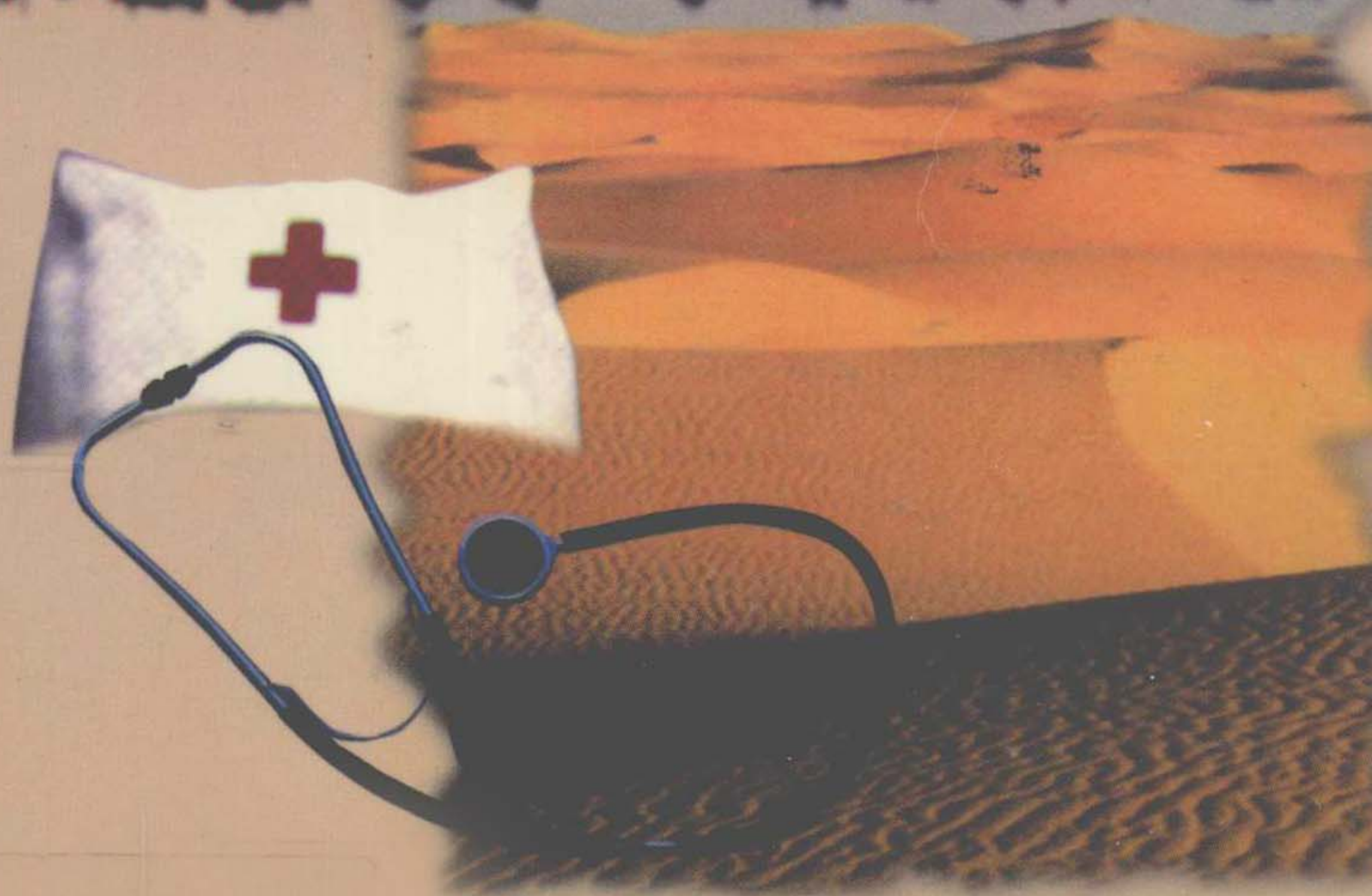


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MURDER IN MESOPOTAMIA



Agatha Christie

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Murder in Mesopotamia

AGATHA CHRISTIE

MURDER IN
MESOPOTAMIA



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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FOREWORD

By Giles Reilly, M.D.

The events chronicled in this narrative took place some four years ago. Circumstances have rendered it necessary, in my opinion, that a straightforward account of them should be given to the public. There have been the wildest and most ridiculous rumours suggesting that important evidence was suppressed and other nonsense of that kind. Those misconstructions have appeared more especially in the American Press.

For obvious reasons it was desirable that the account should not come from the pen of one of the expedition staff, who might reasonably be supposed to be prejudiced.

