

БИЛИНГВА BESTSELLER

DEATH
ON THE NILE

Agatha Christie

СМЕРТЬ
НА НИЛЕ

Агата Кристи



Билингва Bestseller

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Смерть на Ниле / Death on the Nile

«ЭКСМО»

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На роскошном пароходе «Карнак», плывущем по Нилу, убита молодая миллионерша, недавно вышедшая замуж и, как выяснилось, имевшая множество врагов среди пассажиров. Любой мог убить самоуверенную и нагловатую девушку, укравшую жениха у лучшей подруги. Но ни один из вероятных подозреваемых не совершал этого преступления... К счастью, на пароходе находится великий сыщик Эркюль Пуаро, который знает все общество, представленное в круизе, еще по Лондону и в курсе возможных мотивов каждого из присутствующих. И, конечно, первое, о чем задумывается бельгиец, — это о «любовном треугольнике», состоявшем из убитой, ее свежеиспеченного мужа и очень темпераментной женщины, которую тот бросил ради миллионерши... В формате PDF A4 сохранен издательский макет книги.

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Смерть на Ниле / Death on the Nile

Agatha Christie

Death on the Nile

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Agatha Christie

Death on the Nile

To SYBIL BURNETT

who also loves wandering about the world

Part one

England

Chapter 1

‘Linnet Ridgeway!’

‘That’s *Her!*’ said Mr Burnaby, the landlord of the Three Crowns. He nudged his companion. The two men stared with round bucolic eyes and slightly open mouths. A big scarlet Rolls-Royce had just stopped in front of the local post office. A girl jumped out, a girl without a hat and wearing a frock that looked (but only *looked*) simple. A girl with golden hair and straight autocratic features – a girl with a lovely shape – a girl such as was seldom seen in Malton-under-Wode.

With a quick imperative step she passed into the post office.

‘That’s her!’ said Mr Burnaby again. And he went on in a low awed voice: ‘Millions she’s got... Going to spend thousands on the place. Swimming-pools there’s going to be, and Italian gardens and a ballroom and half of the house pulled down and rebuilt...’

‘She’ll bring money into the town,’ said his friend. He was a lean, seedy-looking man. His tone was envious and grudging.

Mr Burnaby agreed.

‘Yes, it’s a great thing for Malton-under-Wode. A great thing it is.’ Mr Burnaby was complacent about it. ‘Wake us all up proper,’ he added.

‘Bit of difference from Sir George,’ said the other.

‘Ah, it was the ’orses did for him,’ said Mr Burnaby indulgently. ‘Never ’ad no luck.’

‘What did he get for the place?’

‘A cool sixty thousand, so I’ve heard.’

The lean man whistled.

Mr Burnaby went on triumphantly:

‘And they say she’ll have spent another sixty thousand before she’s finished!’

‘Wicked!’ said the lean man. ‘Where’d she *get* all that money from?’

‘America, so I’ve heard. Her mother was the only daughter of one of those millionaire blokes. Quite like the pictures, isn’t it?’

The girl came out of the post office and climbed into the car. As she drove off, the lean man followed her with his eyes.

He muttered:

‘It seems all wrong to me – her looking like that. Money *and* looks – it’s too much! If a girl’s as rich as that she’s no right to be a good-looker as well. And she *is* a good-looker... Got everything, that girl has. Doesn’t seem fair...’

Chapter 2

Extract from the social column of the *Daily Blague*.

Among those supping at Chez Ma Tante I noticed beautiful Linnet Ridgeway. She was with the Hon. Joanna Southwood, Lord Windlesham and Mr Toby Bryce. Miss Ridgeway, as everyone knows, is the daughter of Melhuish Ridgeway who married Anna Hartz. She inherits from her grandfather, Leopold Hartz, an immense fortune. The lovely Linnet is the sensation of the moment and it is rumoured that an engagement may be announced shortly. Certainly Lord Windlesham seemed very épris!

Chapter 3

The Hon. Joanna Southwood said:

‘Darling, I think it’s going to be all perfectly *marvellous*!’

She was sitting in Linnet Ridgeway’s bedroom at Wode Hall. From the window the eye passed over the gardens to open country with blue shadows of woodlands.

‘It’s rather perfect, isn’t it?’ said Linnet.

