

世界著名侦探小说

MURDER ON THE LINKS

AGATHA CHRISTIE



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THE LINKS**



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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CHAPTER 1

A Fellow-Traveller

I believe that a well-known anecdote exists to the effect that a young writer, determined to make the commencement of his story forcible and original enough to catch and rivet the attention of the most blasé of editors, penned the following sentence:

““Hell!” said the Duchess.’

Strangely enough, this tale of mine opens in much the same fashion. Only the lady who gave utterance to the exclamation was not a duchess.

It was a day in early June. I had been transacting some business in Paris and was returning by the morning service to London, where I was still sharing rooms with my old friend, the Belgian ex-detective, Hercule Poirot.

The Calais express was singularly empty – in fact, my own compartment held only one other traveller. I had made a somewhat hurried departure from the hotel and was busy assuring myself that I had duly collected all my traps, when the train started. Up till then I had hardly noticed my companion, but I was now violently recalled to the fact of her existence. Jumping up from her seat, she let down the window and stuck her head out, withdrawing it a moment later with the brief and forcible ejaculation ‘Hell!’

Now I am old-fashioned. A woman, I consider, should be womanly. I have no patience with the modern neurotic girl who jazzes from morning to night, smokes like a chimney, and uses language which would make a Billingsgate fishwoman blush!

I looked up, frowning slightly, into a pretty, impudent face, surmounted by a rakish little red hat. A thick cluster of black curls hid each ear. I judged that she was little more

than seventeen, but her face was covered with powder, and her lips were quite impossibly scarlet.

Nothing abashed, she returned my glance, and executed an expressive grimace.

'Dear me, we've shocked the kind gentleman!' she observed to an imaginary audience. 'I apologize for my language! Most unladylike, and all that, but, oh, Lord, there's reason enough for it! Do you know I've lost my only sister?'

'Really?' I said politely. 'How unfortunate.'

'He disapproves!' remarked the lady. 'He disapproves utterly – of me, and my sister – which last is unfair, because he hasn't seen her!'

I opened my mouth, but she forestalled me.

'Say no more! Nobody loves me! I shall go into the garden and eat worms! Boohoo. I am crushed!'

She buried herself behind a large comic French paper. In a minute or two I saw her eyes stealthily peeping at me over the top. In spite of myself I could not help smiling, and in a minute she had tossed the paper aside, and had burst into a merry peal of laughter.

'I knew you weren't such a mutt as you looked,' she cried.

Her laughter was so infectious that I could not help joining in, though I hardly cared for the word 'mutt'.

'There! Now we're friends!' declared the minx. 'Say you're sorry about my sister –'

'I am desolated!'

'That's a good boy!'

'Let me finish. I was going to add that, although I am desolated, I can manage to put up with her absence very well.' I made a little bow.

But this most unaccountable of damsels frowned and shook her head.

'Cut it out. I prefer the "dignified disapproval" stunt. Oh, your face! "Not one of us", it said. And you were right there – though, mind you, it's pretty hard to tell nowadays.

It's not everyone who can distinguish between a demi and a duchess. There now, I believe I've shocked you again! You've been dug out of the backwoods, you have. Not that I mind that. We could do with a few more of your sort. I just hate a fellow who gets fresh. It makes me mad.'

She shook her head vigorously.

'What are you like when you're mad?' I inquired with a smile.

'A regular little devil! Don't care what I say, or what I do, either! I nearly did a chap in once. Yes, really. He'd have deserved it too.'

'Well,' I begged, 'don't get mad with me.'

'I shan't. I like you – did the first moment I set eyes on you. But you looked so disapproving that I never thought we should make friends.'

'Well, we have. Tell me something about yourself.'

'I'm an actress. No – not the kind you're thinking of. I've been on the boards since I was a kid of six – tumbling.'

'I beg your pardon,' I said, puzzled.

'Haven't you ever seen child acrobats?'

'Oh, I understand!'

'I'm American born, but I've spent most of my life in England. We've got a new show now –'

'We?'

