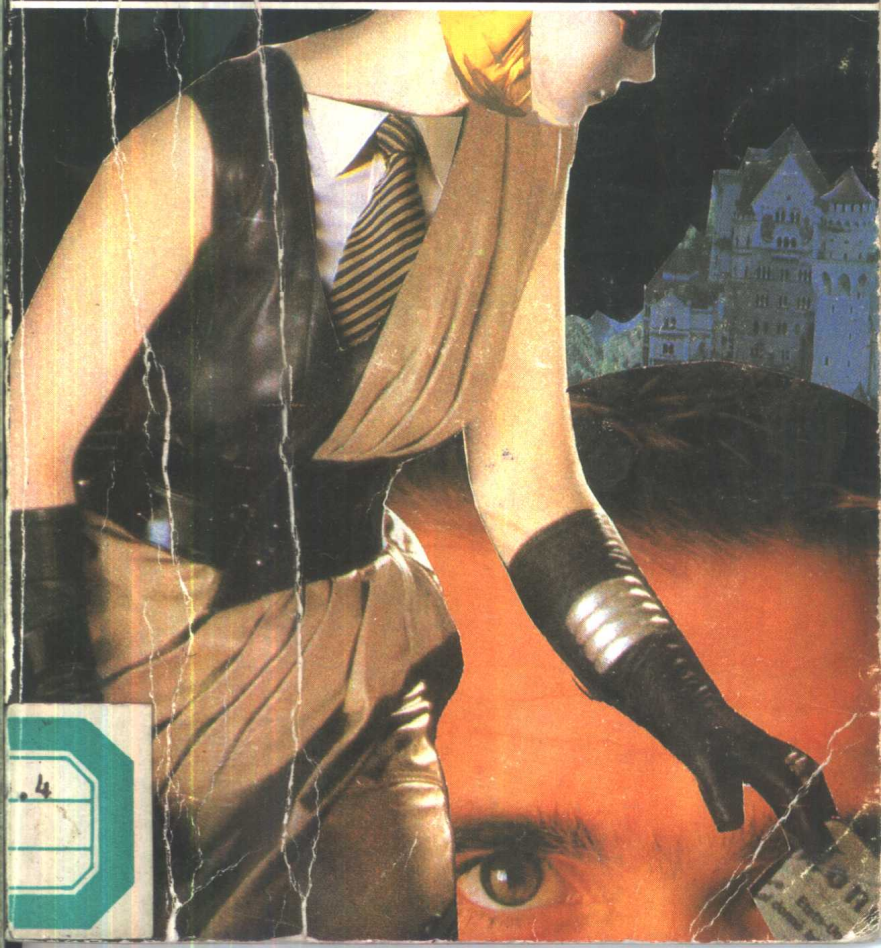


世界著名侦探小说

THIRD GIRL

AGATHA CHRISTIE



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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

世界著名侦探小说

第三位女郎

阿加莎·克里斯蒂 著

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CHAPTER ONE

Hercule Poirot was sitting at the breakfast table. At his right hand was a steaming cup of chocolate. He had always had a sweet tooth. To accompany the chocolate was a *brioche*. It went agreeably with chocolate. He nodded his approval. This was from the fourth shop he had tried. It was a Danish *pâtisserie* but infinitely superior to the so-called French one nearby. That had been nothing less than a fraud.

He was satisfied gastronomically. His stomach was at peace. His mind also was at peace, perhaps somewhat too much so. He had finished his *Magnum Opus*, an analysis of great writers of detective fiction. He had dared to speak scathingly of Edgar Allen Poe, he had complained of the lack of method or order in the romantic outpourings of Wilkie Collins, had lauded to the skies two American authors who were practically unknown, and had in various other ways given honour where honour was due and sternly withheld it where he considered it was not. He had seen the volume through the press, had looked upon the results and, apart from a really incredible number of printer's errors, pronounced that it was good. He had enjoyed this literary achievement and enjoyed the vast amount of reading he had had to do, had enjoyed sneering with disgust as he flung a book across the floor (though always remembering to first pick it up and dispose of it tidily in the waste-paper basket) and had enjoyed appreciatively nodding his head on the rare occasions when such approval was justified.

And now? He had had a pleasant interlude of relaxation, very necessary after his intellectual labour. But one could not relax for ever, one had to go on to the next thing. Unfortunately he had no idea what the next thing might be. Some further literary accomplishment? He thought not. Do a thing well then leave it alone. That was his maxim. The truth of the matter was, he was

bored. All this strenuous mental activity in which he had been indulging – there had been too much of it. It had got him into bad habits, it had made him restless ...

Vexatious! He shook his head and took another sip of chocolate.

