

Agatha Christie

The Adventure  
of the Christmas  
Pudding

 HarperCollins e-books

# Contents

Cover  
Title Page  
Foreword by the Author  
The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding  
The Mystery of the Spanish Chest  
The Under Dog  
Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds  
The Dream  
Greenshaw's Folly  
About Agatha Christie  
Credits  
The Agatha Christie Collection  
Copyright  
About the Publisher

## 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 Mystery of the Spanish Chest

I

Punctual to the moment, as always, Hercule Poirot entered the small room where Miss Lemon, his efficient secretary, awaited her instructions for the day.

At first sight Miss Lemon seemed to be composed entirely of angles – thus satisfying Poirot's demand for symmetry.

Not that where women were concerned Hercule Poirot carried his passion for geometrical precision so far. He was, on the contrary, old-fashioned. He had a continental prejudice for curves – it might be said for voluptuous curves. He liked women to *be* women. He liked them lush, highly coloured, exotic. There had been a certain Russian countess – but that was long ago now. A folly of earlier days.

But Miss Lemon he had never considered as a woman. She was a human machine – an instrument of precision. Her efficiency was terrific. She was forty-eight years of age, and was fortunate enough to have no imagination whatever.

'Good morning, Miss Lemon.'

'Good morning, M. Poirot.'

Poirot sat down and Miss Lemon placed before him the morning's mail, neatly arranged in categories. She resumed her seat and sat with pad and pencil at the ready.

But there was to be this morning a slight change in routine. Poirot had brought in with him the morning newspaper, and his eyes were scanning it with interest. The headlines were big and bold.

SPANISH CHEST MYSTERY. LATEST DEVELOPMENTS.

'You have read the morning papers, I presume, Miss Lemon?'

'Yes, M. Poirot. The news from Geneva is not very good.'

Poirot waved away the news from Geneva in a comprehensive sweep of the arm.

'A Spanish chest,' he mused. 'Can you tell me, Miss Lemon, what exactly is a Spanish chest?'

'I suppose, M. Poirot, that it is a chest that came originally from Spain.'

'One might reasonably suppose so. You have then, no expert knowledge?'

'They are usually of the Elizabethan period, I believe. Large, and with a good deal of brass decoration on them. They look very nice when well kept and polished. My sister bought one at a sale. She keeps household linen in it. It looks very nice.'

'I am sure that in the house of any sister of yours, all the furniture would be well kept,' said Poirot, bowing gracefully.



Miss Lemon replied sadly that servants did not seem to know what elbow grease *was* nowadays. Poirot looked a little puzzled, but decided not to inquire into the inward meaning of the mysterious phrase 'elbow grease'.

He looked down again at the newspaper, conning over the names: Major Rich, Mr and Mrs Clayton, Commander McLaren, Mr and Mrs Spence. Names, nothing but names to him; yet all possessed of human personalities, hating, loving, fearing. A drama, this, in which he, Hercule Poirot, had no part. And he would have liked to have a part in it! Six people at an evening party, in a room with a big Spanish chest against the wall, six people, five of them talking, eating a buffet supper, putting records on the gramophone, dancing, and the sixth *dead, in the Spanish chest* . . .

Ah, thought Poirot. How my dear friend, Hastings, would have enjoyed this! What romantic flights of imagination he would have had. What ineptitudes he would have uttered! Ah, *ce cher Hastings*, at this moment, today, I miss him . . . Instead –

He sighed and looked at Miss Lemon. Miss Lemon, intelligently perceiving that Poirot was in no mood to dictate letters, had uncovered her typewriter and was awaiting her moment to get on with certain arrears of work. Nothing could have interested her less than sinister Spanish chests containing dead bodies.

Poirot sighed and looked down at a photographed face. Reproductions in newsprint were never very good, and this was decidedly smudgy – but what a face!

*Mrs Clayton, the wife of the murdered man* . . .

On an impulse, he thrust the paper at Miss Lemon.

'Look,' he demanded. 'Look at that face.'

Miss Lemon looked at it obediently, without emotion.

'What do you think of her, Miss Lemon? That is Mrs Clayton.'

Miss Lemon took the paper, glanced casually at the picture and remarked:

'She's a little like the wife of our bank manager when we lived at Croydon Heath.'

'Interesting,' said Poirot. 'Recount to me, if you will be so kind, the history of your bank manager's wife.'

'Well, it's not really a very pleasant story, M. Poirot.'

'It was in my mind that it might not be. Continue.'

'There was a good deal of talk – about Mrs Adams and a young artist. Then Mr Adams shot himself. But Mrs Adams wouldn't marry the other man and he took some kind of poison – but they pulled him through all right; and finally Mrs Adams married a young solicitor. I believe there was more trouble after that, only of course we'd left Croydon Heath by then so I didn't hear very much more about it.'

Hercule Poirot nodded gravely.

'She was beautiful?'

'Well – not really what you'd call beautiful – But there seemed to be something about her –'

'Exactly. What is that something that they possess – the sirens of this world! The Helens of Troy, the Cleopatras –?'

Miss Lemon inserted a piece of paper vigorously into her typewriter.

'Really, M. Poirot, I've never thought about it. It seems all very silly to me. If people would just go on with their jobs and didn't think about such things it would be much better.'

Having thus disposed of human frailty and passion, Miss Lemon let her fingers hover over the keys of the typewriter, waiting impatiently to be allowed to begin her work.

'That is your view,' said Poirot. 'And at this moment it is your desire that *you* should be allowed to get on with *your* job. But your job, Miss Lemon, is not only to take down my letters, to file my papers, to deal with my telephone calls, to typewrite my letters – All these things you do admirably. But me, I deal not only with documents but with human beings. And there, too, I need assistance.'

'Certainly, M. Poirot,' said Miss Lemon patiently. 'What is it you want me to do?'

'This case interests me. I should be glad if you would make a study of this morning's report of it in all the papers and also of any additional reports in the evening papers – Make me a précis of the facts.'

'Very good, M. Poirot.'

Poirot withdrew to his sitting-room, a rueful smile on his face.

'It is indeed the irony,' he said to himself, 'that after my dear friend Hastings I should have Miss Lemon. What greater contrast can one imagine? *Ce cher Hastings* – how he would have enjoyed himself. How he would have walked up and down talking about it, putting the most romantic construction on every incident, believing as gospel truth every word the papers have printed about it. And my poor Miss Lemon, what I have asked her to do, she will not enjoy at all!' Miss Lemon came to him in due course with a type-written sheet.

'I've got the information you wanted, M. Poirot. I'm afraid though, it can't be regarded as reliable. The papers vary a good deal in their accounts. I shouldn't like to guarantee that the facts as stated are more than sixty per cent accurate.'

'That is probably a conservative estimate,' murmured Poirot. 'Thank you, Miss Lemon, for the trouble you have taken.'

The facts were sensational, but clear enough. Major Charles Rich, a well-to-do bachelor, had given an evening party to a few of his friends, at his apartment. These friends consisted of Mr and Mrs Clayton, Mr and Mrs Spence, and a Commander McLaren. Commander McLaren was a very old friend of both Rich and the Claytons, Mr and Mrs Spence, a younger couple, were fairly recent acquaintances. Arnold Clayton was in the Treasury. Jeremy Spence was a junior Civil Servant. Major Rich was forty-eight, Arnold Clayton was fifty-five, Commander McLaren was forty-six, Jeremy Spence was thirty-seven. Mrs Clayton was said to be 'some years younger than her husband'. One person was unable to attend the party. At the last moment, Mr Clayton was called away to Scotland on urgent business, and was supposed to have left King's Cross by the 8.15 train.



The party proceeded as such parties do. Everyone appeared to be enjoying themselves. It was neither a wild party nor a drunken one. It broke up about 11.45. The four guests left together and shared a taxi. Commander McLaren was dropped first at his club and then the Spences dropped Margharita Clayton at Cardigan Gardens just off Sloane Street and went on themselves to their house in Chelsea.

The gruesome discovery was made on the following morning by Major Rich's manservant, William Burgess. The latter did not live in. He arrived early so as to clear up the sitting-room before calling Major Rich with his early morning tea. It was whilst clearing up that Burgess was startled to find a big stain discolouring the light-coloured rug on which stood the Spanish chest. It seemed to have seeped through from the chest, and the valet immediately lifted up the lid of the chest and looked inside. He was horrified to find there the body of Mr Clayton, stabbed through the neck.