She leaned her arms on the window sill. Her face was eager, alive, dynamic. Beside her, Joanna Southwood seemed, somehow, a little dim – a tall thin young woman of twenty-seven, with a long clever face and freakishly plucked eyebrows.

‘And you’ve done so much in the time! Did you have lots of architects and things?’

‘Three.’

‘What are architects like? I don’t think I’ve ever seen any.’

‘They were all right. I found them rather impractical sometimes.’

‘Darling, you soon put *that* right! You are the *most* practical creature!’ Joanna picked up a string of pearls from the dressing table. ‘I suppose these are real, aren’t they, Linnet?’

‘Of course.’

‘I know it’s “of course” to you, my sweet, but it wouldn’t be to most people. Heavily cultured or even Woolworth! Darling, they really are *incredible*, so exquisitely matched. They must be worth the *most* fabulous sums!’

‘Rather vulgar, you think?’

‘No, not at all – just pure beauty. What *are* they worth?’

‘About fifty thousand.’

‘What a lovely lot of money! Aren’t you afraid of having them stolen?’

‘No, I always wear them – and anyway they’re insured.’

‘Let me wear them till dinnertime, will you, darling? It would give me such a thrill.’

Linnet laughed.

‘Of course, if you like.’

‘You know, Linnet, I really do envy you. You’ve simply got *everything*. Here you are at twenty, your own mistress, with any amount of money, looks, superb health. You’ve even got *brains*! When are you twenty-one?’

‘Next June. I shall have a grand coming-of-age party in London.’

‘And then are you going to marry Charles Windlesham? All the dreadful little gossip writers are getting so excited about it. And he really is frightfully devoted.’

Linnet shrugged her shoulders.

'I don't know. I don't really want to marry anyone yet.'

'Darling, how right you are! It's never quite the same afterwards, is it?'

The telephone shrilled and Linnet went to it.

'Yes? Yes?'

The butler's voice answered her.

'Miss de Bellefort is on the line. Shall I put her through?'

'Bellefort? Oh, of course, yes, put her through.'

A click and a voice, an eager, soft, slightly breathless voice.

'Hullo, is that Miss Ridgeway? *Linnet!*'

'*Jackie darling!* I haven't heard anything of you for ages and *ages!*'

'I know. It's awful. Linnet, I want to see you terribly.'

'Darling, can't you come down here? My new toy. I'd love to show it to you.'

'That's just what I want to do.'

'Well, jump into a train or a car.'

'Right, I will. A frightfully dilapidated two-seater. I bought it for fifteen pounds, and some days it goes beautifully. But it has moods. If I haven't arrived by tea-time you'll know it's had a mood. So long, my sweet.'

Linnet replaced the receiver. She crossed back to Joanna.

'That's my oldest friend, Jacqueline de Bellefort. We were together at a convent in Paris. She's had the most terribly bad luck. Her father was a French Count, her mother was American – a Southerner. The father went off with some woman, and her mother lost all her money in the Wall Street crash. Jackie was left absolutely broke. I don't know how she's managed to get along the last two years.'

Joanna was polishing her deep blood-coloured nails with her friend's nail pad. She leant back with her head on one side scrutinizing the effect.

'Darling,' she drawled, 'won't that be rather *tiresome*? If any misfortunes happen to my friends I always drop them *at once!* It sounds heartless, but it saves such a lot of trouble later! They always want to borrow money off you, or else they start a dressmaking business and you have to get the most terrible clothes from them. Or they paint lampshades, or do batik scarves.'

'So, if I lost all my money, you'd drop me tomorrow?'

'Yes, darling, I would. You can't say I'm not honest about it! I only like successful people. And you'll find that's true of nearly everybody – only most people won't admit it. They just say that really they "can't put up with Mary or Emily or Pamela any more! Her troubles have made her so *bitter* and peculiar, poor dear!"'

'How beastly you are, Joanna!'

'I'm only on the make, like everyone else.'

'*I'm* not on the make!'

'For obvious reasons! You don't have to be sordid when good-looking, middle-aged American trustees pay you over a vast allowance every quarter.'

'And you're wrong about Jacqueline,' said Linnet. 'She's not a sponge. I've wanted to help her, but she won't let me. She's as proud as the devil.'

'What's she in such a hurry to see you for? I'll bet she wants something! You just wait and see.'