I therefore suggested to Miss Amy Leatheran that she should undertake the task. She is obviously the person to do it. She had a professional character of the highest, she is not biased by having any previous connection with the University of Pittstown Expedition to Iraq and she was an observant and intellectual eye-witness.

It was not very easy to persuade Miss Leatheran to undertake this task – in fact, persuading her was one of the hardest jobs of my professional career – and even after it was completed she displayed a curious reluctance to let me see the manuscript. I discovered that this was partly due to some critical remarks she had made concerning my daughter Sheila. I soon disposed of that, assuring her that as children criticize their parents freely in print nowadays, parents are only too delighted when their offspring come in for their share of abuse! Her other objection was extreme modesty about her literary style. She hoped I would ‘put the grammar right and all that.’ I have, on the contrary, refused to alter so much as a single word. Miss Leatheran’s style in my opinion is vigorous,

individual and entirely apposite. If she calls Hercule Poirot 'Poirot' in one paragraph and 'Mr Poirot' in the next, such a variation is both interesting and suggestive. At one moment she is, so to speak, 'remembering her manners' (and hospital nurses are great sticklers for etiquette) and at the next her interest in what she is telling is that of a pure human being – cap and cuffs forgotten!

The only thing I have done is to take the liberty of writing a first chapter – aided by a letter kindly supplied by one of Miss Leatheran's friends. It is intended to be in the nature of a frontispiece – that is, it gives a rough sketch of the narrator.

CHAPTER 1

Frontispiece

In the hall of the Tigris Palace Hotel in Baghdad a hospital nurse was finishing a letter. Her fountain-pen drove briskly over the paper.

...Well, dear, I think that's really all my news. I must say it's been nice to see a bit of the world – though England for me every time, thank you. The *dirt* and the *mess* in Baghdad you wouldn't believe – and not romantic at all like you'd think from the *Arabian Nights*! Of course, it's pretty just on the river, but the town itself is just awful – and no proper shops at all. Major Kelsey took me through the bazaars, and of course there's no denying they're *quaint* – but just a lot of rubbish and hammering away at copper pans till they make your head ache – and not what I'd like to use myself unless I was sure about the cleaning. You've got to be so careful of verdigris with copper pans.

I'll write and let you know if anything comes of the job that Dr Reilly spoke about. He said this American gentleman was in Baghdad now and might come and see me this afternoon. It's for his wife – she has 'fancies,' so Dr Reilly said. He didn't say any more than that, and of course, dear, one knows what that *usually means* (but I hope not actually D.T.s!). Of course, Dr Reilly didn't *say* anything – but he had a look – if you know what I mean. This Dr Leidner is an archaeologist and is digging up a mound out in the desert somewhere for some American museum.

Well, dear, I will close now. I thought what you told me about little Stubbins was simply *killing*! Whatever did Matron say?

No more now.

Yours ever,

AMY LEATHERAN

Enclosing the letter in an envelope, she addressed it to Sister Curshaw, St Christopher's Hospital, London.

As she put the cap on her fountain-pen, one of the native boys approached her.

'A gentleman come to see you. Dr Leidner.'

Nurse Leatheran turned. She saw a man of middle height with slightly stooping shoulders, a brown beard and gentle, tired eyes.

Dr Leidner saw a woman of thirty-five, of erect, confident bearing. He saw a good-humoured face with slightly prominent blue eyes and glossy brown hair. She looked, he thought, just what a hospital nurse for a nervous case ought to look. Cheerful, robust, shrewd and matter-of-fact.

Nurse Leatheran, he thought, would do.

CHAPTER 2

Introducing Amy Leatheran

I don't pretend to be an author or to know anything about writing. I'm doing this simply because Dr Reilly asked me to, and somehow when Dr Reilly asks you to do a thing you don't like to refuse.

'Oh, but, doctor,' I said, 'I'm not literary – not literary at all.'

'Nonsense!' he said. 'Treat it as case notes, if you like.'

Well, of course, you *can* look at it that way.

Dr Reilly went on. He said that an unvarnished plain account of the Tell Yarimjah business was badly needed.

'If one of the interested parties writes it, it won't carry conviction. They'll say it's biased one way or another.'

And of course that was true, too. I was in it all and yet an outsider, so to speak.

‘Why don’t you write it yourself, doctor?’ I asked.

‘I wasn’t on the spot – you were. Besides,’ he added with a sigh, ‘my daughter won’t let me.’

The way he knuckles under to that chit of a girl of his is downright disgraceful. I had half a mind to say so, when I saw that his eyes were twinkling. That was the worst of Dr Reilly. You never knew whether he was joking or not. He always said things in the same slow melancholy way – but half the time there was a twinkle underneath it.

