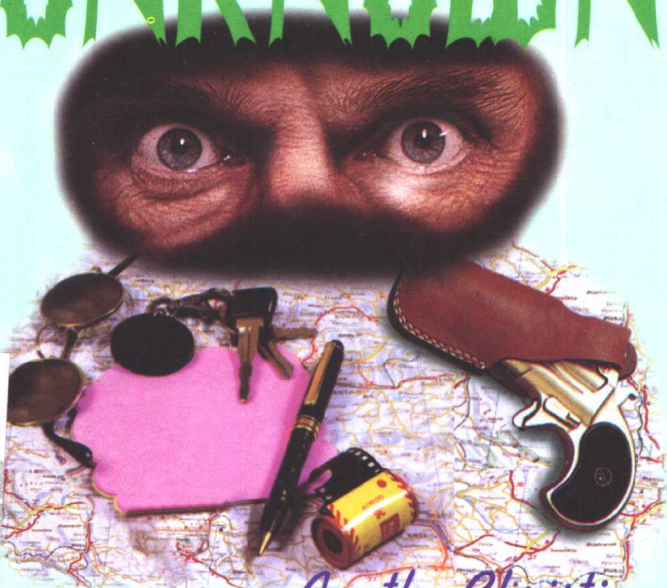


WORLD DETECTIVE STORIES

DESTINATION UNKNOWN



Agatha Christie

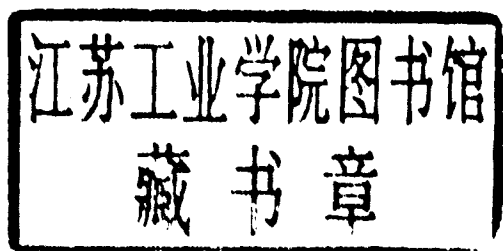
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To ANTHONY

who likes foreign travel as much as I do

CHAPTER ONE

The man behind the desk moved a heavy glass paper-weight four inches to the right. His face was not so much thoughtful or abstracted as expressionless. He had the pale complexion that comes from living most of the day in artificial light. This man, you felt, was an indoor man. A man of desks and files. The fact that to reach his office you had to walk through long twisting underground corridors was somehow strangely appropriate. It would have been difficult to guess his age. He looked neither old nor young. His face was smooth and unwrinkled, and in his eyes was a great tiredness.

The other man in the room was older. He was dark with a small military moustache. There was about him an alert nervous energy. Even now, unable to sit still, he was pacing up and down, from time to time throwing off a remark in a jerky manner.

'Reports!' he said explosively. 'Reports, reports and more reports, and none of them any damn' good!' The man at the desk looked down at the papers in front of him. On top was an official card headed, 'Betterton, Thomas Charles.' After the name was an interrogation mark. The man at the desk nodded thoughtfully. He said:

'You've followed up these reports and none of them any good?' The other shrugged his shoulders.

'How can one tell?' he asked.

The man behind the desk sighed.

'Yes,' he said, 'there is that. One can't tell, really.' The older man went on with a kind of machine-gun volley abruptness:

'Reports from Rome; reports from Touraine; seen on the

Riviera; noticed in Antwerp; definitely identified in Oslo; positively seen in Biarritz; observed behaving suspiciously in Strasbourg; seen on the beach at Ostend with a glamorous blonde; noticed walking in the streets in Brussels with a greyhound! Hasn't been seen yet in the Zoo with his arm round a zebra, but I dare say that will come!

'You've no particular fancy yourself, Wharton? Personally I had hopes of the Antwerp report, but it hasn't led to anything. Of course by now -' the young man stopped speaking and seemed to go into a coma. Presently he came out of it again and said cryptically, 'Yes, probably ... and yet - I wonder?'

Colonel Wharton sat down abruptly on the arm of a chair.

'But we've got to find out,' he said insistently. 'We've got to break the back of all this *how* and *why* and *where*? You can't lose a tame scientist every month or so and have no idea *how* they go or *why* they go or *where*! Is it where we think - or isn't it? We've always taken it for granted that it is, but now I'm not so sure. You've read all the last dope on Betterton from America?'

The man behind the desk nodded.

'Usual Left Wing tendencies at the period when everyone had them. Nothing of a lasting or permanent nature as far as can be found out. Did sound work before the war though nothing spectacular. When Mannheim escaped from Germany, Betterton was assigned as assistant to him, and ended by marrying Mannheim's daughter. After Mannheim's death he carried on, on his own, and did brilliant work. He leaped into fame with the startling discovery of ZE Fission. ZE Fission was a brilliant and absolutely revolutionary discovery. It put Betterton tops. He was all set for a brilliant career over there, but his wife had died soon after their marriage and he was all broken up over it. He came to England. He has been at Harwell for the last eighteen months. Just six months ago he married again.'

