THE PICCADILLY MURDER

ANTHONY BERKELEY

THE CRIME CLUB, INC.

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Mr. Chitterwick watched it all, and a clearer case never existed, but — was the elderly lady actually poisoned by the red-haired man?

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CHAPTER I

MR. CHITTERWICK SEES RED

THE Piccadilly Palace Hotel is, to the Londoner, a hotel only by the way. From its noble imitation-marble vestibule he sees, tucked unobtrusively away in a corner, the coil of a staircase surreptitiously ascending round a corner, and lifts are at work all day long whisking strange country cousins up into mysterious regions which must, by inference, exist; but play the psychoanalytical game with the Londoner and give him the words "Piccadilly Palace" and he will reply, without a split second's hesitation, "lounge." For him the Piccadilly Palace exists only in its lounge.

To us who frequent it the lounge of the Piccadilly Palace is what Monte Carlo is to Europe's new rich, our pride, our Mecca and our rendezvous. The vastness of its gilt and synthetic-marble interior, the multitude of its chairs and little tables, the agility of its bustling waitresses, who are always far too busy running the liquid errands of one's immediate neighbours to be able to attend to the thirst of oneself, the hum and buzz and heat and smoke of its almost palpable atmosphere—on all

these we look round with sober pride and reflect that now at last we are seeing life. Here we sit and sip our so-called Martini, till our thoughts turn longingly upon sole and whitebait, and poulet rôti, salade; and we join the queue (by now stretching halfway across the lounge) at the entrance to the three-and-sixpenny table d'hôte dining room. A devil of a fellow.

But that is not the only function of the Piccadilly Palace lounge—to exhilarate the simple pleasure seeker. Its real importance as a social phenomenon is the way in which it brings together, in surprising contact, the most diverse representatives of every class or calling with an income of between, roughly, a hundred and fifty and a thousand pounds a year.

To those who have eyes to see, the kaleidoscopic juxtapositions to be found only on this unique spot are a continual delight. Here a couple of public-school boys, out for a cheap dinner and show and sipping their mixed vermouths with conscious man-of-the-worldliness, are rubbing quite unwitting shoulders with a pair of vermilion-lipped ladies of the night (or, *pace* the shrinking censor, as it is not yet night, of the pavements), who have dropped in to restore themselves with a short drink and a rest; at the next table one of that peculiarly detestable brand of young rounder which seems to be attracted to the Piccadilly Palace lounge like flies to sugar, smarmed and stinking of cheap scent, is backing his chair into that of the highly respectable widow of a

retired butcher from Peckham; over there a chorus girl, with the matinée paint scarcely removed from her cheeks, is cocking an impudently amused eye at the glass of lemonade in front of her neighbour (though an empty chair prudently separates them), the white-haired and rather wondering vicar of an obviously country parish. As a benefit performance for those interested in social niceties, a hundred such unconscious little comedies are enacted daily between the hours of five o'clock and half-past seven.

Mr. Ambrose Chitterwick, who liked to consider himself a modest student of the human animal, was in the habit of visiting occasionally the lounge of the Piccadilly Palace Hotel to escape from his aunt.

On the afternoon in question Mr. Chitterwick had arrived there unusually early. It was barely half-past two, and the after-luncheon coffee drinking was in full swing. Mr. Chitterwick found an unoccupied table with extreme difficulty (was, indeed, piloted to one by a lordly but benevolent head waiter after he had wandered helplessly three times round the whole place and assured himself that not a single seat was vacant) and dropped with relief into the chair that was edged against the back of his knees. He had lunched unhappily at a large stores, surrounded entirely by women, and not for the first time he had wished very earnestly that his aunt did not disapprove quite so strongly of

clubs. But disapprove she did, and where Mr. Chitterwick's aunt disapproved. . . .

Unfortunately she did approve of lunching in large stores, and Mr. Chitterwick, having several commissions to execute for her, including the obtaining of patterns for new drawing-room curtains, had been bidden not to return to Chiswick for lunch but to have it, so to speak, among the curtains; and Mr. Chitterwick, who had somehow got into the habit of taking the line of least resistance where his aunt was concerned, had done so. Now he commanded some black coffee from the waitress, miraculously produced by the same lordly head waiter, with which to restore himself, and wickedly added a glass of benedictine to his order. But for all that he knew that his aunt did not disapprove of benedictine so strongly as she did of clubs.

Nevertheless, it was with a sense of being his own man again that he set down his glass after the first sip and, mildly beaming, surveyed the accustomed landscape. The scene was particularly interesting to him to-day, as he had not before had an opportunity of examining the after-luncheon gathering as distinct from the pre-dinner one. His eyes roamed deliberately over his immediate neighbourhood. Then his face fell. This was a very different affair. Here were no piquant contrasts at all. The entire collection was dull, sombre, and ultra-respectable. No impudently amused eyes, no vermilion lips; only the young rounders, the widows of

retired solicitors, and a leavening of quite uninteresting middle-aged men. Suburban London, mostly female, held the Piccadilly Palace lounge in flabby thrall.