‘Well,’ I said doubtfully, ‘I suppose I *could*.’

‘Of course you could.’

‘Only I don’t quite know how to set about it.’

‘There’s a good precedent for that. Begin at the beginning, go on to the end and then leave off.’

‘I don’t even know quite where and what the beginning was,’ I said doubtfully.

‘Believe me, nurse, the difficulty of beginning will be nothing to the difficulty of knowing how to stop. At least that’s the way it is with me when I have to make a speech. Someone’s got to catch hold of my coat-tails and pull me down by main force.’

‘Oh, you’re joking, doctor.’

‘It’s profoundly serious I am. Now what about it?’

Another thing was worrying me. After hesitating a moment or two I said: ‘You know, doctor, I’m afraid I might tend to be – well, a little *personal* sometimes.’

‘God bless my soul, woman, the more personal you are the better! This is a story of human beings – not dummies! Be personal – be prejudiced – be catty – be anything you please! Write the thing your own way. We can always prune out the bits that are libellous afterwards! You go ahead. You’re a sensible woman, and you’ll give a sensible common-sense account of the business.’

So that was that, and I promised to do my best.

And here I am beginning, but as I said to the doctor, it’s difficult to know just where to start.

I suppose I ought to say a word or two about myself. I'm thirty-two and my name is Amy Leatheran. I took my training at St Christopher's and after that did two years maternity. I did a certain amount of private work and I was for four years at Miss Bendix's Nursing Home in Devonshire Place. I came out to Iraq with a Mrs Kelsey. I'd attended her when her baby was born. She was coming out to Baghdad with her husband and had already got a children's nurse booked who had been for some years with friends of hers out there. Their children were coming home and going to school, and the nurse had agreed to go to Mrs Kelsey when they left. Mrs Kelsey was delicate and nervous about the journey out with so young a child, so Major Kelsey arranged that I should come out with her and look after her and the baby. They would pay my passage home unless we found someone needing a nurse for the return journey.

Well, there is no need to describe the Kelseys – the baby was a little love and Mrs Kelsey quite nice, though rather the fretting kind. I enjoyed the voyage very much. I'd never been a long trip on the sea before.

Dr Reilly was on board the boat. He was a black-haired, long-faced man who said all sorts of funny things in a low, sad voice. I think he enjoyed pulling my leg and used to make the most extraordinary statements to see if I would swallow them. He was the civil surgeon at a place called Hassanieh – a day and a half's journey from Baghdad.

I had been about a week in Baghdad when I ran across him and he asked when I was leaving the Kelseys. I said that it was funny his asking that because as a matter of fact the Wrights (the other people I mentioned) were going home earlier than they had meant to and their nurse was free to come straightaway.

He said that he had heard about the Wrights and that that was why he had asked me.

'As a matter of fact, nurse, I've got a possible job for you.'

'A case?'

He screwed his face up as though considering.

'You could hardly call it a case. It's just a lady who has – shall we say – fancies?'

'Oh!' I said.

(One usually knows what *that* means – drink or drugs!)

Dr Reilly didn't explain further. He was very discreet. 'Yes,' he said. 'A Mrs Leidner. Husband's an American – an American Swede to be exact. He's the head of a large American dig.'

And he explained how this expedition was excavating the site of a big Assyrian city something like Nineveh. The expedition house was not actually very far from Hassanieh, but it was a lonely spot and Dr Leidner had been worried for some time about his wife's health.

'He's not been very explicit about it, but it seems she has these fits of recurring nervous terrors.'

'Is she left alone all day amongst natives?' I asked.

'Oh, no, there's quite a crowd – seven or eight. I don't fancy she's ever been alone in the house. But there seems to be no doubt that she's worked herself up into a queer state. Leidner has any amount of work on his shoulders, but he's crazy about his wife and it worries him to know she's in this state. He felt he'd be happier if he knew that some responsible person with expert knowledge was keeping an eye on her.'

'And what does Mrs Leidner herself think about it?'

Dr Reilly answered gravely:

'Mrs Leidner is a very lovely lady. She's seldom of the same mind about anything two days on end. But on the whole she favours the idea.' He added, 'She's an odd woman. A mass of affection and, I should fancy, a champion liar – but Leidner seems honestly to believe that she is scared out of her life by something or other.'

'What did she herself say to you, doctor?'

'Oh, she hasn't consulted me! She doesn't like me anyway – for several reasons. It was Leidner who came to me and propounded this plan. Well, nurse, what do you think of the idea? You'd see something of the country before you go home

- they'll be digging for another two months. And excavation is quite interesting work.'