Obeying his first impulse, Burgess rushed out into the street and fetched the nearest policeman.

Such were the bald facts of the case. But there were further details. The police had immediately broken the news to Mrs Clayton who had been 'completely prostrated'. She had seen her husband for the last time at a little after six o'clock on the evening before. He had come home much annoyed, having been summoned to Scotland on urgent business in connection with some property that he owned. He had urged his wife to go to the party without him. Mr Clayton had then called in at his and Commander McLaren's club, had had a drink with his friend, and had explained the position. He had then said, looking at his watch, that he had just time on his way to King's Cross, to call in on Major Rich and explain. He had already tried to telephone him, but the line had seemed to be out of order.

According to William Burgess, Mr Clayton arrived at the flat at about 7.55. Major Rich was out but was due to return any moment, so Burgess suggested that Mr Clayton should come in and wait. Clayton said he had no time, but would come in and write a note. He explained that he was on his way to catch a train at King's Cross. The valet showed him into the sitting-room and himself returned to the kitchen where he was engaged in the preparation of canapés for the party. The valet did not hear his master return but, about ten minutes later, Major Rich looked into the kitchen and told Burgess to hurry out and get some Turkish cigarettes which were Mrs Spence's favourite smoking. The valet did so and brought them to his master in the sitting-room. Mr Clayton was not there, but the valet naturally thought he had already left to catch his train.

Major Rich's story was short and simple. Mr Clayton was not in the flat when he himself came in and he had no idea that he had been there. No note had been left for him and the first he heard of Mr Clayton's journey to Scotland was when Mrs Clayton and the others arrived.



There were two additional items in the evening papers. Mrs Clayton who was 'prostrated with shock' had left her flat in Cardigan Gardens and was believed to be staying with friends.

The second item was in the stop press. Major Charles Rich had been charged with the murder of Arnold Clayton and had been taken into custody.

'So that is that,' said Poirot, looking up at Miss Lemon. 'The arrest of Major Rich was to be expected. But what a remarkable case. What a *very* remarkable case! Do you not think so?'

'I suppose such things do happen, M. Poirot,' said Miss Lemon without interest.

'Oh certainly! They happen every day. Or nearly every day. But usually they are quite understandable – though distressing.'

'It is certainly a very unpleasant business.'

'To be stabbed to death and stowed away in a Spanish chest is certainly unpleasant for the victim – supremely so. But when I say this is a remarkable case, I refer to the remarkable behaviour of Major Rich.'

Miss Lemon said with faint distaste:

'There seems to be a suggestion that Major Rich and Mrs Clayton were very close friends . . . It was a suggestion and not a proved fact, so I did not include it.'

'That was very correct of you. But it is an inference that leaps to the eye. Is that all you have to say?'

Miss Lemon looked blank. Poirot sighed, and missed the rich colourful imagination of his friend Hastings. Discussing a case with Miss Lemon was uphill work.

'Consider for a moment this Major Rich. He is in love with Mrs Clayton – granted . . . He wants to dispose of her husband – that, too, we grant, though if Mrs Clayton is in love with him, and they are having the affair together, where is the urgency? It is, perhaps, that Mr Clayton will not give his wife the divorce? But it is not of all this that I talk. Major Rich, he is a retired soldier, and it is said sometimes that soldiers are not brainy. But, *tout de même*, this Major Rich, is he, can he be, a complete imbecile?'

Miss Lemon did not reply. She took this to be a purely rhetorical question.

'Well,' demanded Poirot. 'What do *you* think about it all?'

'What do *I* think?' Miss Lemon was startled.

'*Mais oui* – you!'

Miss Lemon adjusted her mind to the strain put upon it. She was not given to mental speculation of any kind unless asked for it. In such leisure moments as she had, her mind was filled with the details of a superlatively perfect filing-system. It was her only mental recreation.

'Well –' she began, and paused.

'Tell me just what happened – what you think happened, on that evening. Mr Clayton is in the sitting-room writing a note, Major Rich comes back – what then?'

'He finds Mr Clayton there. They – I suppose they have a quarrel. Major Rich stabs him. Then, when he sees what he has done, he – he puts the body in the chest. After all, the guests, I suppose, might be arriving any minute.'

'Yes, yes. The guests arrive! The body is in the chest. The evening passes. The guests depart. And then –'

'Well, then, I suppose Major Rich goes to bed and – Oh!'

'Ah,' said Poirot. 'You see it now. You have murdered a man. You have concealed his body in a chest. And then – you go peacefully to bed, quite unperturbed by the fact that your valet will discover the crime in the morning.'

'I suppose it's possible that the valet might never have looked inside the chest?'

'With an enormous pool of blood on the carpet underneath it?'

'Perhaps Major Rich didn't realize that the blood was there.'

'Was it not somewhat careless of him not to look and see?'

'I dare say he was upset,' said Miss Lemon.

Poirot threw up his hands in despair.

Miss Lemon seized the opportunity to hurry from the room.

## II

The Mystery of the Spanish chest was, strictly speaking, no business of Poirot's. He was engaged at the moment in a delicate mission for one of the large oil companies where one of the high ups was possibly involved in some questionable transaction. It was hush-hush, important and exceedingly lucrative. It was sufficiently involved to command Poirot's attention, and had the great advantage that it required very little physical activity. It was sophisticated and bloodless. Crime at the highest levels.

The mystery of the Spanish chest was dramatic and emotional; two qualities which Poirot had often declared to Hastings could be much overrated – and indeed frequently were so by the latter. He had been severe with *ce cher Hastings* on this point, and now here he was, behaving much as his friend might have done, obsessed with beautiful women, crimes of passion, jealousy, hatred and all the other romantic causes of murder! He wanted to *know* about it all. He wanted to know what Major Rich was like, and what his manservant, Burgess, was like, and what Margharita Clayton was like (though that, he thought, he knew) and what the late Arnold Clayton had been like (since he held that the character of the victim was of the first importance in a murder case), and even what Commander McLaren, the faithful friend, and Mr and Mrs Spence, the recently acquired acquaintances, were like.

And he did not see exactly how he was going to gratify his curiosity!

He reflected on the matter later in the day.

Why did the whole business intrigue him so much? He decided, after reflection, that it was because – as the facts were related – the whole thing was more or less impossible! Yes, there was a Euclidean flavour.



Starting from what one could accept, there had been a quarrel between two men. Cause, presumably, a woman. One man killed the other in the heat of rage. Yes, that happened – though it would be more acceptable if the husband had killed the lover. Still – the lover had killed the husband, stabbed him with a dagger (?) – somehow a rather unlikely weapon. Perhaps Major Rich had had an Italian mother? Somewhere – surely – there should be something to explain the choice of a dagger as a weapon. Anyway, one must accept the dagger (some papers called it a stiletto!). It was to hand and was used. The body was concealed in the chest. That was common sense and inevitable. The crime had not been premeditated, and as the valet was returning at any moment, and four guests would be arriving before very long, it seemed the only course indicated.

The party is held, the guests depart, the manservant is already gone – and – Major Rich goes to bed!

To understand how that could happen, one must see Major Rich and find out what kind of a man acts in that way.

Could it be that, overcome with horror at what he had done and the long strain of an evening trying to appear his normal self, he had taken a sleeping-pill of some kind or a tranquilizer which had put him into a heavy slumber which lasted long beyond his usual hour of waking? Possible. Or was it a case, rewarding to a psychologist, where Major Rich's feeling of subconscious guilt made him *want* the crime to be discovered? To make up one's mind on that point one would have to see Major Rich. It all came back to –

The telephone rang. Poirot let it ring for some moments, until he realized that Miss Lemon after bringing him his letters to sign, had gone home some time ago, and that George had probably gone out.

He picked up the receiver.

'M. Poirot?'

'Speaking!'

'Oh how splendid.' Poirot blinked slightly at the fervour of the charming female voice. 'It's Abbie Chatterton.'

'Ah, Lady Chatterton. How can I serve you?'

'By coming over as quickly as you can right away to a simply frightful cocktail party I am giving. Not just for the cocktail party – it's for something quite different really. I *need* you. It's absolutely *vital*. Please, *please*, *please* don't let me down! *Don't* say you can't manage it.'

Poirot had not been going to say anything of the kind. Lord Chatterton, apart from being a peer of the realm and occasionally making a very dull speech in the House of Lords, was nobody in particular. But Lady Chatterton was one of the brightest jewels in what Poirot called *le haut monde*. Everything she did or said was news. She had brains, beauty, originality and enough vitality to activate a rocket to the moon.