'She sounded excited about something,' admitted Linnet. 'Jackie always did get frightfully worked up over things. She once stuck a penknife into someone!'

'Darling, how thrilling!'

‘A boy who was teasing a dog. Jackie tried to get him to stop. He wouldn’t. She pulled him and shook him but he was much emphasiser than she was, and at last she whipped out a penknife and plunged it right into him. There was the *most* awful row!’

‘I should think so. It sounds most uncomfortable!’

Linnet’s maid entered the room. With a murmured word of apology, she took down a dress from the wardrobe and went out of the room with it.

‘What’s the matter with Marie?’ asked Joanna. ‘She’s been crying.’

‘Poor thing! You know I told you she wanted to marry a man who has a job in Egypt. She didn’t know much about him, so I thought I’d better make sure he was all right. It turned out that he had a wife already – and three children.’

‘What a lot of enemies you must make, Linnet.’

‘Enemies?’ Linnet looked surprised.

Joanna nodded and helped herself to a cigarette.

‘Enemies, my sweet. You’re so devastatingly efficient. And you’re so frightfully good at doing the right thing.’

Linnet laughed.

‘Why, I haven’t got an enemy in the world.’

Chapter 4

Lord Windlesham sat under the cedar tree. His eyes rested on the graceful proportions of Wode Hall. There was nothing to mar its old-world beauty; the new buildings and additions were out of sight round the corner. It was a fair and peaceful sight bathed in the autumn sunshine. Nevertheless, as he gazed, it was no longer Wode Hall that Charles Windlesham saw. Instead, he seemed to see a more imposing Elizabethan mansion, a long sweep of park, a bleaker background... It was his own family seat, Charltonbury, and in the foreground stood a figure – a girl’s figure, with bright golden hair and an eager confident face... Linnet as mistress of Charltonbury!

He felt very hopeful. That refusal of hers had not been at all a definite refusal. It had been little more than a plea for time. Well, he could afford to wait a little...

How amazingly suitable the whole thing was. It was certainly advisable that he should marry money, but not such a matter of necessity that he could regard himself as forced to put his own feelings on one side. And he loved Linnet. He would have wanted to marry her even if she had been practically penniless, instead of one of the richest girls in England. Only, fortunately, she *was* one of the richest girls in England...

His mind played with attractive plans for the future. The Mastership of the Roxdale perhaps, the restoration of the west wing, no need to let the Scotch shooting...

Charles Windlesham dreamed in the sun.

Chapter 5

It was four o’clock when the dilapidated little two-seater stopped with a sound of crunching gravel. A girl got out of it – a small slender creature with a mop of dark hair. She ran up the steps and tugged at the bell.

A few minutes later she was being ushered into the long stately drawing room, and an ecclesiastical butler was saying with the proper mournful intonation:

‘Miss de Bellefort.’

‘Linnet!’

‘Jackie!’

Windlesham stood a little aside, watching sympathetically as this fiery little creature flung herself open-armed upon Linnet.

‘Lord Windlesham – Miss de Bellefort – my best friend.’

A pretty child, he thought – not really pretty but decidedly attractive with her dark curly hair and her enormous eyes. He murmured a few tactful nothings and then managed unobtrusively to leave the two friends together.

Jacqueline pounced – in a fashion that Linnet remembered as being characteristic of her.

‘Windlesham? Windlesham? *That’s* the man the papers always say you’re going to marry! Are you, Linnet? *Are* you?’

Linnet murmured:

‘Perhaps.’

‘Darling – I’m so glad! He looks nice.’

‘Oh, don’t make up your mind about it – I haven’t made up my own mind yet.’

‘Of course not! Queens always proceed with due deliberation to the choosing of a consort!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Jackie.’

‘But you *are* a queen, Linnet! You always were. *Sa Majesté, la reine Linette. Linette la blonde!* And I–I’m the Queen’s confidante! The trusted Maid of Honour.’

‘What nonsense you talk, Jackie darling! Where have you been all this time? You just disappear. And you never write.’

‘I hate writing letters. Where have I been? Oh, about three parts submerged, darling. In JOBS, you know. Grim jobs with grim women!’

‘Darling, I wish you’d-’

‘Take the Queen’s bounty? Well, frankly, darling, that’s what I’m here for. No, not to borrow money. It’s not got to that yet! But I’ve come to ask a great big important favour!’