The door opened and his well-trained servant, George, entered. His manner was deferential and slightly apologetic. He coughed and murmured, 'A –' he paused, '– a – young lady has called.'

Poirot looked at him with surprise and mild distaste.

'I do not see people at this hour,' he said reprovingly.

'No, sir,' agreed George.

Master and servant looked at each other. Communication was sometimes fraught with difficulties for them. By inflexion or innuendo or a certain choice of words George would signify that there was something that might be elicited if the right question was asked. Poirot considered what the right question in this case might be.

'She is good-looking, this young lady?' he inquired carefully.

'In my view – no, sir, but there is no accounting for tastes.'

Poirot considered his reply. He remembered the slight pause that George had made before the phrase – young lady. George was a delicate social recorder. He had been uncertain of the visitor's status but had given her the benefit of the doubt.

'You are of the opinion that she is a young lady rather than, let us say, a young person?'

'I think so, sir, though it is not always easy to tell nowadays.' George spoke with genuine regret.

'Did she give a reason for wishing to see me?'

'She said –' George pronounced the words with some reluctance, apologising for them in advance as it were, 'that she wanted to consult you about a murder she might have committed.'

Hercule Poirot stared. His eyebrows rose. 'Might have committed? Does she not *know*?'

'That is what she said, sir.'

‘Unsatisfactory, but possibly interesting,’ said Poirot.

‘It might – have been a joke, sir,’ said George, dubiously.

‘Anything is possible, I suppose,’ conceded Poirot, ‘but one would hardly think –’ He lifted his cup. ‘Show her in after five minutes.’

‘Yes, sir.’ George withdrew.

Poirot finished the last sip of chocolate. He pushed aside his cup and rose to his feet. He walked to the fireplace and adjusted his moustaches carefully in the mirror over the chimney piece. Satisfied, he returned to his chair and awaited the arrival of his visitor. He did not know exactly what to expect ...

He had hoped perhaps for something nearer to his own estimate of female attraction. The outworn phrase ‘beauty in distress’ had occurred to him. He was disappointed when George returned ushering in the visitor; inwardly he shook his head and sighed. Here was no beauty – and no noticeable distress either. Mild perplexity would seem nearer the mark.

‘Pha!’ thought Poirot disgustedly. ‘These girls! Do they not even try to make something of themselves? Well made up, attractively dressed, hair that has been arranged by a good hairdresser, then perhaps she might pass. But now!’

His visitor was a girl of perhaps twenty-odd. Long straggly hair of indeterminate colour strayed over her shoulders. Her eyes, which were large, bore a vacant expression and were of a greenish blue. She wore what were presumably the chosen clothes of her generation. Black high leather boots, white open-work woollen stockings of doubtful cleanliness, a skimpy skirt, and a long and sloppy pullover of heavy wool. Anyone of Poirot’s age and generation would have had only one desire. To drop the girl into a bath as soon as possible. He had often felt this same reaction walking along the streets. There were hundreds of girls looking exactly the same. They all looked dirty. And yet – a contradiction in terms – this one had the look of having been recently drowned and pulled out of a river. Such girls, he reflected, were not perhaps really dirty. They merely took enormous care and pains to look so.

He rose with his usual politeness, shook hands, drew out a chair.

'You demanded to see me, mademoiselle? Sit down, I pray of you.'

'Oh,' said the girl, in a slightly breathless voice. She stared at him.

'*Eh bien?*' said Poirot.

She hesitated. 'I think I'd - rather stand.' The large eyes continued to stare doubtfully.

'As you please.' Poirot resumed his seat and looked at her. He waited. The girl shuffled her feet. She looked down on them then up again at Poirot.

'You - you *are* Hercule Poirot?'

'Assuredly. In what way can I be of use to you?'

'Oh, well, it's rather difficult. I mean -'

Poirot felt that she might need perhaps a little assistance. He said helpfully, 'My manservant told me that you wanted to consult me because you thought you "might have committed a murder." Is that correct?'

The girl nodded. 'That's right.'

'Surely that is not a matter that admits of any doubt. You must know yourself whether you have committed a murder or not.'

'Well, I don't know quite how to put it. I mean -'

'Come now,' said Poirot kindly. 'Sit down. Relax the muscles. Tell me all about it.'

'I don't think - oh dear, I don't know how to - You see, it's all so difficult. I've - I've changed my mind. I don't want to be rude but - well, I think I'd better go.'

'Come now. Courage.'

'No, I can't. I thought I could come and - and ask you, ask you what I ought to do - but I can't, you see. It's all so different from -'

'From what?'