She said again:

'I *need* you. Just give that wonderful moustache of yours a lovely twirl, and *come!*' It was not quite so quick as that. Poirot had first to make a meticulous toilet. The twirl to the moustaches was added and he then set off.

The door of Lady Chatterton's delightful house in Cheriton Street was ajar and a noise as of animals mutinying at the zoo sounded from within. Lady Chatterton who was holding two ambassadors, an international rugger player and an American evangelist in play, neatly jettisoned them with the rapidity of sleight of hand and was at Poirot's side.

'M. Poirot, how wonderful to see you! No, don't have that nasty Martini. I've got something special for you – a kind of *sirap* that the sheikhs drink in Morocco. It's in my own little room upstairs.'

She led the way upstairs and Poirot followed her. She paused to say over her shoulder:

'I didn't put these people off, because it's absolutely essential that no one should know there's anything special going on here, and I've promised the servants enormous bonuses if not a word leaks out. After all, one doesn't want one's house besieged by reporters. And, poor darling, she's been through so much already.'

Lady Chatterton did not stop at the first-floor landing, instead she swept on up to the floor above.

Gasping for breath and somewhat bewildered, Hercule Poirot followed.

Lady Chatterton paused, gave a rapid glance downwards over the banisters, and then flung open a door, exclaiming as she did so:

'I've got him, Margharita! I've got him! Here he is!'

She stood aside in triumph to let Poirot enter, then performed a rapid introduction.

'This is Margharita Clayton. She's a very, very dear friend of mine. You'll help her, won't you? Margharita, this is that wonderful Hercule Poirot. He'll do just everything you want – you will, won't you, dear M. Poirot?'

And without waiting for the answer which she obviously took for granted (Lady Chatterton had not been a spoilt beauty all her life for nothing), she dashed out of the door and down the stairs, calling back rather indiscreetly, 'I've got to go back to all these awful people . . .'

The woman who had been sitting in a chair by the window rose and came towards him. He would have recognized her even if Lady Chatterton had not mentioned her name. Here was that wide, that very wide brow, the dark hair that sprang away from it like wings, the grey eyes set far apart. She wore a close-fitting, high-necked gown of dull black that showed up the beauty of her body and the magnolia-whiteness of her skin. It was an unusual face, rather than a beautiful one – one of those oddly proportioned faces that one sometimes sees in an Italian primitive. There was about her a kind of medieval simplicity – a strange innocence

that could be, Poirot thought, more devastating than any voluptuous sophistication. When she spoke it was with a kind of childlike candour.

'Abbie says you will help me . . .'

She looked at him gravely and inquiringly.

For a moment he stood quite still, scrutinizing her closely. There was nothing ill-bred in his manner of doing it. It was more the kind but searching look that a famous consultant gives a new patient.

'Are you sure, Madame,' he said at last, 'that I *can* help you?'

A little flush rose to her cheeks.

'I don't know what you mean.'

'What is it, Madame, that you want me to do?'

'Oh,' she seemed surprised. 'I thought – you knew who I was?'

'I know who you are. Your husband was killed – stabbed, and a Major Rich has been arrested and charged with his murder.'

The flush heightened.

'Major Rich did *not* kill my husband.'

Quick as a flash Poirot said:

'Why not?'

She stared, puzzled. 'I – I beg your pardon?'

'I have confused you – because I have not asked the question that everybody asks – the police – the lawyers . . . "Why should Major Rich kill Arnold Clayton?" But I ask the opposite. I ask you, Madame, why you are sure that Major Rich did *not* kill him?'

'Because,' she paused a moment – 'because I know Major Rich so well.'

'You know Major Rich so well,' repeated Poirot tonelessly.

He paused and then said sharply:

'How well?'

Whether she understood his meaning, he could not guess. He thought to himself: Here is either a woman of great simplicity or of great subtlety . . . Many people, he thought, must have wondered that about Margharita Clayton . . .

'How well?' She was looking at him doubtfully. 'Five years – no, nearly six.'

'That was not precisely what I meant . . . You must understand, Madame, that I shall have to ask you the impertinent questions. Perhaps you will speak the truth, perhaps you will lie. It is very necessary for a woman to lie sometimes. Women must defend themselves, and the lie, it can be a good weapon. But there are three people, Madame, to whom a woman should speak the truth. To her Father confessor, to her hairdresser, and to her private detective – if she trusts him. Do you trust me, Madame?'

Margharita Clayton drew a deep breath.

'Yes,' she said. 'I do.' And added: 'I must.'



'Very well, then. What is it you want me to do – find out who killed your husband?'

'I suppose so – yes.'

'But it is not essential? You want me, then, to clear Major Rich from suspicion?'

She nodded quickly – gratefully.

'That – and that only?'

It was, he saw, an unnecessary question. Margharita Clayton was a woman who saw only one thing at a time.

'And now,' he said, 'for the impertinence. You and Major Rich, you are lovers, yes?'

'Do you mean, were we having an affair together? No.'

'But he was in love with you?'

'Yes.'

'And you – were in love with him?'

'I think so.'

'You do not seem quite sure?'

'I *am* sure – now.'

'Ah! You did not, then, love your husband?'

'No.'

'You reply with an admirable simplicity. Most women would wish to explain at great length just exactly what their feelings were. How long had you been married?'

'Eleven years.'

'Can you tell me a little about your husband – what kind of a man he was?'

She frowned.

'It's difficult. I don't really know what kind of a man Arnold was. He was very quiet – very reserved. One didn't know what he was thinking. He was clever, of course – everyone said he was brilliant – in his work, I mean . . . He didn't – how can I put it – he never explained himself at all . . .'

'Was he in love with you?'

'Oh, yes. He must have been. Or he wouldn't have minded so much –' She came to a sudden stop.

'About other men? That is what you were going to say? He was jealous?'

Again she said:

'He must have been.' And then, as though feeling that the phrase needed explanation, she went on. 'Sometimes, for days, he wouldn't speak . . .'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. 'This violence – that has come into your life. Is it the first that you have known?'

'Violence?' She frowned, then flushed. 'Is it – do you mean – that poor boy who shot himself?'

'Yes,' said Poirot. 'I expect that is what I mean.'

'I'd no idea he felt like that . . . I was sorry for him – he seemed so shy – so lonely. He must have been very neurotic, I think. And there were two Italians – a duel – It



was ridiculous! Anyway, nobody was killed, thank goodness . . . And honestly, I didn't care about *either* of them! I never even pretended to care.'

'No. You were just – there! And where you are – things happen! I have seen that before in my life. It is *because* you do not care that men are driven mad. But for Major Rich you do care. So – we must do what we can . . .'

He was silent for a moment or two.

She sat there gravely, watching him.

'We turn from personalities, which are often the really important things, to plain facts. I know only what has been in the papers. On the facts as given there, only two persons had the opportunity of killing your husband, only two persons *could* have killed him – Major Rich and Major Rich's manservant.'

She said, stubbornly:

'I *know* Charles didn't kill him.'

'So, then, it must have been the valet. You agree?'

She said doubtfully:

'I see what you mean . . .'

'But you are dubious about it?'

'It just seems – fantastic!'

'Yet the *possibility* is there. Your husband undoubtedly came to the flat, since his body was found there. If the valet's story is true, Major Rich killed him. But if the valet's story is false? Then, the valet killed him and hid the body in the chest before his master returned. An excellent way of disposing of the body from his point of view. He has only got to "notice the bloodstain" the next morning and "discover" it. Suspicion will immediately fall on Rich.'

'But why should he want to kill Arnold?'

'Ah why? The motive cannot be an obvious one – or the police would have investigated it. It is possible that your husband knew something to the valet's discredit, and was about to acquaint Major Rich with the facts. Did your husband ever say anything to you about this man Burgess?'

She shook her head.

'Do you think he would have done so – if that had indeed been the case?'

She frowned.

'It's difficult to say. Possibly not. Arnold never talked much about people. I told you he was reserved. He wasn't – he was never – a *chatty* man.'

'He was a man who kept his own counsel . . . Yes, now what is your opinion of Burgess?'

'He's not the kind of man you notice very much. A fairly good servant. Adequate but not polished.'

'What age?'

'About thirty-seven or -eight, I should think. He'd been a batman in the army during the war, but he wasn't a regular soldier.'

'How long had he been with Major Rich?'

'Not very long. About a year and a half, I think.'