‘Go on.’

‘If you’re going to marry the Windlesham man, you’ll understand, perhaps.’

Linnet looked puzzled for a minute, then her face cleared.

‘Jackie, do you mean-?’

‘Yes, darling, *I’m engaged!*’

‘So that’s it! I thought you were looking particularly alive somehow. You always do, of course, but even more than usual.’

‘That’s just what I feel like.’

‘Tell me all about him.’

‘His name’s Simon Doyle. He’s big and square and incredibly simple and boyish and utterly adorable! He’s poor – got no money. He’s what you call “county” all right – but very impoverished county – a younger son and all that. His people come from Devonshire. He loves the country and country things. And for the last five years he’s been in the City in a stuffy office. And now they’re cutting down and he’s out of a job. Linnet, I shall *die* if I can’t marry him! I shall die! I shall die! I shall *die*...!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Jackie.’

‘I shall die, I tell you! I’m crazy about him. He’s crazy about me. We can’t live without each other.’

‘Darling, you *have* got it badly!’

‘I know. It’s awful, isn’t it? This love business gets hold of you and you can’t do anything about it.’

She paused for a minute. Her dark eyes dilated, looked suddenly tragic. She gave a little shiver.

‘It’s – even frightening sometimes! Simon and I were made for each other. I shall never care for anyone else. And *you’ve* got to help us, Linnet. I heard you’d bought this place and it put an idea into my head. Listen, you’ll have to have a land agent – perhaps two. I want you to give the job to Simon.’

‘Oh!’ Linnet was startled.

Jacqueline rushed on.

‘He’s got all that sort of thing at his fingertips. He knows all about estates – was brought up on one. And he’s got his business training too. Oh, Linnet, you will give him a job, won’t you, for love of me? If he doesn’t make good, sack him. But he will. And we can live in a little house and I shall see lots of you and everything in the garden will be too, too divine.’ She got up. ‘Say you will, Linnet. Say you will. Beautiful Linnet! Tall golden Linnet! My own very special Linnet! Say you will!’

‘Jackie-’

‘You will?’

Linnet burst out laughing.

‘Ridiculous Jackie! Bring along your young man and let me have a look at him and we’ll talk it over.’

Jackie darted at her, kissing her exuberantly.

‘*Darling Linnet* – you’re a real friend! I knew you were. You wouldn’t let me down – ever. You’re just the loveliest thing in the world. Goodbye.’

‘But, Jackie, you’re *staying*.’

‘Me? No, I’m not. I’m going back to London and tomorrow I’ll come back and bring Simon and we’ll settle it all up. You’ll adore him. He really is a *pet*.’

‘But can’t you wait and just have tea?’

‘No, I can’t wait, Linnet. I’m too excited. I must get back and tell Simon. I know I’m mad, darling, but I can’t help it. Marriage will cure me, I expect. It always seems to have a very sobering effect on people.’ She turned at the door, stood a moment, then rushed back for a last quick birdlike embrace. ‘Dear Linnet – there’s no one like you.’

Chapter 6

M. Gaston Blondin, the proprietor of that modish little restaurant Chez Ma Tante, was not a man who delighted to honour many of his clientele. The rich, the beautiful, the notorious and the well-born might wait in vain to be singled out and paid special attention. Only in the rarest cases did M. Blondin, with gracious condescension, greet a guest, accompany him to a privileged table, and exchange with him suitable and apposite remarks.

On this particular night, M. Blondin had exercised his royal prerogative three times – once for a Duchess, once for a famous racing peer, and once for a little man of comical appearance with immense black moustaches and who, a casual onlooker would have thought, could bestow no favour on Chez Ma Tante by his presence there.

M. Blondin, however, was positively fulsome in his attentions. Though clients had been told for the last half hour that a table was not to be had, one now mysteriously appeared, placed in a most favourable position. M. Blondin conducted the client to it with every appearance of *empressement*.

‘But naturally, for *you* there is *always* a table, Monsieur Poirot! How I wish that you would honour us oftener!’

Hercule Poirot smiled, remembering that past incident wherein a dead body, a waiter, M. Blondin, and a very lovely lady had played a part.

‘You are too amiable, Monsieur Blondin,’ he said.

‘And you are alone, Monsieur Poirot?’

‘Yes, I am alone.’