Some distance away from where he was sitting, alone and at a small table against the wall, was a girl whose appearance arrested Mr. Chitterwick's wandering eye for a few moments. She was quite a pretty girl in rather a severe way, but that was not the reason why his glance lingered on her; Mr. Chitterwick, it is to be regretted, had not much of an eye for a pretty girl. The point about her that arrested his attention was that she was not the kind of girl one sees alone in the Piccadilly Palace. Her blue coat and skirt were plainer and quieter than most of the coats and skirts to be seen there, the small hat that allowed only a glimpse of black hair more severe, her whole appearance more restrained and not at all expectant. Must be waiting for someone, decided Mr. Chitterwick, regarding her with interest. Otherwise——

At this point Mr. Chitterwick's eye caught that of the girl, and the latter was distinctly cold. Mr. Chitterwick looked hastily away.

Only one other person could Mr. Chitterwick see who interested him at all. A few tables away, with a clear field of view between, her back to one of the noble pseudo-marble pillars, sat an elderly woman to whom Mr. Chitterwick's heart went out at once. Mr. Chitterwick was very fond of elderly ladies,

provided that they did not look too much like aunts. This one did not look like an aunt at all. She was alone, for one thing, and she wore no air of authority. The air she did wear was one of complete bewilderment, as if she wondered how on earth she had ever got in here and why, and how on earth she was ever going to get out again. It was quite plain that she was not of the kind that does patronize the Piccadilly Palace, either after lunch or before dinner.

Mr. Chitterwick, finding nothing else worthy of his attention, began to play one of his favourite games with her—detectives. From her appearance alone, just her appearance, and perhaps her way of speaking (if she did speak), and her mannerisms (if she displayed any), and any other clue she offered (if she did offer any), he would deduce every single thing about her—her habits, both of mind and body, her character, whether she liked dogs better than cats or vice versa, what sort of a meal she would order if she found herself alone in a good restaurant, married, single, or widow, Conservative or Liberal, everything, in fact, excepting possibly, in the case of a married woman, her maiden name. Mr. Chitterwick invariably played this game on his way home in the Underground to Chiswick, to the considerable discomfort of the objects of his researches, the unconscious and fixed beam which Mr. Chitterwick kept turned on his victims making them uneasily scrutinize themselves in a surrepti-

tious way from head to foot to find out exactly what *was* wrong with their appearance.

While Mr. Chitterwick is preparing to exercise his powers of scientific deduction once again, let us turn the tables on him by studying his own appearance for a moment and applying his same methods to the result.

At a glance, then, Mr. Ambrose Chitterwick is seen to be a red-faced, somewhat globular, early middle-aged gentleman of independent means, with gold-rimmed pince-nez on a very short nose, less hair than he used to have, and an extremely ancient aunt at Chiswick. From the remarkable mildness which is so obvious a feature of Mr. Chitterwick's nature, it is easy to deduce that Mr. Chitterwick not only lives with his aunt at Chiswick, but to most purposes for his aunt at Chiswick too. From the same clue the deduction also follows that Mr. Chitterwick's aunt at Chiswick rules Mr. Chitterwick with a rod of something stronger than iron, for no female could live in the same house with such mild masculinity and not do so; moreover, by the law of averages, as applied to the houses of aunts in Chiswick, it must be clear that Mr. Chitterwick's aunt must be an old lady of quite exceptional forcefulness and will.

So far as Mr. Chitterwick is concerned, there is another law to be taken into account, the law of compensation. The deducer will therefore at once reach the conclusion that Mr. Chitterwick must have

some counterbalance in his make-up to this excess of mildness, and this is probably to be found in his hobby; as there is nothing Mr. Chitterwick resembles in appearance so little as a murderer, it will readily be gathered that Mr. Chitterwick's hobby must be criminology—as indeed it is. From the confidence that he exhibits in every line of him as he sets about making his own deductions, the conclusion is irresistible that Mr. Chitterwick once solved, entirely off his own bat, a peculiarly difficult case of murder, and that after it had been given up by the police and all the best amateur criminological brains in the country. And that again is the case.[1]

So much for Mr. Chitterwick.

On this occasion Mr. Chitterwick was not to get very far with his own game. He had swiftly reached certain obvious conclusions. The lady was between sixty and sixty-five; her face, distinctly weather-beaten and with a pronouncedly aquiline nose and fine eyes, not only proclaimed her a dweller in the country, but unmistakably stamped her as of good family; Mr. Chitterwick decided that she might not unreasonably be expected to have a handle to her name. The ring on her left hand made it clear that she was either a wife or a widow, and from a certain air of poise and authority about her underlying her present bewilderment, Mr. Chitterwick plumped for the latter alternative.