'You never noticed anything odd about his manner towards your husband?'

'We weren't there so very often. No, I noticed nothing at all.'

'Tell me now about the events of that evening. What time were you invited?'

'Eight-fifteen for half past.'

'And just what kind of a party was it to be?'

'Well, there would be drinks, and a kind of buffet supper – usually a very good one. *Foie gras* and hot toast. Smoked salmon. Sometimes there was a hot rice dish – Charles had a special recipe he'd got in the Near East – but that was more for winter. Then we used to have music – Charles had got a very good stereophonic gramophone. Both my husband and Jock McLaren were very fond of classical records. And we had dance music – the Spences were very keen dancers. It was that sort of thing – a quiet informal evening. Charles was a very good host.'

'And this particular evening – it was like other evenings there? You noticed nothing unusual – nothing out of place?'

'Out of place?' She frowned for a moment. 'When you said that I – no, it's gone. There was something . . .' She shook her head again. 'No. To answer your question, there was nothing unusual at all about that evening. We enjoyed ourselves. Everybody seemed relaxed and happy.' She shivered. 'And to think that all the time –'

Poirot held up a quick hand.

'Do not think. This business that took your husband to Scotland, how much do you know about that?'

'Not very much. There was some dispute over the restrictions on selling a piece of land which belonged to my husband. The sale had apparently gone through and then some sudden snag turned up.'

'What did your husband tell you exactly?'

'He came in with a telegram in his hand. As far as I remember, he said: "This is most annoying. I shall have to take the night mail to Edinburgh and see Johnston first thing tomorrow morning . . . Too bad when one thought the thing was going through smoothly at last." Then he said: "Shall I ring up Jock and get him to call for you," and I said "Nonsense, I'll just take a taxi," and he said that Jock or the Spences would see me home. I said did he want anything packed and he said he'd just throw a few things into a bag, and have a quick snack at the club, before catching the train. Then he went off and – and that's the last time I saw him.'

Her voice broke a little on the last words.

Poirot looked at her very hard.

'Did he show you the telegram?'



'No.'

'A pity.'

'Why do you say that?'

He did not answer that question. Instead he said briskly:

'Now to business. Who are the solicitors acting for Major Rich?'

She told him and he made a note of the address.

'Will you write a few words to them and give it to me? I shall want to make arrangements to see Major Rich.'

'He – it's been remanded for a week.'

'Naturally. That is the procedure. Will you also write a note to Commander McLaren and to your friends the Spences? I shall want to see all of them, and it is essential that they do not at once show me the door.'

When she rose from the writing-desk, he said:

'One thing more. I shall register my own impressions, but I also want yours – of Commander McLaren and of Mr and Mrs Spence.'

'Jock is one of our oldest friends. I've known him ever since I was a child. He appears to be quite a dour person, but he's really a dear – always the same – always to be relied upon. He's not gay and amusing but he's a tower of strength – both Arnold and I relied on his judgement a lot.'

'And he, also, is doubtless in love with you?' Poirot's eyes twinkled slightly.

'Oh yes,' said Margharita happily. 'He's always been in love with me – but by now it's become a kind of habit.'

'And the Spences?'

'They're amusing – and very good company. Linda Spence is really rather a clever girl. Arnold enjoyed talking with her. She's attractive, too.'

'You are friends?'

'She and I? In a way. I don't know that I *really* like her. She's too malicious.'

'And her husband?'

'Oh, Jeremy is delightful. Very musical. Knows a good deal about pictures, too. He and I go to picture shows a good deal together . . .'

'Ah, well, I shall see for myself.' He took her hand in his, 'I hope, Madame, you will not regret asking for my help.'

'Why should I regret it?' Her eyes opened wide.

'One never knows,' said Poirot cryptically.

'And I – I do not know,' he said to himself, as he went down the stairs. The cocktail party was still in full spate, but he avoided being captured and reached the street.

'No,' he repeated. 'I do not know.'

It was of Margharita Clayton he was thinking.

That apparently childlike candour, that frank innocence – Was it just that? Or did it mask something else? There had been women like that in medieval days – women



on whom history had not been able to agree. He thought of Mary Stuart, the Scottish Queen. Had she known, that night in Kirk o' Fields, of the deed that was to be done? Or was she completely innocent? Had the conspirators told her nothing? Was she one of those childlike simple women who can say to themselves 'I do not know' and believe it? He felt the spell of Margharita Clayton. But he was not entirely sure about her . . .

Such women could be, though innocent themselves, the cause of crimes.

Such women could be, in intent and design, criminals themselves, though not in action.

Theirs was never the hand that held the knife –  
As to Margharita Clayton – no – he did not know!

### III

Hercule Poirot did not find Major Rich's solicitors very helpful. He had not expected to do so.

They managed to indicate, though without saying so, that it would be in their client's best interest if Mrs Clayton showed no sign of activity on his behalf.

His visit to them was in the interests of 'correctness'. He had enough pull with the Home Office and the CID to arrange his interview with the prisoner.

Inspector Miller, who was in charge of the Clayton case, was not one of Poirot's favourites. He was not, however, hostile on this occasion, merely contemptuous.

'Can't waste much time over the old dodderer,' he had said to his assisting sergeant before Poirot was shown in. 'Still, I'll have to be polite.'

'You'll really have to pull some rabbits out of a hat if you're going to do anything with this one, M. Poirot,' he remarked cheerfully. 'Nobody else but Rich *could* have killed the bloke.'

'Except the valet.'

'Oh, I'll give you the valet! As a possibility, that is. But you won't find anything there. No motives whatever.'

'You cannot be entirely sure of that. Motives are very curious things.'

'Well, he wasn't acquainted with Clayton in any way. He's got a perfectly innocuous past. And he seems to be perfectly right in his head. I don't know what more you want?'

'I want to find out that Rich did not commit the crime.'

'To please the lady, eh?' Inspector Miller grinned wickedly. 'She's been getting at you, I suppose. Quite something, isn't she? *Cherchez la femme* with a vengeance. If she'd had the opportunity, you know, she might have done it herself.'

'That, *no*.'

'You'd be surprised. I once knew a woman like that. Put a couple of husbands out of the way without a blink of her innocent blue eyes. Broken-hearted each time, too. The jury would have acquitted her if they'd had half a chance – which they hadn't, the evidence being practically cast iron.'

'Well, my friend, let us not argue. What I make so bold as to ask is a few reliable details on the facts. What a newspaper prints is news – but not always truth!'

'They have to enjoy themselves. What do you want?'

'Time of death as near as can be.'

'Which can't be very near because the body wasn't examined until the following morning. Death is estimated to have taken place from thirteen to ten hours previously. That is, between seven and ten o'clock the night before . . . He was stabbed through the jugular vein – Death must have been a matter of moments.'

'And the weapon?'

'A kind of Italian stiletto – quite small – razor sharp. Nobody has ever seen it before, or knows where it comes from. But we shall know – in the end . . . It's a matter of time and patience.'

'It could not have been picked up in the course of a quarrel.'

'No. The valet says no such thing was in the flat.'

'What interests me is the telegram,' said Poirot. 'The telegram that called Arnold Clayton away to Scotland . . . Was that summons genuine?'

'No. There was no hitch or trouble up there. The land transfer, or whatever it was, was proceeding normally.'

'Then who sent that telegram – I am presuming there *was* a telegram?'

'There must have been . . . Not that we'd necessarily believe Mrs Clayton. But Clayton told the valet he was called by wire to Scotland. And he also told Commander McLaren.'

'What time did he see Commander McLaren?'

'They had a snack together at their club – Combined Services – that was at about a quarter past seven. Then Clayton took a taxi to Rich's flat, arriving there just before eight o'clock. After that –' Miller spread his hands out.

'Anybody notice anything at all odd about Rich's manner that evening?'

'Oh well, you know what people are. Once a thing has happened, people think they noticed a lot of things I bet they never saw at all. Mrs Spence, now, she says he was *distract* all the evening. Didn't always answer to the point. As though he had "something on his mind". I bet he had, too, if he had a body in the chest! Wondering how the hell to get rid of it!'

'Why didn't he get rid of it?'

'Beats me. Lost his nerve, perhaps. But it was madness to leave it until next day. He had the best chance he'd ever have that night. There's no night porter on. He could have got his car round – packed the body in the boot – it's a big boot – driven out in the country and parked it somewhere. He might have been seen getting the body into the car, but the flats are in a side street and there's a courtyard you drive a car through. At, say, three in the morning, he had a reasonable chance. And what does he do? Goes to bed, sleeps late the next morning and wakes up to find the police in the flat!'