‘Oh, well, Jules here will compose for you a little meal that will be a poem – positively a poem! Women, however charming, have this disadvantage: they distract the mind from food! You will enjoy your dinner, Monsieur Poirot, I promise you that. Now as to wine-’

A technical conversation ensued, Jules, the *maître d’hotel*, assisting.

Before departing, M. Blondin lingered a moment, lowering his voice confidentially.

‘You have grave affairs on hand?’

Poirot shook his head.

‘I am, alas, a man of leisure,’ he said softly. ‘I have made the economies in my time and I have now the means to enjoy the life of idleness.’

‘I envy you.’

‘No, no, you would be unwise to do so. I can assure you, it is not so gay as it sounds.’ He sighed. ‘How true is the saying that man was forced to invent work in order to escape the strain of having to think.’

M. Blondin threw up his hands.

‘But there is so much! There is travel!’

‘Yes, there is travel. Already I have done not so badly. This winter I shall visit Egypt, I think. The climate, they say, is superb! One will escape from the fogs, the greyness, the monotony of the constantly falling rain.’

‘Ah! Egypt,’ breathed M. Blondin.

‘One can even voyage there now, I believe, by train, escaping all sea travel except the Channel.’

‘Ah, the sea, it does not agree with you?’

Hercule Poirot shook his head and shuddered slightly.

‘I, too,’ said M. Blondin with sympathy. ‘Curious the effect it has upon the stomach.’

‘But only upon certain stomachs! There are people on whom the motion makes no impression whatever. They actually *enjoy* it!’

‘An unfairness of the good God,’ said M. Blondin. He shook his head sadly, and, brooding on the impious thought, withdrew.

Smooth-footed, deft-handed waiters ministered to the table. Toast Melba, butter, an ice pail, all the adjuncts to a meal of quality.

The orchestra broke into an ecstasy of strange discordant noises. London danced.

Hercule Poirot looked on, registered impressions in his neat orderly mind.

How bored and weary most of the faces were! Some of those stout men, however, were enjoying themselves... whereas a patient endurance seemed to be the sentiment exhibited on their partners’ faces. The fat woman in purple was looking radiant... Undoubtedly the fat had certain compensations in life... a zest – a gusto – denied to those of more fashionable contours.

A good sprinkling of young people – some vacant-looking – some bored – some definitely unhappy. How absurd to call youth the time of happiness – youth, the time of greatest vulnerability!

His glance softened as it rested on one particular couple. A well-matched pair – tall broad-shouldered man, slender delicate girl. Two bodies that moved in a perfect rhythm of happiness. Happiness in the place, the hour, and in each other.

The dance stopped abruptly. Hands clapped and it started again. After a second encore the couple returned to their table close by Poirot. The girl was flushed, laughing. As she sat, he could study her face as it was lifted laughing to her companion.

There was something else beside laughter in her eyes. Hercule Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

'She cares too much, that little one,' he said to himself. 'It is not safe. No, it is not safe.'

And then a word caught his ear. Egypt.

Their voices came to him clearly – the girl's young, fresh, arrogant, with just a trace of soft-sounding for-eign Rs, and the man's pleasant, low-toned, well-bred English.

'I'm *not* counting my chickens before they're hatched, Simon. I tell you Linnet won't let us down!'

'I might let *her* down.'

'Nonsense – it's just the right job for you.'

'As a matter of fact I think it is... I haven't really any doubts as to my capability. And I mean to make good – for *your* sake!'

The girl laughed softly, a laugh of pure happiness.

'We'll wait three months – to make sure you don't get the sack – and then-'

'And then I'll endow thee with my worldly goods – that's the hang of it, isn't it?'

'And, as I say, we'll go to Egypt for our honeymoon. Damn the expense! I've always wanted to go to Egypt all my life. The Nile and the Pyramids and the sand...'

He said, his voice slightly indistinct:

'We'll see it together, Jackie... together. Won't it be marvellous?'

'I wonder. Will it be as marvellous to you as it is to me? Do you really care – as much as I do?'

Her voice was suddenly sharp – her eyes dilated – almost with fear.

The man's answer came with an equal sharpness:

'Don't be absurd, Jackie.'

But the girl repeated: 'I wonder...' Then she shrugged her shoulders: 'Let's dance.'

Hercule Poirot murmured to himself:

'*Une qui aime et un qui se laisse aimer*. Yes, I wonder too.'