'Anything there?' asked Wharton sharply.

The other shook his head.

'Not that we can find out. She's the daughter of a local solicitor. Worked in an insurance office before her marriage. No violent political affinities so far as we've been able to discover.'

'ZE Fission,' said Colonel Wharton gloomily, with distaste. 'What they mean by all these terms beats me. I'm old-fashioned. I never really even visualized a molecule, but here they are nowadays splitting up the universe! Atom bombs, nuclear fission, ZE fission, and all the rest of it. And Betterton was one of the splitters in chief! What do they say of him at Harwell?'

'Quite a pleasant personality. As to his work, nothing outstanding or spectacular. Just variations on the practical applications of ZEF.'

Both men were silent for a moment. Their conversation had been desultory, almost automatic. The security reports lay in a pile on the desk and the security reports had had nothing of value to tell.

'He was thoroughly screened on arrival here, of course,' said Wharton.

'Yes, everything was quite satisfactory.'

'Eighteen months ago,' said Wharton thoughtfully. 'It gets 'em down, you know. Security precautions. The feeling of being perpetually under the microscope, the cloistered life. They get nervy, queer. I've seen it often enough. They begin to dream of an ideal world. Freedom and brotherhood, and pool-all-secrets and work for the good of humanity! That's exactly the moment when someone, who's more or less the dregs of humanity, sees their chance and takes it!' He rubbed his nose. 'Nobody's so gullible as the scientist,' he said. 'All the phony mediums say so. Can't quite see why.'

The other smiled, a very tired smile.

'Oh, yes,' he said, 'it would be so. They think they *know*, you

see That's always dangerous. Now, our kind are different. We're humble-minded men. We don't expect to save the world, only pick up one or two broken pieces and remove a spanner or two when it's jamming up the works.' He tapped thoughtfully on the table with his finger. 'If I only knew a little more about Betterton,' he said. 'Not his life and his actions, but the revealing, everyday things. What sort of jokes he laughed at. What made him swear. Who were the people he admired and who made him mad.'

Wharton looked at him curiously.

'What about the wife - you've tried her?'

'Several times.'

'Can't she help?'

The other shrugged his shoulders.

'She hasn't so far.'

'You think she knows something?'

'She doesn't admit, of course, that she knows anything. All the established reactions: worry, grief, desperate anxiety, no clue or suspicion beforehand, husband's life perfectly normal, no stress of any kind - and so on and so on. Her own theory is that he's been kidnapped.'

'And you don't believe her?'

'I'm handicapped,' said the man behind the desk bitterly. 'I never believe anybody.'

'Well,' said Wharton slowly, 'I suppose one has to keep an open mind. What's she like?'

'Ordinary sort of woman you'd meet any day playing bridge.'

Wharton nodded comprehendingly.

'That makes it more difficult,' he said.

'She's here to see me now. We shall go over all the same ground again.'

'It's the only way,' said Wharton. '*I* couldn't do it, though.'

'Haven't got the patience.' He got up. 'Well, I won't keep you. We've not got much further, have we?'

'Unfortunately, no. You might do a special check-up on that Oslo report. It's a likely spot.'

Wharton nodded and went out. The other man raised the receiver by his elbow and said:

'I'll see Mrs Betterton now. Send her in.'

He sat staring into space until there was a tap on the door and Mrs Betterton was shown in. She was a tall woman, about twenty-seven years of age. The most noticeable thing about her was a magnificent head of auburn-red hair. Beneath the splendour of this, her face seemed almost insignificant. She had the blue-green eyes and light eyelashes that so often go with red hair. She was wearing no make-up, he noticed. He considered the significance of that whilst he was greeting her, settling her comfortably in a chair near the desk. It inclined him very slightly to the belief that Mrs Betterton knew more than she had said she knew.

In his experience, women suffering from violent grief and anxiety did not neglect their make-up. Aware of the ravages grief made in their appearance, they did their best to repair those ravages. He wondered if Mrs Betterton calculatingly abstained from make-up, the better to sustain the part of the distracted wife. She said now, rather breathlessly:

'Oh, Mr Jessop, I do hope - is there any news?'

He shook his head and said gently:

'I'm so sorry to ask you to come up like this, Mrs Betterton. I'm afraid we haven't got any definite news for you.'

