into his own room that evening? What was there in there that I must not be allowed to see? I think, my friends, that there was – Benedict Farley himself!'

He smiled at the blank faces.

'Yes, yes, it is not nonsense what I say. Why could the Mr Farley to whom I had been talking not realize the difference between two totally dissimilar letters? Because, *mes amis*, he was a man of *normal sight* wearing a pair of very powerful

glasses. Those glasses would render a man of normal eyesight practically blind. Isn't that so, Doctor?'

Stillingfleet murmured, 'That's so – of course.'

'Why did I feel that in talking to Mr Farley I was talking to a *mountebank*, to an actor playing a part! Consider the setting. The dim room, the green-shaded light turned blindingly away from the figure in the chair. What did I see – the famous patchwork dressing-gown, the beaked nose (faked with that useful substance, nose putty) the white crest of hair, the powerful lenses concealing the eyes. What evidence is there that Mr Farley ever had a dream? Only the story I was told and the evidence of *Mrs Farley*. What evidence is there that Benedict Farley kept a revolver in his desk? Again only the story told me and the word of Mrs Farley. Two people carried this fraud through – Mrs Farley and Hugo Cornworthy. Cornworthy wrote the letter to me, gave instructions to the butler, went out ostensibly to the cinema, but let himself in again immediately with a key, went to his room, made himself up, and played the part of Benedict Farley.

'And so we come to this afternoon. The opportunity for which Mr Cornworthy has been waiting arrives. There are two witnesses on the landing to swear that no one goes in or out of Benedict Farley's room. Cornworthy waits until a particularly heavy batch of traffic is about to pass. Then he leans out of his window, and with the lazy-tongs which he has purloined from the desk next door he holds an object against the window of that room. Benedict Farley comes to the window. Cornworthy snatches back the tongs and as Farley leans out, and the lorries are passing outside, Cornworthy shoots him with the revolver that he has ready. There is a blank wall opposite, remember. There can be no witness of the crime. Cornworthy waits for over half an hour, then gathers up some papers, conceals the lazy-tongs and the revolver between them and goes out on to the landing and into the next room. He replaces the tongs on the desk, lays down the revolver after pressing the dead man's fingers on it, and hurries out with the news of Mr Farley's "suicide".

'He arranges that the letter to me shall be found and that I shall arrive with my story – the story I heard *from Mr Farley's own lips* – of his extraordinary "dream" – the strange compulsion he felt to kill himself ! A few credulous people will discuss the hypnotism theory – but the main result will be to confirm without a doubt that the actual hand that held the revolver was Benedict Farley's own.'

Hercule Poirot's eyes went to the widow's face – he noted with satisfaction the dismay – the ashy pallor – the blind fear . . .

'And in due course,' he finished gently, 'the happy ending would have been achieved. A quarter of a million and two hearts that beat as one . . .'

II

John Stillingfleet, MD, and Hercule Poirot walked along the side of Northway House. On their right was the towering wall of the factory. Above them, on their left, were

the windows of Benedict Farley's and Hugo Cornworthy's rooms. Hercule Poirot stopped and picked up a small object – a black stuffed cat.

'*Voilà,*' he said. 'That is what Cornworthy held in the lazy-tongs against Farley's window. You remember, he hated cats? Naturally he rushed to the window.'

'Why on earth didn't Cornworthy come out and pick it up after he'd dropped it?'

'How could he? To do so would have been definitely suspicious. After all, if this object were found what would anyone think – that some child had wandered round here and dropped it.'

'Yes,' said Stillingfleet with a sigh. 'That's probably what the ordinary person *would* have thought. But not good old Hercule! D'you know, old horse, up to the very last minute I thought you were leading up to some subtle theory of high-falutin' psychological "suggested" murder? I bet those two thought so too! Nasty bit of goods, the Farley. Goodness, how she cracked! Cornworthy might have got away with it if she hadn't had hysterics and tried to spoil your beauty by going for you with her nails. I only got her off you just in time.'

He paused a minute and then said:

'I rather like the girl. Grit, you know, and brains. I suppose I'd be thought to be a fortune hunter if I had a shot at her . . . ?'

'You are too late, my friend. There is already someone *sur le tapis*. Her father's death has opened the way to happiness.'

'Take it all round, *she* had a pretty good motive for bumping off the unpleasant parent.'

'Motive and opportunity are not enough,' said Poirot. 'There must also be the criminal temperament!'

'I wonder if you'll ever commit a crime, Poirot?' said Stillingfleet. 'I bet you could get away with it all right. As a matter of fact, it would be *too* easy for you – I mean the thing would be off as definitely too unsporting.'

'That,' said Poirot, 'is a typical English idea.'