[1]As set forth in *The Poisoned Chocolates Case.*

Her clothes were more than illuminating. They were not fashionable—far from it; but neither were they dowdy; they were simple, straightforward, and eminently suited to their purpose, which was that of covering her body with decency and comfort. It was her clothes, in fact, that inclined Mr. Chitterwick toward the theory of a handle to her name; they were the clothes of a woman important enough to wear exactly what she liked and not what some twopenny-halfpenny French tradesman told her she should.

A nice old lady, Mr. Chitterwick began to sum up, but with a terribly strong will of her own. Probably she——

At this point Mr. Chitterwick's meditations were interrupted. There was a vacant chair beside the old lady, on which her bag had been lying. A man, quite a large man with red, curly hair, had approached the chair, picked up her bag and handed it to her, and dropped into the chair with a word of greeting. The old lady turned to him with obvious relief, and they began to talk.

Mr. Chitterwick watched them with interest. So that's what she was waiting for, he thought. Now, I wonder who the man is. Some relation to her, without a doubt. Her son? They don't look at all like mother and son. Dear me, the poor lady is very short-sighted. Fancy my not noticing that before. She's positively peering at him. Lost her glasses, no doubt. Does that argue something a little slipshod

in her character that I hadn't quite remarked? Just a trifle slipshod? But, dear me, she doesn't look a slipshod kind of person at all. Not in the least. Just the reverse, I should have said. Ah, I have it. She has always been proud of her sight, keen rider to hounds, see the fox farther than anyone else, that sort of thing; and she won't acknowledge that her sight is failing her at last. That would be quite in keeping. Dear me, she is talking very animatedly. I wonder whether——

Mr. Chitterwick became abruptly conscious of the large, red-haired man's gaze. It was fixed on himself in a positive glare.

Mr. Chitterwick started. He knew that when engaged in his game he was apt to forget the rule about staring at strangers. He coloured to the roots of his hair and transferred his regard very hastily to a gilt wreath ornamented with emerald-green leaves, halfway up a purple marble pillar. Really, he must have been staring quite unpardonably rudely to make the red-haired man return his gaze with something that positively approached malignity. In his agitation Mr. Chitterwick gulped down three parts of his benedictine, while only opening his throat to sufficient capacity for a quarter of the amount. During the disastrous coughing fit which followed he found time to hope spasmodically that his distress would be accepted by the red-haired man as both an apology and a penance.

The hope was apparently not to be substantiated.

Glancing guiltily out of the corner of a streaming eye, when vision at last returned to him, Mr. Chitterwick perceived the red-haired man's gaze still fixed on him with the same malignant intensity. Again he sought refuge in the gilt and emerald wreath. But even while endeavouring to admire its striking colour scheme he was conscious of the red-haired man's eyes boring a neat little fiery hole in the centre of his forehead.

If there is one impulse more powerful than any other it is the intense longing to turn one's eyes in a forbidden direction. Mr. Chitterwick fought it manfully for more than a minute, and a whole minute, when spent in fighting an impulse, is a very long time indeed. Then he succumbed. Trembling with agitation, he flashed a swift glance toward the red-haired man and away again.

If Mr. Chitterwick had been a hen, he would have clucked. For the red-haired man's gaze was still fixed on him, if possible even more malignantly than before.

Mr. Chitterwick stifled a foolish desire to squeak. The thing was becoming absurd. It might have been rude of him to stare in the first place, but surely an innocent stare did not deserve such concentrated hatred as the red-haired man was despatching in almost tangible waves through the ether. But nevertheless, reassure himself thus as he might, the more absurd Mr. Chitterwick felt it to be, the more his agitation increased.

During the next few minutes, Mr. Chitterwick found his eyes engaged, willy-nilly, in a ridiculous cat-and-mouse game with those of the red-haired man. Every few seconds he was compelled, quite impossibly against his will, to pop forth a glance at the red-haired man to see if he was still gazing at him; and every time he was. Mr. Chitterwick would have given quite a considerable sum of money to have been able to plunge out of the place, but he had not yet paid for his coffee and benedictine, and of course there was no waitress to respond to the frenzied appeals he was throwing out all round. There was no waitress, no lordly head waiter, no other coffee drinker in the whole crowded place; nobody at all but Mr. Chitterwick and the red-haired man.

Mr. Chitterwick swore an awful oath to himself. By his aunt's nightcap he swore that he would not glance in the red-haired man's direction again. He began to recite "The Wreck of the *Hesperus*" to himself in a feverish undertone. He had learned it at the age of four, at the first school he ever went to, and had never been able to forget it; he found it a great stand-by on occasions like this.

"*It was the schooner* Hesperus, *that sailed the . . .*" Eighteen whole seconds passed. "*The skipper, he blew a whiff from his pipe . . .*" Another six. "'*Come hither, come hither, my little daught*ER . . .'" Gradually Mr. Chitterwick slackened his pace. The soothing words were exer-