Olive Betterton said quickly:

'I know. You said so in your letter. But I wondered if - since then - oh! I was glad to come up. Just sitting at home wondering and brooding - that's the worst of it all. Because there's nothing one *can* do!'

The man called Jessop said soothingly:

'You mustn't mind, Mrs Betterton, if I go over the same ground again and again, ask you the same questions, stress the same points. You see it's always possible that some small point *might* arise. Something that you hadn't thought of before, or perhaps hadn't thought worth mentioning.'

'Yes. Yes, I understand. Ask me all over again about everything.'

'The last time you saw your husband was on the 23rd of August?'

'Yes.'

'That was when he left England to go to Paris to a Conference there.'

'Yes.'

Jessop went on rapidly:

'He attended the first two days of the Conference. The third day he did not turn up. Apparently he had mentioned to one of his colleagues that he was going instead for a trip on a *bateau mouche* that day.'

'A *bateau mouche*? What's a *bateau mouche*?'

Jessop smiled.

'One of those small boats that go along the Seine.' He looked at her sharply. 'Does that strike you as unlike your husband?'

She said doubtfully:

'It does, rather. I should have thought he'd be so keen on what was going on at the Conference.'

'Possibly. Still the subject for discussion on this particular day was not one in which he had any special interest, so he might reasonably have given himself a day off. But it doesn't strike you as being quite like your husband?'

She shook her head.

'He did not return that evening to his hotel,' went on Jessop: 'As far as can be ascertained he did not pass any frontier, certainly not on his own passport. Do you think he could have had a second passport, in another name perhaps?'

'Oh, no, why should he?'

He watched her.

'You never saw such a thing in his possession?'

She shook her head with vehemence.

'No, and I don't believe it. I don't believe it for a moment. I don't believe he went away deliberately as you all try to make out. Something's happened to him, or else - or else perhaps he's lost his memory.'

'His health had been quite normal?'

'Yes. He was working rather hard and sometimes felt a little tired, nothing more than that.'

'He'd not seemed worried in any way or depressed?'

'He wasn't worried or depressed about *anything*!' With shaking fingers she opened her bag and took out her handkerchief. 'It's all so awful.' Her voice shook. 'I can't believe it. He'd never have gone off without a word to me. Something's happened to him. He's been kidnapped or he's been attacked perhaps. I try not to think it but sometimes I feel that that must be the solution. He must be dead.'

'Now please, Mrs Betterton, please - there's no need to entertain that supposition yet. If he's dead, his body would have been discovered by now.'

'It might not. Awful things happen. He might have been drowned or pushed down a sewer. I'm sure anything could happen in Paris.'

'Paris, I can assure you, Mrs Betterton, is a very well-policed city.'

She took the handkerchief away from her eyes and stared at him with sharp anger.

'I know what you think, but it isn't so! Tom wouldn't sell secrets or betray secrets. He wasn't a communist. His whole life is an open book.'

'What were his political beliefs, Mrs Betterton?'

'In America he was a Democrat, I believe. Here he voted

Labour. He wasn't interested in politics. He was a scientist, first and last.' She added defiantly, 'He was a brilliant scientist.'

'Yes,' said Jessop, 'he was a brilliant scientist. That's really the crux of the whole matter. He might have been offered, you know, very considerable inducements to leave this country and go elsewhere.'

'It's not true.' Anger leaped out again. 'That's what the papers try to make out. That's what you all think when you come questioning me. It's not true. He'd never go without telling me, without giving me some idea.'

'And he told you - nothing?'

Again he was watching her keenly.

'Nothing. I don't know where he is. I think he was kidnapped, or else, as I say, dead. But if he's dead, I must know. I must know soon. I can't go on like this, waiting and wondering. I can't eat or sleep. I'm sick and ill with worry. Can't you help me? Can't you help me *at all*?'

He got up then and moved round his desk. He murmured:

'I'm so very sorry, Mrs Betterton, so very sorry. Let me assure you that we are trying our very best to find out what has happened to your husband. We get reports in every day from various places.'

'Reports from where?' she asked sharply. 'What do they say?'

He shook his head.

'They all have to be followed up, sifted and tested. But as a rule, I am afraid, they're vague in the extreme.'

'I must *know*,' she murmured brokenly again. 'I can't go on like this.'

'Do you care for your husband very much, Mrs Betterton?'

'Of course I care for him. Why, we've only been married six months. Only six months.'

'Yes, I know. There was - forgive me for asking - no quarrel of any kind between you?'