Chapter 7

Joanna Southwood said: 'And suppose he's a terrible tough?'

Linnet shook her head.

'Oh, he won't be. I can trust Jacqueline's taste.'

Joanna murmured:

'Ah, but people don't run true to form in love affairs.'

Linnet shook her head impatiently. Then she changed the subject.

'I must go and see Mr Pierce about those plans.'

'Plans?'

'Yes, some dreadful insanitary old cottages. I'm having them pulled down and the people moved.'

'How sanitary and public-spirited of you, darling!'

'They'd have had to go anyway. Those cottages would have overlooked my new swimming pool.'

'Do the people who live in them like going?'

'Most of them are delighted. One or two are being rather stupid about it – really tiresome in fact. They don't seem to realize how vastly improved their living conditions will be!'

'But you're being quite high-handed about it, I presume.'

'My dear Joanna, it's to their advantage really.'

'Yes, dear. I'm sure it is. Compulsory benefit.'

Linnet frowned. Joanna laughed.

'Come now, you *are* a tyrant, admit it. A beneficent tyrant if you like!'

'I'm not the least bit of a tyrant.'

‘But you like your own way!’

‘Not especially.’

‘Linnet Ridgeway, can you look me in the face and tell me of *any one occasion* on which you’ve failed to do exactly as you wanted?’

‘Heaps of times.’

‘Oh, yes, “heaps of times” – just like that – but no concrete example. And you simply can’t think up one, darling, however hard you try! The triumphal progress of Linnet Ridgeway in her golden car.’

Linnet said sharply: ‘You think I’m selfish?’

‘No – just irresistible. The combined effect of money and charm. Everything goes down before you. What you can’t buy with cash you buy with a smile. Result: Linnet Ridgeway, the Girl Who Has Everything.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Joanna!’

‘Well, haven’t you got everything?’

‘I suppose I have... It sounds rather disgusting, somehow!’

‘Of course it’s disgusting, darling! You’ll probably get terribly bored and blasé by and by. In the meantime, enjoy the triumphal progress in the golden car. Only I wonder, I really do wonder, what will happen when you want to go down a street which has a board saying No Thoroughfare.’

‘Don’t be idiotic, Joanna.’ As Lord Windlesham joined them, Linnet said, turning to him: ‘Joanna is saying the nastiest things to me.’

‘All spite, darling, all spite,’ said Joanna vaguely as she got up from her seat.

She made no apology for leaving them. She had caught the glint in Windlesham’s eye.

He was silent for a minute or two. Then he went straight to the point.

‘Have you come to a decision, Linnet?’

Linnet said slowly:

‘Am I being a brute? I suppose, if I’m not sure, I ought to say No-’

He interrupted her:

‘Don’t say it. You shall have time – as much time as you want. But I think, you know, we should be happy together.’

‘You see,’ Linnet’s tone was apologetic, almost childish, ‘I’m enjoying myself so much – especially with all this.’ She waved a hand. ‘I wanted to make Wode Hall into my real ideal of a country house, and I do think I’ve got it nice, don’t you?’

‘It’s beautiful. Beautifully planned. Everything perfect. You’re very clever, Linnet.’ He paused a minute and went on: ‘And you like Charltonbury, don’t you? Of course it wants modernizing and all that – but you’re so clever at that sort of thing. You enjoy it.’

‘Why, of course, Charltonbury’s divine.’

She spoke with ready enthusiasm, but inwardly she was conscious of a sudden chill. An alien note had sounded, disturbing her complete satisfaction with life. She did not analyse the feeling at the moment, but later, when Windlesham had left her, she tried to probe the recesses of her mind.

Charltonbury – yes, that was it – she had resented the mention of Charltonbury. But why? Charltonbury was modestly famous. Windlesham’s ancestors had held it since the time of Elizabeth. To be mistress of Charltonbury was a position unsurpassed in society. Windlesham was one of the most desirable *partis* in England.

Naturally he couldn’t take Wode seriously... It was not in any way to be compared with Charltonbury.

Ah, but Wode was *hers*! She had seen it, acquired it, rebuilt and re-dressed it, lavished money on it. It was her own possession, her kingdom.

But in a sense it wouldn't count if she married Windlesham. What would they want with two country places? And of the two, naturally Wode Hall would be the one to be given up.