'My sister and I. Sort of song and dance, and a bit of patter, and a dash of the old business thrown in. It's quite a new idea, and it hits them every time. There's going to be money in it –'

My new acquaintance leaned forward, and discoursed volubly, a great many of her terms being quite unintelligible to me. Yet I found myself envincing an increasing interest in her. She seemed such a curious mixture of child and woman. Though perfectly worldly-wise, and able, as she expressed it, to take care of herself, there was yet something curiously ingenuous in her single-minded attitude towards life, and her wholehearted determination to 'make good'.

We passed through Amiens. The name awakened many

memories. My companion seemed to have an intuitive knowledge of what was in my mind.

'Thinking of the War?'

I nodded.

'You were through it, I suppose?'

'Pretty well. I was wounded once, and after the Somme they invalidated me out altogether. I'm a sort of private secretary now to an MP.'

'My! That's brainy!'

'No, it isn't. There's really awfully little to do. Usually a couple of hours every day sees me through. It's dull work too. In fact, I don't know what I should do if I hadn't got something to fall back upon.'

'Don't say you collect bugs!'

'No. I share rooms with a very interesting man. He's a Belgian – an ex-detective. He's set up as a private detective in London, and he's doing extraordinarily well. He's really a very marvellous little man. Time and again he has proved to be right where the official police have failed.'

My companion listened with widening eyes.

'Isn't that interesting now? I just adore crime. I go to all the mysteries on the movies. And when there's a murder on I just devour the papers.'

'Do you remember the Styles Case?' I asked.

'Let me see, was that the old lady who was poisoned? Somewhere down in Essex?'

I nodded.

'That was Poirot's first big case. Undoubtedly, but for him the murderer would have escaped scot-free. It was a most wonderful bit of detective work.'

Warming to my subject, I ran over the heads of the affair, working up to the triumphant and unexpected dénouement.

The girl listened spellbound. In fact, we were so absorbed that the train drew into Calais station before we realized it.

I secured a couple of porters, and we alighted on the platform. My companion held out her hand.

'Goodbye, and I'll mind my language better in future.'

'Oh, but surely you'll let me look after you on the boat?'

'Mayn't be on the boat. I've got to see whether that sister of mine got aboard after all anywhere. But thanks, all the same.'

'Oh, but we're going to meet again, surely? Aren't you even going to tell me your name?' I cried, as she turned away.

She looked over her shoulder.

'Cinderella,' she said, and laughed.

But little did I think when and how I should see Cinderella again.

CHAPTER 2

An Appeal for Help

It was five minutes past nine when I entered our joint sitting-room for breakfast on the following morning. My friend Poirot, exact to the minute as usual, was just tapping the shell of his second egg.

He beamed upon me as I entered.

'You have slept well, yes? You have recovered from the crossing so terrible? It is a marvel, almost you are exact this morning. *Pardon*, but your tie is not symmetrical. Permit that I rearrange him.'

Elsewhere, I have described Hercule Poirot. An extraordinary little man! Height, five feet four inches, egg-shaped head carried a little to one side, eyes that shone green when he was excited, stiff military moustache, air of dignity immense! He was neat and dandified in appearance. For neatness of any kind he had an absolute passion. To see an ornament set crookedly, or a speck of dust, or a slight disarray in one's attire, was torture to the little man until he could ease his feelings by remedying the matter. 'Order' and 'Method' were his gods. He had a certain disdain for tangible evidence, such as footprints and cigarette ash, and would maintain that, taken by themselves, they would never enable a detective to solve a problem. Then he would tap his egg-shaped head with absurd complacency, and remark with great satisfaction: 'The true work, it is done from *within*. *The little grey cells* – remember always the little grey cells, *mon ami*.'

I slipped into my seat, and remarked idly, in answer to Poirot's greeting, that an hour's sea passage from Calais to Dover could hardly be dignified by the epithet 'terrible'.

'Anything interesting come by the post?' I asked.

Poirot shook his head with a dissatisfied air.

'I have not yet examined my letters, but nothing of interest arrives nowadays. The great criminals, the criminals of method, they do not exist.'

He shook his head despondently, and I roared with laughter.

'Cheer up, Poirot, the luck will change. Open your letters. For all you know, there may be a great case looming on the horizon.'