'He went to bed and slept well as an innocent man might do.'

'Have it that way if you like. But do you really believe that yourself?'

'I shall have to leave that question until I have seen the man myself.'

'Think you know an innocent man when you see one? It's not so easy as that.'

'I know it is not easy – and I should not attempt to say I could do it. What I want to make up my mind about is whether the man is as stupid as he seems to be.'

#### IV

Poirot had no intention of seeing Charles Rich until he had seen everyone else. He started with Commander McLaren.

McLaren was a tall, swarthy, uncommunicative man. He had a rugged but pleasant face. He was a shy man and not easy to talk to. But Poirot persevered.

Fingering Margharita's note, McLaren said almost reluctantly:

'Well, if Margharita wants me to tell you all I can, of course I'll do so. Don't know what there is to tell, though. You've heard it all already. But whatever Margharita wants – I've always done what she wanted – ever since she was sixteen. She's got a way with her, you know.'

'I know,' said Poirot. He went on: 'First I should like you to answer a question quite frankly. Do you think Major Rich is guilty?'

'Yes, I do. I wouldn't say so to Margharita if she wants to think he's innocent, but I simply can't see it any other way. Hang it all, the fellow's *got* to be guilty.'

'Was there bad feeling between him and Mr Clayton?'

'Not in the least. Arnold and Charles were the best of friends. That's what makes the whole thing so extraordinary.'

'Perhaps Major Rich's friendship with Mrs Clayton –'

He was interrupted. 'Faugh! All that stuff. All the papers slyly hinting at it . . . Damned innuendoes! Mrs Clayton and Rich were good friends and that's all! Margharita's got lots of friends. *I'm* her friend. Been one for years. And nothing the whole world mightn't know about it. Same with Charles and Margharita.'

'You do not then consider that they were having an affair together?'

'Certainly *NOT*!' McLaren was wrathful. 'Don't go listening to that hell-cat Spence woman. She'd say anything.'

'But perhaps Mr Clayton suspected there *might* be something between his wife and Major Rich.'

'You can take it from me he did nothing of the sort! I'd have known if so. Arnold and I were very close.'

'What sort of man was he? You, if anyone, should know.'

'Well, Arnold was a quiet sort of chap. But he was clever – quite brilliant, I believe. What they call a first-class financial brain. He was quite high up in the Treasury, you know.'

'So I have heard.'



'He read a good deal. And he collected stamps. And he was extremely fond of music. He didn't dance, or care much for going out.'

'Was it, do you think, a happy marriage?'

Commander McLaren's answer did not come quickly. He seemed to be puzzling it out.

'That sort of thing's very hard to say . . . Yes, I think they were happy. He was devoted to her in his quiet way. I'm sure she was fond of him. They weren't likely to split up, if that's what you're thinking. They hadn't, perhaps, a lot in common.'

Poirot nodded. It was as much as he was likely to get. He said: 'Now tell me about that last evening. Mr Clayton dined with you at the club. What did he say?'

'Told me he'd got to go to Scotland. Seemed vexed about it. We didn't have dinner, by the way. No time. Just sandwiches and a drink. For him, that is. I only had the drink. I was going out to a buffet supper, remember.'

'Mr Clayton mentioned a telegram?'

'Yes.'

'He did not actually show you the telegram?'

'No.'

'Did he say he was going to call on Rich?'

'Not definitely. In fact he said he doubted if he'd have time. He said "Margharita can explain or you can." And then he said: "See she gets home all right, won't you?" Then he went off. It was all quite natural and easy.'

'He had no suspicion at all that the telegram wasn't genuine?'

'Wasn't it?' Commander McLaren looked startled.

'Apparently not.'

'How very odd . . .' Commander McLaren went into a kind of coma, emerging suddenly to say:

'But that really *is* odd. I mean, what's the point? Why should anybody *want* him to go to Scotland?'

'It is a question that needs answering, certainly.'

Hercule Poirot left, leaving the commander apparently still puzzling on the matter.

V

The Spences lived in a minute house in Chelsea.

Linda Spence received Poirot with the utmost delight. 'Do tell me,' she said. 'Tell me *all* about Margharita! Where is she?'

'That I am not at liberty to state, Madame.'

'She *has* hidden herself well! Margharita is very clever at that sort of thing. But she'll be called to give evidence at the trial, I suppose? She can't wiggle herself out of that.'

Poirot looked at her appraisingly. He decided grudgingly that she was attractive in the modern style (which at that moment resembled an underfed orphan child). It

was not a type he admired. The artistically disordered hair fluffed out round her head, a pair of shrewd eyes watched him from a slightly dirty face devoid of make-up save for a vivid cerise mouth. She wore an enormous pale-yellow sweater hanging almost to her knees, and tight black trousers.

'What's your part in all this?' demanded Mrs Spence. 'Get the boy-friend out of it somehow? Is that it? What a hope!'

'You think then, that he is guilty?'

'Of course. Who else?'

That, Poirot thought, was very much the question. He parried it by asking another question.

'What did Major Rich seem to you like on that fatal evening? As usual? Or not as usual?'

Linda Spence screwed up her eyes judicially.

'No, he wasn't himself. He was – different.'

'How, different?'

'Well, surely, if you've just stabbed a man in cold blood –'

'But you were not aware at the time that he had just stabbed a man in cold blood, were you?'

'No, of course not.'

'So how did you account for his being "different"? In what way?'

'Well – *distract*. Oh, I don't know. But thinking it over afterwards I decided that there had definitely been *something*.'

Poirot sighed.

'Who arrived first?'

'We did, Jim and I. And then Jock. And finally Margharita.'

'When was Mr Clayton's departure for Scotland first mentioned?'

'When Margharita came. She said to Charles: "Arnold's terribly sorry. He's had to rush off to Edinburgh by the night train." And Charles said: "Oh, that's too bad." And then Jock said: "Sorry. Thought you already knew." And then we had drinks.'

'Major Rich at no time mentioned seeing Mr Clayton that evening? He said nothing of his having called in on his way to the station?'

'Not that I heard.'

'It was strange, was it not,' said Poirot, 'about that telegram?'

'What was strange?'

'It was a fake. Nobody in Edinburgh knows anything about it.'

'So that's it. I wondered at the time.'

'You have an idea about the telegram?'

'I should say it rather leaps to the eye.'

'How do you mean exactly?'



'My dear man,' said Linda. 'Don't play the innocent. Unknown hoaxter gets the husband out of the way! For that night, at all events, the coast is clear.'

'You mean that Major Rich and Mrs Clayton planned to spend the night together.'

'You have heard of such things, haven't you?' Linda looked amused.

'And the telegram was sent by one or the other of them?'

'It wouldn't surprise me.'

'Major Rich and Mrs Clayton were having an affair together you think?'

'Let's say I shouldn't be surprised if they were. I don't know it for a fact.'

'Did Mr Clayton suspect?'

'Arnold was an extraordinary person. He was all bottled up, if you know what I mean. I think he *did* know. But he was the kind of man who would never have let on. Anyone would think he was a dry stick with no feelings at all. But I'm pretty sure he wasn't like that underneath. The queer thing is that I should have been much less surprised if Arnold had stabbed Charles than the other way about. I've an idea Arnold was really an insanely jealous person.'

'That is interesting.'

'Though it's more likely, really, that he'd have done in Margharita. Othello – that sort of thing. Margharita, you know, had an extraordinary effect on men.'

'She is a good-looking woman,' said Poirot with judicious understatement.

'It was more than that. She *had* something. She would get men all het up – mad about her – and turn round and look at them with a sort of wide-eyed surprise that drove them bamy.'

'*Une femme fatale*.'

'That's probably the foreign name for it.'

'You know her well?'

'My dear, she's one of my best friends – and I wouldn't trust her an inch!'

'Ah,' said Poirot and shifted the subject to Commander McLaren.

'Jock? Old faithful? He's a pet. Born to be the friend of the family. He and Arnold were really close friends. I think Arnold unbent to him more than to anyone else. And of course he was Margharita's tame cat. He'd been devoted to her for years.'

'And was Mr Clayton jealous of him, too?'

'Jealous of Jock? What an idea! Margharita's genuinely fond of Jock, but she's never given him a thought of that kind. I don't think, really, that one ever would . . . I don't know why . . . It seems a shame. He's so nice.'