She, Linnet Ridgeway, wouldn't exist any longer. She would be Countess of Windlesham, bringing a fine dowry to Charltonbury and its master. She would be queen consort, not queen any longer.

'I'm being ridiculous,' said Linnet to herself.

But it was curious how she did hate the idea of abandoning Wode...

And wasn't there something else nagging at her? Jackie's voice with that queer blurred note in it saying: 'I shall *die* if I can't marry him! I shall die. I shall die...'

So positive, so earnest. Did she, Linnet, feel like that about Windlesham? Assuredly she didn't. Perhaps she could never feel like that about anyone. It must be – rather wonderful – to feel like that...

The sound of a car came through the open window.

Linnet shook herself impatiently. That must be Jackie and her young man. She'd go out and meet them.

She was standing in the open doorway as Jacqueline and Simon Doyle got out of the car.

'Linnet!' Jackie ran to her. 'This is Simon. Simon, here's Linnet. She's just the most wonderful person in the world.'

Linnet saw a tall, broad-shouldered young man, with very dark blue eyes, crisply curling brown hair, a square chin, and a boyish, appealing, simple smile...

She stretched out a hand. The hand that clasped hers was firm and warm... She liked the way he looked at her, the naïve genuine admiration.

Jackie had told him she was wonderful, and he clearly thought that she was wonderful...

A warm sweet feeling of intoxication ran through her veins.

'Isn't this all lovely?' she said. 'Come in, Simon, and let me welcome my new land agent properly.'

And as she turned to lead the way she thought: 'I'm frightfully – frightfully happy. I like Jackie's young man... I like him enormously...'

And then a sudden pang: 'Lucky Jackie...'

Chapter 8

Tim Allerton leant back in his wicker chair and yawned as he looked out over the sea. He shot a quick sidelong glance at his mother.

Mrs Allerton was a good-looking, white-haired woman of fifty. By imparting an expression of pinched severity to her mouth every time she looked at her son, she sought to disguise the fact of her intense affection for him. Even total strangers were seldom deceived by this device and Tim himself saw through it perfectly.

He said:

'Do you really like Majorca, Mother?'

'Well-, ' Mrs Allerton considered, 'it's cheap.'

'And cold,' said Tim with a slight shiver.

He was a tall, thin young man, with dark hair and a rather narrow chest. His mouth had a very sweet expression, his eyes were sad and his chin was indecisive. He had long delicate hands.

Threatened by consumption some years ago, he had never displayed a really robust physique. He was popularly supposed 'to write', but it was understood among his friends that enquiries as to literary output were not encouraged.

'What are you thinking of, Tim?'

Mrs Allerton was alert. Her bright dark-brown eyes looked suspicious.

Tim Allerton grinned at her:

'I was thinking of Egypt.'

'Egypt?' Mrs Allerton sounded doubtful.

'Real warmth, darling. Lazy golden sands. The Nile. I'd like to go up the Nile, wouldn't you?'

'Oh, I'd *like* it.' Her tone was dry. 'But Egypt's expensive, my dear. Not for those who have to count the pennies.'

Tim laughed. He rose, stretched himself. Suddenly he looked alive and eager. There was an excited note in his voice.

'The expense will be my affair. Yes, darling. A little flutter on the Stock Exchange. With thoroughly satisfactory results. I heard this morning.'

'This morning?' said Mrs Allerton sharply. 'You only had one letter and that-'

She stopped and bit her lip.

Tim looked momentarily undecided whether to be amused or annoyed. Amusement gained the day.

'And that was from Joanna,' he finished coolly. 'Quite right, Mother. What a queen of detectives you'd make! The famous Hercule Poirot would have to look to his laurels if you were about.'

Mrs Allerton looked rather cross.

'I just happened to see the handwriting-'

'And knew it wasn't that of a stockbroker? Quite right. As a matter of fact it was yesterday I heard from them. Poor Joanna's handwriting *is* rather noticeable – sprawls about all over the envelope like an inebriated spider.'

'What does Joanna say? Any news?'

Mrs Allerton strove to make her voice sound casual and ordinary. The friendship between her son and his second cousin, Joanna Southwood, always irritated her. Not, as she put it to herself, that there was 'anything in it'. She was quite sure there wasn't. Tim had never manifested a sentimental interest in Joanna, nor she in him. Their mutual attraction seemed to be founded on gossip and the possession of a large number of friends and acquaintances in common. They both liked people and discussing people. Joanna had an amusing if caustic tongue.