'I'm awfully sorry and I really don't want to be rude, but -'

She breathed an enormous sigh, looked at Poirot, looked away, and suddenly blurted out, 'You're too old. Nobody told

me you were so old. I really don't want to be rude but - there it is. *You're too old.* I'm really very sorry.'

She turned abruptly and blundered out of the room, rather like a desperate moth in lamplight.

Poirot, his mouth open, heard the bang of the front door.

He ejaculated: '*Nom d'un nom d'un nom ...*'

CHAPTER TWO

The telephone rang.

Hercule Poirot did not even seem aware of the fact.

It rang with shrill and insistent persistence.

George entered the room and stepped towards it, turning a questioning glance towards Poirot.

Poirot gestured with his hand.

'Leave it,' he said.

George obeyed, leaving the room again. The telephone continued to ring. The shrill irritating noise continued. Suddenly it stopped. After a minute or two, however, it commenced to ring again.

'Ah *Sapristi!* That must be a woman - undoubtedly a woman.'

He sighed, rose to his feet and came to the instrument.

He picked up the receiver. 'Allo,' he said.

'Are you - is that M. Poirot?'

'I, myself.'

'It's Mrs Oliver - your voice sounds different. I didn't recognise it at first.'

'*Bonjour, Madame* - you are well, I hope?'

'Oh, I'm all right.' Ariadne Oliver's voice came through in its usual cheerful accents. The well-known detective story writer and Hercule Poirot were on friendly terms.

'It's rather early to ring you up, but I want to ask you a favour.'

'Yes?'

'It is the annual dinner of our Detective Authors' Club; I wondered if you would come and be our Guest Speaker this year. It would be very very sweet of you if you would.'

'When is this?'

'Next month - the twenty-third.'

A deep sigh came over the telephone.

'Alas! I am too old.'

'Too old? What on earth do you mean? You're not old at all.'

'You think not?'

'Of course not. You'll be wonderful. You can tell us lots of lovely stories about real crimes.'

'And who will want to listen?'

'Everyone. They - M. Poirot, is there anything the matter? Has something happened? You sound upset.'

'Yes, I am upset. My feelings - ah, well, no matter.'

'But tell me about it.'

'Why should I make a fuss?'

'Why shouldn't you? You'd better come and tell me all about it. When will you come? This afternoon. Come and have tea with me.'

'Afternoon tea, I do not drink it.'

'Then you can have coffee.'

'It is not the time of day I usually drink coffee.'

'Chocolate? With whipped cream on top? Or a tisane. You love sipping tisanes. Or lemonade. Or orangeade. Or would you like decaffeinated coffee if I can get it -'

'*Ah ça, non, par exemple!* It is an abomination.'

'One of those sirops you like so much. I know, I've got half a bottle of Ribena in the cupboard.'

'What is Ribena?'

'Blackcurrant flavour.'

'Indeed, one has to hand it to you! You really do try, Madame. I am touched by your solicitude. I will accept with pleasure to drink a cup of chocolate this afternoon.'

'Good. And then you'll tell me all about what's upset you.'
She rang off.

II

Poirot considered for a moment. Then he dialled a number. Presently he said: 'Mr Goby? Hercule Poirot here. Are you very fully occupied at this moment?'

'Middling,' said the voice of Mr Goby. 'Middling to fair. But to oblige you, Monsieur Poirot, if you're in a hurry, as you usually are - well, I wouldn't say that my young men couldn't manage mostly what's on hand at present. Of course good boys aren't as easy to get as they used to be. Think too much of themselves nowadays. Think they know it all before they've started to learn. But there! Can't expect old heads on young shoulders. I'll be pleased to put myself at your disposal, M. Poirot. Maybe I can put one or two of the better lads on the job. I suppose it's the usual - collecting information?'

He nodded his head and listened whilst Poirot went into details of exactly what he wanted done. When he had finished with Mr Goby, Poirot rang up Scotland Yard where in due course he got through to a friend of his. When he in turn had listened to Poirot's requirements, he replied,

'Don't want much, do you? Any murder, *anywhere*. Time, place and victim unknown. Sounds a bit of a wild goose chase, if you ask me, old boy.' He added disapprovingly, 'You don't seem really to know *anything*!'

III

At 4.15 that afternoon Poirot sat in Mrs Oliver's drawing-room sipping appreciatively at a large cup of chocolate topped with foaming whipped cream which his hostess had just placed on a small table beside him. She added a small plate full of *langue de chats* biscuits.

'Chère Madame, what kindness.' He looked over his cup with faint surprise at Mrs Oliver's coiffure and also at her new wallpaper. Both were new to him. The last time he had seen Mrs Oliver, her hair style had been plain and severe. It now displayed a richness of coils and twists arranged in intricate patterns all over her head. Its prolific luxury was, he suspected, largely artificial. He debated in his mind how many switches of hair might unexpectedly fall off if Mrs Oliver was to get suddenly excited, as was her wont. As for the wallpaper ...