Poirot switched to consideration of the valet. But beyond saying vaguely that he mixed a very good side car, Linda Spence seemed to have no ideas about Burgess, and indeed seemed barely to have noticed him.

But she was quite quick in the uptake.

'You're thinking, I suppose, that *he* could have killed Arnold just as easily as Charles could? It seems to me madly unlikely.'

'That remark depresses me, Madame. But then, it seems to me (though you will probably not agree) that it is madly unlikely – not that Major Rich should kill Arnold Clayton – but that he should kill him in just the way he did.'

'Stiletto stuff? Yes, definitely not in character. More likely the blunt instrument. Or he might have strangled him, perhaps?'

Poirot sighed.

'We are back at Othello. Yes, Othello . . . you have given me there a little idea . . .'

'Have I? What –' There was the sound of a latchkey and an opening door. 'Oh, here's Jeremy. Do you want to talk to him, too?'

Jeremy Spence was a pleasant-looking man of thirty-odd, well groomed, and almost ostentatiously discreet. Mrs Spence said that she had better go and have a look at a casserole in the kitchen and went off, leaving the two men together.

Jeremy Spence displayed none of the engaging candour of his wife. He was clearly disliking very much being mixed up in the case at all, and his remarks were carefully non-informative. They had known the Claytons some time, Rich not so well. Had seemed a pleasant fellow. As far as he could remember, Rich had seemed absolutely as usual on the evening in question. Clayton and Rich always seemed on good terms. The whole thing seemed quite unaccountable.

Throughout the conversation Jeremy Spence was making it clear that he expected Poirot to take his departure. He was civil, but only just so.

'I am afraid,' said Poirot, 'that you do not like these questions?'

'Well, we've had quite a session of this with the police. I rather feel that's enough. We've told all we know or saw. Now – I'd like to forget it.'

'You have my sympathy. It is most unpleasant to be mixed up in this. To be asked not only what you know or what you saw but perhaps even what you think?'

'Best not to think.'

'But can one avoid it? Do you think, for instance, that Mrs Clayton was in it, too. Did she plan the death of her husband with Rich?'

'Good lord, no.' Spence sounded shocked and dismayed. 'I'd no idea that there was any question of such a thing?'

'Has your wife not suggested such a possibility?'

'Oh Linda! You know what women are – always got their knife into each other. Margharita never gets much of a show from her own sex – a darned sight too attractive. But surely this theory about Rich and Margharita planning murder – that's fantastic!'

'Such things have been known. The weapon, for instance. It is the kind of weapon a woman might possess, rather than a man.'

'Do you mean the police have traced it to her – They can't have! I mean –'

'I know nothing,' said Poirot truthfully, and escaped hastily.

From the consternation on Spence's face, he judged that he had left that gentleman something to think about!



## VI

'You will forgive my saying, M. Poirot, that I cannot see how you can be of assistance to me in any way.'

Poirot did not answer. He was looking thoughtfully at the man who had been charged with the murder of his friend, Arnold Clayton.

He was looking at the firm jaw, the narrow head. A lean brown man, athletic and sinewy. Something of the greyhound about him. A man whose face gave nothing away, and who was receiving his visitor with a marked lack of cordiality.

'I quite understand that Mrs Clayton sent you to see me with the best intentions. But quite frankly, I think she was unwise. Unwise both for her own sake and mine.'

'You mean?'

Rich gave a nervous glance over his shoulder. But the attendant warder was the regulation distance away. Rich lowered his voice.

'They've got to find a motive for this ridiculous accusation. They'll try to bring that there was an – association between Mrs Clayton and myself. That, as I know Mrs Clayton will have told you, is quite untrue. We are friends, nothing more. But surely it is advisable that she should make no move on my behalf?'

Hercule Poirot ignored the point. Instead he picked out a word.

'You said this "ridiculous" accusation. But it is not that, you know.'

'I did *not* kill Arnold Clayton.'

'Call it then a false accusation. Say the accusation is not true. But it is not *ridiculous*. On the contrary, it is highly plausible. You must know that very well.'

'I can only tell you that to me it seems fantastic.'

'Saying that will be of very little use to you. We must think of something more useful than that.'

'I am represented by solicitors. They have briefed, I understand, eminent counsel to appear for my defence. I cannot accept your use of the word "we".'

Unexpectedly Poirot smiled.

'Ah,' he said, in his most foreign manner, 'that is the flea in the ear you give me. Very well. I go. I wanted to see you. I have seen you. Already I have looked up your career. You passed high up into Sandhurst. You passed into the Staff College. And so on and so on. I have made my own judgement of you today. You are not a stupid man.'

'And what has all that got to do with it?'

'Everything! It is impossible that a man of your ability should commit a murder in the way this one was committed. Very well. You are innocent. Tell me now about your manservant Burgess.'

'Burgess?'

'Yes. If you didn't kill Clayton, Burgess must have done so. The conclusion seems inescapable. But why? There must *be* a "why?" You are the only person who knows Burgess well enough to make a guess at it. Why, Major Rich, why?'

'I can't imagine. I simply can't see it. Oh, I've followed the same line of reasoning as you have. Yes, Burgess had opportunity – the only person who had except myself. The trouble is, I just can't believe it. Burgess is not the sort of man you can imagine murdering anybody.'

'What do your legal advisers think?'

Rich's lips set in a grim line.

'My legal advisers spend their time asking me, in a persuasive way, if it isn't true that I have suffered all my life from blackouts when I don't really know what I am doing!'

'As bad as that,' said Poirot. 'Well, perhaps we shall find it is Burgess who is subject to blackouts. It is always an idea. The weapon now. They showed it to you and asked you if it was yours?'

'It was not mine. I had never seen it before.'

'It was not yours, no. But are you quite sure you had never seen it before?'

'No.' Was there a faint hesitation? 'It's a kind of ornamental toy – really – One sees things like that lying about in people's houses.'

'In a woman's drawing-room, perhaps. Perhaps in Mrs Clayton's drawing-room?'

'Certainly NOT!'

The last word came out loudly and the warder looked up.

'*Très bien*. Certainly not – and there is no need to shout. But somewhere, at some time, you *have* seen something very like it. Eh? I am right?'

'I do not think so . . . In some curio shop . . . perhaps.'

'Ah, very likely.' Poirot rose. 'I take my leave.'

VII

'And now,' said Hercule Poirot, 'for Burgess. Yes, at long last, for Burgess.'

He had learnt something about the people in the case, from themselves and from each other. But nobody had given him any knowledge of Burgess. No clue, no hint, of what kind of a man he was.

When he saw Burgess he realized why.

The valet was waiting for him at Major Rich's flat, apprised of his arrival by a telephone call from Commander McLaren.

'I am M. Hercule Poirot.'

'Yes, sir, I was expecting you.'

Burgess held back the door with a deferential hand and Poirot entered. A small square entrance hall, a door on the left, open, leading into the sitting-room. Burgess relieved Poirot of his hat and coat and followed him into the sitting-room.

'Ah,' said Poirot looking round. 'It was here, then, that it happened?'

'Yes, sir.'

A quiet fellow, Burgess, white-faced, a little weedy. Awkward shoulders and elbows. A flat voice with a provincial accent that Poirot did not know. From the east coast,



perhaps. Rather a nervous man, perhaps – but otherwise no definite characteristics. It was hard to associate him with positive action of any kind. Could one postulate a negative killer?

He had those pale blue, rather shifty eyes, that unobservant people often equate with dishonesty. Yet a liar can look you in the face with a bold and confident eye.

'What is happening to the flat?' Poirot inquired.

'I'm still looking after it, sir. Major Rich arranged for my pay and to keep it nice until – until –'

The eyes shifted uncomfortably.

'Until –' agreed Poirot.

He added in a matter of fact manner: 'I should say that Major Rich will almost certainly be committed for trial. The case will come up probably within three months.'

Burgess shook his head, not in denial, simply in perplexity.

'It really doesn't seem possible,' he said.

'That Major Rich should be a murderer?'

'The whole thing. That chest –'

His eyes went across the room.

'Ah, so that is the famous chest?'

It was a mammoth piece of furniture of very dark polished wood, studded with brass, with a great brass hasp and antique lock.

'A handsome affair.' Poirot went over to it.

It stood against the wall near the window, next to a modern cabinet for holding records. On the other side of it was a door, half ajar. The door was partly masked by a big painted leather screen.

'That leads into Major Rich's bedroom,' said Burgess.