Poirot smiled, and taking up the neat little letter opener with which he opened his correspondence he slit the tops of the several envelopes that lay by his plate.

'A bill. Another bill. It is that I grow extravagant in my old age. Aha! a note from Japp.'

'Yes?' I pricked up my ears. The Scotland Yard Inspector had more than once introduced us to an interesting case.

'He merely thanks me (in his fashion) for a little point in the Aberystwyth Case on which I was able to set him right. I am delighted to have been of service to him.'

Poirot continued to read his correspondence placidly.

'A suggestion that I should give a lecture to our local Boy Scouts. The Countess of Forfanock will be obliged if I will call and see her. Another lap-dog without doubt! And now for the last. Ah -'

I looked up, quick to notice the change of tone. Poirot was reading attentively. In a minute he tossed the sheet over to me.

'This is out of the ordinary, *mon ami*. Read for yourself.'

The letter was written on a foreign type of paper, in a bold characteristic hand:

VILLA GENEVIÈVE,
MERLINVILLE-SUR-MER,
FRANCE.

Dear Sir, - I am in need of the services of a detective and, for reasons which I will give you later, do not wish to call in the official police. I have heard of you from several quarters, and all reports go to show that you are not only a

man of decided ability, but one who also knows how to be discreet. I do not wish to trust details to the post, but, on account of a secret I possess, I go in daily fear of my life. I am convinced that the danger is imminent, and therefore I beg that you will lose no time in crossing to France, I will send a car to meet you at Calais, if you will wire me when you are arriving. I shall be obliged if you will drop all cases you have on hand, and devote yourself solely to my interests. I am prepared to pay any compensation necessary. I shall probably need your services for a considerable period of time, as it may be necessary for you to go out to Santiago, where I spent several years of my life. I shall be content for you to name your own fee.

Assuring you once more that the matter is *urgent*.

Yours faithfully,

P. T. RENAULD.

Below the signature was a hastily scrawled line, almost illegible:

'For God's sake, come!'

I handed the letter back with quickened pulses.

'At last!' I said. 'Here is something distinctly out of the ordinary.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Poirot meditatively.

'You will go of course,' I continued.

Poirot nodded. He was thinking deeply. Finally he seemed to make up his mind, and glanced up at the clock. His face was very grave.

'See you, my friend, there is no time to lose. The Continental express leaves Victoria at 11 o'clock. Do not agitate yourself. There is plenty of time. We can allow ten minutes for discussion. You accompany me, *n'est-ce pas?*'

'Well -'

'You told me yourself that your employer needed you not for the next few weeks.'

'Oh, that's all right. But this Mr Renauld hints strongly that his business is private.'

'Ta-ta-ta! I will manage M. Renault. By the way, I seem to know the name?'

'There's a well-known South American millionaire fellow. His name's Renault. I don't know whether it could be the same.'

'But without doubt. That explains the mention of Santiago. Santiago is in Chile, and Chile it is in South America! Ah; but we progress finely! You remarked the postscript? How did it strike you?'

I considered.

'Clearly he wrote the letter keeping himself well in hand, but at the end his self-control snapped and, on the impulse of the moment, he scrawled those four desperate words.'

But my friend shook his head energetically.

'You are in error. See you not that while the ink of the signature is nearly black, that of the postscript is quite pale?'

'Well?' I said, puzzled.

'*Mon Dieu, mon ami*, but use your little grey cells. Is it not obvious? Mr Renault wrote his letter. Without blotting it, he re-read it carefully. Then, not on impulse, but deliberately, he added those last words, and blotted the sheet.'

'But why?'

'*Parbleu!* so that it should produce the effect upon me that it has upon you.'

'What?'

'*Mais oui* - to make sure of my coming! He re-read the letter and was dissatisfied. It was not strong enough!'

He paused, and then added softly, his eyes shining with that green light that always betokened inward excitement:

'And so, *mon ami*, since that postscript was added, not on impulse, but soberly, in cold blood, the urgency is very great, and we must reach him as soon as possible.'

'Merlinville,' I murmured thoughtfully. 'I've heard of it, I think.'

Poirot nodded.