'These cherries - they are new?' he waved a teaspoon. It was, he felt, rather like being in a cherry orchard.

'Are there too many of them, do you think?' said Mrs Oliver. 'So hard to tell beforehand with wallpaper. Do you think my old one was better?'

Poirot cast his mind back dimly to what he seemed to remember as large quantities of bright coloured tropical birds in a forest. He felt inclined to remark '*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*,' but restrained himself.

'And now,' said Mrs Oliver, as her guest finally replaced his cup on its saucer and sat back with a sigh of satisfaction, wiping remnants of foaming cream from his moustache, 'what is all this about?'

'That I can tell you very simply. This morning a girl came to see me. I suggested she might make an appointment. One has one's routine, you comprehend. She sent back word that she wanted to see me at once because she thought she might have committed a murder.'

'What an odd thing to say. Didn't she *know*?'

'Precisely! *C'est inouï!* so I instructed George to show her in. She stood there! She refused to sit down. She just stood there staring at me. She seemed quite half-witted. I tried to encourage her. Then suddenly she said that she'd changed her mind. She said she didn't want to be rude but that - (what do you think?) - but that I was *too old* ...'

Mrs Oliver hastened to utter soothing words. 'Oh well, girls are like that. Anyone over thirty-five they think is half dead. They've no *sense*, girls, you must realise that.'

'It wounded me,' said Hercule Poirot.

'Well, I shouldn't worry about it, if I were you. Of course it was a very rude thing to say.'

'That does not matter. And it is not only *my* feelings. I am worried. Yes, I am worried.'

'Well, I should forget all about it if I were you,' advised Mrs Oliver comfortably.

'You do not understand. I am worried about this girl. She came to me for *help*. Then she decided that I was too old. Too old to be of any use to her. She was wrong of course, that goes without saying and then she just ran away. But I tell you that girl *needs* help.'

'I don't suppose she does really,' said Mrs Oliver soothingly. 'Girls make a fuss about things.'

'No. You are wrong. *She needs help*.'

'You don't think she really has committed a murder?'

'Why not? She said she had.'

'Yes, but -' Mrs Oliver stopped. 'She said she *might* have,' she said slowly. 'But what can she possibly mean by that?'

'Exactly. It does not make sense.'

'Who did she murder or did she think she murdered?'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'And why did she murder someone?'

Again Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'Of course it could be all sorts of things.' Mrs Oliver began to brighten as she set her ever prolific imagination to work. 'She could have run over someone in her car and not stopped. She could have been assaulted by a man on a cliff and struggled with him and managed to push him over. She could have given someone the wrong medicine by mistake. She could have gone to one of those purple pill parties and had a fight with someone. She could have come to and found she had stabbed someone. She -'

'*Assez, madame, assez!*'

But Mrs Oliver was well away.

'She might have been a nurse in the operating theatre and

administered the wrong anaesthetic or –' she broke off, suddenly anxious for clearer details. 'What did she look like?'

Poirot considered for a moment.

'An Ophelia devoid of physical attraction.'

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Oliver. 'I can almost *see* her when you say that. How queer.'

'She is not competent,' said Poirot. 'That is how I see her. She is not one who can cope with difficulties. She is not one of those who can see beforehand the dangers that must come. She is one of whom others will look round and say "we want a victim. That one will do".'

But Mrs Oliver was no longer listening. She was clutching her rich coils of hair with both hands in a gesture with which Poirot was familiar.

'Wait,' she cried in a kind of agony. 'Wait!'

Poirot waited, his eyebrows raised.

'You didn't tell me her name,' said Mrs Oliver.

'She did not give it. Unfortunate, I agree with you.'

'Wait!' implored Mrs Oliver, again with the same agony. She relaxed her grip on her head and uttered a deep sigh. Hair detached itself from its bonds and tumbled over her shoulders, a super imperial coil of hair detached itself completely and fell on the floor. Poirot picked it up and put it discreetly on the table.

'Now then,' said Mrs Oliver, suddenly restored to calm. She pushed in a hairpin or two, and nodded her head while she thought.

'Who told this girl about you, M. Poirot?'

'No one, so far as I know. Naturally, she had heard about me no doubt.'

Mrs Oliver thought that 'naturally' was not the word at all. What was natural was that Poirot himself was sure that everyone had always heard of him. Actually large numbers of people would only look at you blankly if the name of Hercule Poirot was mentioned, especially the younger generation. 'But how am I going to put that to him?' thought Mrs Oliver, 'in such a way that it won't hurt his feelings?'