Poirot nodded. His eyes travelled to the other side of the room. There were two stereophonic record players, each on a low table, trailing cords of snake-like flex. There were easy chairs – a big table. On the walls were a set of Japanese prints. It was a handsome room, comfortable, but not luxurious.

He looked back at William Burgess.

'The discovery,' he said kindly, 'must have been a great shock to you.'

'Oh it was, sir. I'll never forget it.' The valet rushed into speech. Words poured from him. He felt, perhaps, that by telling the story often enough, he might at last expunge it from his mind.

'I'd gone round the room, sir. Clearing up. Glasses and so on. I'd just stooped to pick up a couple of olives off the floor – and I saw it – on the rug, a rusty dark stain. No, the rug's gone now. To the cleaners. The police had done with it. Whatever's that? I thought. Saying to myself, almost in joke like: "Really it might be blood! But where does it come from? What got spilt?" And then I saw it was from the chest – down the side, here, where there's a crack. And I said, still not thinking

anything, "Well whatever –?" And I lifted up the lid like this' (he suited the action to the word) 'and there it was – the body of a man lying on his side doubled up – like he might be asleep. And that nasty foreign knife or dagger thing sticking up out of his neck. I'll never forget it – never! Not as long as I live! The shock – not expecting it, you understand . . .'

He breathed deeply.

'I let the lid fall and I ran out of the flat and down to the street. Looking for a policeman – and lucky, I found one – just round the corner.'

Poirot regarded him reflectively. The performance, if it was a performance, was very good. He began to be afraid that it was not a performance – that it was just how things had happened.

'You did not think of awakening first Major Rich?' he asked.

'It never occurred to me, sir. What with the shock. I – I just wanted to get out of here –' he swallowed 'and – and get help.'

Poirot nodded.

'Did you realize that it was Mr Clayton?' he asked.

'I ought to have, sir, but you know, I don't believe I did. Of course, as soon as I got back with the police officer, I said "Why, it's Mr Clayton!" And he says "Who's Mr Clayton?" And I says "He was here last night." '

'Ah,' said Poirot, 'last night . . . Do you remember exactly when it was Mr Clayton arrived here?'

'Not to the minute. But as near as not a quarter to eight, I'd say . . .'

'You knew him well?'

'He and Mrs Clayton had been here quite frequently during the year and a half I've been employed here.'

'Did he seem quite as usual?'

'I think so. A little out of breath – but I took it he'd been hurrying. He was catching a train, or so he said.'

'He had a bag with him, I suppose, as he was going to Scotland?'

'No, sir. I imagine he was keeping a taxi down below.'

'Was he disappointed to find that Major Rich was out?'

'Not to notice. Just said he'd scribble a note. He came in here and went over to the desk and I went back to the kitchen. I was a little behindhand with the anchovy eggs. The kitchen's at the end of the passage and you don't hear very well from there. I didn't hear him go out or the master come in – but then I wouldn't expect to.'

'And the next thing?'

'Major Rich called me. He was standing in the door here. He said he'd forgotten Mrs Spence's Turkish cigarettes. I was to hurry out and get them. So I did. I brought them back and put them on the table in here. Of course I took it that Mr Clayton had left by then to get his train.'



'And nobody else came to the flat during the time Major Rich was out, and you were in the kitchen?'

'No, sir – no one.'

'Can you be sure of that?'

'How could anyone, sir? They'd have had to ring the bell.'

Poirot shook his head. How could anyone? The Spences and McLaren and also Mrs Clayton could, he already knew, account for every minute of their time. McLaren had been with acquaintances at the club, the Spences had had a couple of friends in for a drink before starting. Margharita Clayton had talked to a friend on the telephone at just that period. Not that he thought of any of them as possibilities. There would have been better ways of killing Arnold Clayton than following him to a flat with a manservant there and the host returning any moment. No, he had had a last minute hope of a 'mysterious stranger'! Someone out of Clayton's apparently impeccable past, recognizing him in the street, following him here. Attacking him with the stiletto, thrusting the body into the chest, and fleeing. Pure melodrama, unrelated to reason or to probabilities! In tune with romantic historical fictions – matching the Spanish chest.

He went back across the room to the chest. He raised the lid. It came up easily, noiselessly.

In a faint voice, Burgess said: 'It's been scrubbed out, sir, I saw to that.'

Poirot bent over it. With a faint exclamation he bent lower. He explored with his fingers.

'These holes – at the back and one side – they look – they feel, as though they had been made quite recently.'

'Holes, sir?' The valet bent to see. 'I really couldn't say. I've never noticed them particularly.'

'They are not very obvious. But they are there. What is their purpose, would you say?'

'I really wouldn't know, sir. Some animal, perhaps – I mean a beetle, something of that kind. Something that gnaws wood?'

'Some animal?' said Poirot. 'I wonder.'

He stepped back across the room.

'When you came in here with the cigarettes, was there anything at all about this room that looked different? Anything at all? Chairs moved, table, something of that kind?'

'It's odd your saying that, sir . . . Now you come to mention it, there was. That screen there that cuts off the draught from the bedroom door, it was moved over a bit more to the left.'

'Like this?' Poirot moved swiftly.

'A little more still . . . That's right.'

The screen had already masked about half of the chest. The way it was now arranged, it almost hid the chest altogether.

'Why did you think it had been moved?'

'I didn't think, sir.'

(Another Miss Lemon!)

Burgess added doubtfully:

'I suppose it leaves the way into the bedroom clearer – if the ladies wanted to leave their wraps.'

'Perhaps. But there might be another reason.' Burgess looked inquiring. 'The screen hides the chest now, and it hides the rug below the chest. If Major Rich stabbed Mr Clayton, blood would presently start dripping through the cracks at the base of the chest. Someone might notice – as you noticed the next morning. So – the screen was moved.'

'I never thought of that, sir.'

'What are the lights like here, strong or dim?'

'I'll show you, sir.'

Quickly, the valet drew the curtains and switched on a couple of lamps. They gave a soft mellow light, hardly strong enough even to read by. Poirot glanced up at a ceiling light.

'That wasn't on, sir. It's very little used.'

Poirot looked round in the soft glow.

The valet said:

'I don't believe you'd see any bloodstains, sir, it's too dim.'

'I think you are right. So, then, why was the screen moved?'

Burgess shivered.

'It's awful to think of – a nice gentleman like Major Rich doing a thing like that.'

'You've no doubt that he did do it? Why did he do it, Burgess?'

'Well, he'd been through the war, of course. He might have had a head wound, mightn't he? They do say as sometimes it all flares up years afterwards. They suddenly go all queer and don't know what they're doing. And they say as often as not, it's their nearest and dearest as they goes for. Do you think it could have been like that?'

Poirot gazed at him. He sighed. He turned away.

'No,' he said, 'it was not like that.'

With the air of a conjuror, a piece of crisp paper was insinuated into Burgess's hand.

'Oh thank you, sir, but really I don't –'

'You have helped me,' said Poirot. 'By showing me this room. By showing me what is in the room. By showing me what took place that evening. The impossible is never impossible! Remember that. I said that there were only two possibilities – I



was wrong. There is a third possibility.' He looked round the room again and gave a little shiver. 'Pull back the curtains. Let in the light and the air. This room needs it. It needs cleansing. It will be a long time, I think, before it is purified from what afflicts it – the lingering memory of hate.'

Burgess, his mouth open, handed Poirot his hat and coat. He seemed bewildered. Poirot, who enjoyed making incomprehensible statements, went down to the street with a brisk step.

## VIII

When Poirot got home, he made a telephone call to Inspector Miller.

'What happened to Clayton's bag? His wife said he had packed one.'

'It was at the club. He left it with the porter. Then he must have forgotten it and gone off without it.'

'What was in it?'

'What you'd expect. Pyjamas, extra shirt, washing-things.'

'Very thorough.'

'What did you expect would be in it?'

Poirot ignored that question. He said:

'About the stiletto. I suggest that you get hold of whatever cleaning woman attends Mrs Spence's house. Find out if she ever saw anything like it lying about there.'

'Mrs Spence?' Miller whistled. 'Is that the way your mind is working? The Spences were shown the stiletto. They didn't recognize it.'

'Ask them again.'

'Do you mean –'

'And then let me know what they say –'

'I can't imagine what you think you have got hold of!'

'Read *Othello*, Miller. Consider the characters in *Othello*. We've missed out one of them.'

He rang off. Next he dialled Lady Chatterton. The number was engaged.