After a moment's hesitation while I turned the matter over in my mind: 'Well,' I said, 'I really think I might try it.'

'Splendid,' said Dr Reilly, rising. 'Leidner's in Baghdad now. I'll tell him to come round and see if he can fix things up with you.'

Dr Leidner came to the hotel that afternoon. He was a middle-aged man with a rather nervous, hesitating manner. There was something gentle and kindly and rather helpless about him.

He sounded very devoted to his wife, but he was very vague about what was the matter with her.

'You see,' he said, tugging at his beard in a rather perplexed manner that I later came to know to be characteristic of him, 'my wife is really in a very nervous state. I - I'm quite worried about her.'

'She is in good physical health?' I asked.

'Yes - oh, yes, I think so. No, I should not think there was anything the matter with her physically. But she - well - imagines things, you know.'

'What kind of things?' I asked.

But he shied off from the point, merely murmuring perplexedly: 'She works herself up over nothing at all ... I really can see no foundations for these fears.'

'Fears of what, Dr Leidner?'

He said vaguely, 'Oh, just - nervous terrors, you know.'

Ten to one, I thought to myself, it's drugs. And he doesn't realize it! Lots of men don't. Just wonder why their wives are so jumpy and have such extraordinary changes of mood.

I asked whether Mrs Leidner herself approved of the idea of my coming.

His face lighted up.

'Yes. I was surprised. Most pleurably surprised. She said it was a very good idea. She said she would feel very much safer.'

The word struck me oddly. *Safer*. A very queer word to use. I began to surmise that Mrs Leidner might be a mental case.

He went on with a kind of boyish eagerness.

'I'm sure you'll get on very well with her. She's really a very charming woman.' He smiled disarmingly. 'She feels you'll be the greatest comfort to her. I felt the same as soon as I saw you. You look, if you will allow me to say so, so splendidly healthy and full of common sense. I'm sure you're just the person for Louise.'

'Well, we can but try, Dr Leidner,' I said cheerfully. 'I'm sure I hope I can be of use to your wife. Perhaps she's nervous of natives and coloured people?'

'Oh, dear me no.' He shook his head, amused at the idea. 'My wife likes Arabs very much – she appreciates their simplicity and their sense of humour. This is only her second season – we have been married less than two years – but she already speaks quite a fair amount of Arabic.'

I was silent for a moment or two, then I had one more try.

'Can't you tell me at all what it is your wife is afraid of, Dr Leidner?' I asked.

He hesitated. Then he said slowly, 'I hope – I believe – that she will tell you that herself.'

And that's all I could get out of him.

CHAPTER 3

Gossip

It was arranged that I should go to Tell Yarimjah the following week.

Mrs Kelsey was settling into her house at Alwiyah, and I was glad to be able to take a few things off her shoulders.

During that time I heard one or two allusions to the Leidner expedition. A friend of Mrs Kelsey's, a young squadron-leader, pursed his lips in surprise as he exclaimed: 'Lovely Louise. So that's her latest!' He turned to me. 'That's our nickname for her, nurse. She's always known as Lovely Louise.'

'Is she so very handsome then?' I asked.

'It's taking her at her own valuation. *She* thinks she is!'

'Now don't be spiteful, John,' said Mrs Kelsey. 'You know it's not only she who thinks so! Lots of people have been very smitten by her.'

'Perhaps you're right. She's a bit long in the tooth, but she has a certain attraction.'

'You were completely bowled over yourself,' said Mrs Kelsey, laughing.

The squadron-leader blushed and admitted rather shamefacedly: 'Well, she has a way with her. As for Leidner himself, he worships the ground she walks on – and all the rest of the expedition has to worship too! It's expected of them!'

'How many are there altogether?' I asked.

'All sorts and nationalities, nurse,' said the squadron-leader cheerfully. 'An English architect, a French Father from Carthage – he does the inscriptions – tablets and things, you know. And then there's Miss Johnson. She's English too – sort of general bottle-washer. And a little plump man who does the photography – he's an American. And the Mercados. Heaven knows what nationality they are – Dagos of some kind! She's quite young – a snaky-looking creature – and oh! doesn't she hate Lovely Louise! And there are a couple of youngsters and that's the lot. A few odd fish, but nice on the whole – don't you agree, Pennyman?'

He was appealing to an elderly man who was sitting thoughtfully twirling a pair of pince-nez.

The latter started and looked up.

'Yes – yes – very nice indeed. Taken individually, that is. Of course, Mercado is rather a queer fish –'