He tried again a little later. Still no success. He called for George, his valet, and instructed him to continue ringing the number until he got a reply. Lady Chatterton, he knew, was an incorrigible telephoner.

He sat down in a chair, carefully eased off his patent leather shoes, stretched his toes and leaned back.

'I am old,' said Hercule Poirot. 'I tire easily . . .' He brightened. 'But the cells – they still function. Slowly – but they function . . . *Othello*, yes. Who was it said that to me? Ah yes, Mrs Spence. The bag . . . The screen . . . The body, lying there like a man asleep. A clever murder. Premeditated, planned . . . I think, *enjoyed*! . . .'

George announced to him that Lady Chatterton was on the line.

'Hercule Poirot here, Madame. May I speak to your guest?'

'Why, of course! Oh M. Poirot, have you done something wonderful?'

'Not yet,' said Poirot. 'But possibly, it marches.'

Presently Margharita's voice – quiet, gentle.

'Madame, when I asked you if you noticed anything out of place that evening at the party, you frowned, as though you remembered something – and then it escaped you. Would it have been the position of the screen that night?'

'The screen? Why, of course, yes. It was not quite in its usual place.'

'Did you dance that night?'

'Part of the time.'

'Who did you dance with mostly?'

'Jeremy Spence. He's a wonderful dancer. Charles is good but not spectacular. He and Linda danced and now and then we changed. Jock McLaren doesn't dance. He got out the records and sorted them and arranged what we'd have.'

'You had serious music later?'

'Yes.'

There was a pause. Then Margharita said:

'M. Poirot, what is – all this? Have you – is there – *hope*?'

'Do you ever know, Madame, what the people around you are feeling?'

Her voice, faintly surprised said:

'I – suppose so.'

'I suppose not. I think you have no idea. I think that is the tragedy of your life. But the tragedy is for other people – not for you.'

'Someone today mentioned to me Othello. I asked you if your husband was jealous, and you said you thought he must be. But you said it quite lightly. You said it as Desdemona might have said it not realizing danger. She, too, recognized jealousy, but she did not understand it, because she herself never had, and never could, experience jealousy. She was, I think, quite unaware of the force of acute physical passion. She loved her husband with the romantic fervour of hero worship, she loved her friend Cassio, quite innocently, as a close companion . . . I think that because of her immunity to passion, she herself drove men mad . . . Am I making sense to you, Madame?'

There was a pause – and then Margharita's voice answered. Cool, sweet, a little bewildered:

'I don't – I don't really understand what you are saying . . .'

Poirot sighed. He spoke in matter of fact tones.

'This evening,' he said, 'I pay you a visit.'

IX

Inspector Miller was not an easy man to persuade. But equally Hercule Poirot was not an easy man to shake off until he had got his way. Inspector Miller grumbled, but capitulated.

'– though what Lady Chatterton's got to do with this –'



'Nothing, really. She has provided asylum for a friend, that is all.'

'About those Spences – how did you know?'

'That stiletto came from there? It was a mere guess. Something Jeremy Spence said gave me the idea. I suggested that the stiletto belonged to Margharita Clayton. He showed that he knew positively that it did *not*.' He paused. 'What did they say?' he asked with some curiosity.

'Admitted that it was very like a toy dagger they'd once had. But it had been mislaid some weeks ago, and they had really forgotten about it. I suppose Rich pinched it from there.'

'A man who likes to play safe, Mr Jeremy Spence,' said Hercule Poirot. He muttered to himself: 'Some weeks ago . . . Oh yes, the planning began a long time ago.'

'Eh, what's that?'

'We arrive,' said Poirot. The taxi drew up at Lady Chatterton's house in Cheriton Street. Poirot paid the fare.

Margharita Clayton was waiting for them in the room upstairs. Her face hardened when she saw Miller.

'I didn't know –'

'You did not know who the friend was I proposed to bring?'

'Inspector Miller is not a friend of mine.'

'That rather depends on whether you want to see justice done or not, Mrs Clayton. Your husband was murdered –'

'And now we have to talk of who killed him,' said Poirot quickly. 'May we sit down, Madame?'

Slowly Margharita sat down in a high-backed chair facing the two men.

'I ask,' said Poirot, addressing both his hearers, 'to listen to me patiently. I think I now know what happened on that fatal evening at Major Rich's flat . . . We started, all of us, by an assumption that was not true – the assumption that there were only two persons who had the opportunity of putting the body in the chest – that is to say, Major Rich, or William Burgess. But we were wrong – there was a third person at the flat that evening who had an equally good opportunity to do so.'

'And who was that?' demanded Miller sceptically. 'The lift boy?'

'No. *Arnold Clayton*.'

'What? Concealed his own dead body? You're crazy.'

'Naturally not a dead body – a live one. In simple terms, he hid himself in the chest. A thing that has often been done throughout the course of history. The dead bride in the *Mistletoe Bough*, Iachimo with designs on the virtue of Imogen and so on. I thought of it as soon as I saw that there had been holes bored in the chest quite recently. Why? They were made so that there might be a sufficiency of air in the chest. Why was the screen moved from its usual position that evening? So as to hide the chest from the people in the room. So that the hidden man could lift the lid from time to time and relieve his cramp, and hear better what went on.'

'But why?' demanded Margharita, wide-eyed with astonishment. 'Why should Arnold want to hide in the chest?'

'Is it you who ask that, Madame? Your husband was a jealous man. He was also an inarticulate man. "Bottled up", as your friend Mrs Spence put it. His jealousy mounted. It tortured him! Were you or were you not Rich's mistress? He did not know! He *had* to know! So – a "telegram from Scotland", the telegram that was never sent and that no one ever saw! The overnight bag is packed and conveniently forgotten at the club. He goes to the flat at a time when he has probably ascertained Rich will be out – He tells the valet he will write a note. As soon as he is left alone, he bores the holes in the chest, moves the screen, and climbs inside the chest. Tonight he will know the truth. Perhaps his wife will stay behind the others, perhaps she will go, but come back again. That night the desperate, jealousy-racked man will *know*. . .'

'You're not saying he stabbed *himself*?' Miller's voice was incredulous. 'Nonsense!'

'Oh no, someone else stabbed him. Somebody who knew he was there. It was murder all right. Carefully planned, long premeditated, murder. Think of the other characters in *Othello*. It is Iago we should have remembered. Subtle poisoning of Arnold Clayton's mind; hints, suspicions. Honest Iago, the faithful friend, the man you always believe! Arnold Clayton believed him. Arnold Clayton let his jealousy be played upon, be roused to fever pitch. Was the plan of hiding in the chest Arnold's own idea? He may have thought it was – probably he did think so! And so the scene is set. The stiletto, quietly abstracted some weeks earlier, is ready. The evening comes. The lights are low, the gramophone is playing, two couples dance, the odd man out is busy at the record cabinet, close to the Spanish chest and its masking screen. To slip behind the screen, lift the lid and strike – Audacious, but quite easy!'

'Clayton would have cried out!'

'Not if he were drugged,' said Poirot. 'According to the valet, the body was "lying like a man asleep". Clayton was asleep, drugged by the only man who *could* have drugged him, the man he had had a drink with at the club.'

'Jock?' Margharita's voice rose high in childlike surprise. 'Jock? Not dear old Jock. Why, I've known Jock all my life! Why on earth should Jock . . . ?'

Poirot turned on her.

'Why did two Italians fight a duel? Why did a young man shoot himself? Jock McLaren is an inarticulate man. He has resigned himself, perhaps, to being the faithful friend to you and your husband, but then comes Major Rich as well. It is too much! In the darkness of hate and desire, he plans what is well nigh the perfect murder – a double murder, for Rich is almost certain to be found guilty of it. And with Rich and your husband both out of the way – he thinks that at last you may turn to *him*. And perhaps. Madame, you would have done . . . Eh?'

She was staring at him, wide eyed horror struck . . .



Almost unconsciously she breathed:

'Perhaps . . . I don't – know . . .'

Inspector Miller spoke with sudden authority.

'This is all very well, Poirot. It's a theory, nothing more. There's not a shred of evidence. Probably not a word of it is true.'

'It is all true.'

'But there's no *evidence*. There's nothing we can act on.'

'You are wrong. I think that McLaren, if this is put to him, will admit it. That is, if it is made clear to him that Margharita Clayton knows . . .'

Poirot paused and added:

'Because, once he knows *that*, he has lost . . . The perfect murder has been in vain.'