It was not because Mrs Allerton feared that Tim might fall in love with Joanna that she found herself always becoming a little stiff in manner if Joanna were present or when letters from her arrived.

It was some other feeling hard to define – perhaps an unacknowledged jealousy in the unfeigned pleasure Tim always seemed to take in Joanna's society. He and his mother were such perfect companions that the sight of him absorbed and interested in another woman always startled Mrs Allerton slightly. She fancied, too, that her own presence on these occasions set some barrier between the two members of the younger generation. Often she had come upon them eagerly absorbed in some conversation and, at sight of her, their talk had wavered, had seemed to include her rather too purposefully and as in duty bound. Quite definitely, Mrs Allerton did not like Joanna Southwood. She

thought her insincere, affected, and essentially superficial. She found it very hard to prevent herself saying so in unmeasured tones.

In answer to her question, Tim pulled the letter out of his pocket and glanced through it. It was quite a long letter, his mother noted.

‘Nothing much,’ he said. ‘The Devenishes are getting a divorce. Old Monty’s been had up for being drunk in charge of a car. Windlesham’s gone to Canada. Seems he was pretty badly hit when Linnet Ridgeway turned him down. She’s definitely going to marry this land agent person.’

‘How extraordinary! Is he very dreadful?’

‘No, no, not at all. He’s one of the Devonshire Doyles. No money, of course – and he was actually engaged to one of Linnet’s best friends. Pretty thick, that.’

‘I don’t think it’s at all nice,’ said Mrs Allerton, flushing.

Tim flashed her a quick affectionate glance.

‘I know, darling. You don’t approve of snaffling other people’s husbands and all that sort of thing.’

‘In my day we had our standards,’ said Mrs Allerton. ‘And a very good thing too! Nowadays young people seem to think they can just go about doing anything they choose.’

Tim smiled.

‘They don’t only think it. They do it. *Vide* Linnet Ridgeway!’

‘Well, I think it’s horrid!’

Tim twinkled at her.

‘Cheer up, you old die-hard! Perhaps I agree with you. Anyway, *I* haven’t helped myself to anyone’s wife or fiancée yet.’

‘I’m sure you’d never do such a thing,’ said Mrs Allerton. She added with spirit, ‘I’ve brought you up properly.’

‘So the credit is yours, not mine.’

He smiled teasingly at her as he folded the letter and put it away again. Mrs Allerton let the thought just flash across her mind: ‘Most letters he shows to me. He only reads me snippets from Joanna’s.’

But she put the unworthy thought away from her, and decided, as ever, to behave like a gentlewoman.

‘Is Joanna enjoying life?’ she asked.

‘So so. Says she thinks of opening a delicatessen shop in Mayfair.’

‘She always talks about being hard up,’ said Mrs Allerton with a tinge of spite, ‘but she goes about everywhere and her clothes must cost her a lot. She’s always beautifully dressed.’

‘Ah, well,’ said Tim, ‘she probably doesn’t pay for them. No, mother, I don’t mean what your Edwardian mind suggests to you. I just mean quite literally that she leaves her bills unpaid.’

Mrs Allerton sighed.

‘I never know how people manage to do that.’

‘It’s a kind of special gift,’ said Tim. ‘If only you have sufficiently extravagant tastes, and absolutely no sense of money values, people will give you any amount of credit.’

‘Yes, but you come to the Bankruptcy Court in the end like poor Sir George Wode.’

‘You have a soft spot for that old horse copper – probably because he called you a rosebud in 1879 at a dance.’

‘I wasn’t born in 1879,’ Mrs Allerton retorted with spirit. ‘Sir George has charming manners, and I won’t have you calling him a horse coper.’

‘I’ve heard funny stories about him from people that know.’

‘You and Joanna don’t mind what you say about people; anything will do so long as it’s sufficiently illnatured.’

Tim raised his eyebrows.

‘My dear, you’re quite heated. I didn’t know old Wode was such a favourite of yours.’

‘You don’t realize how hard it was for him, having to sell Wode Hall. He cared terribly about that place.’

Tim suppressed the easy retort. After all, who was he to judge? Instead he said thoughtfully:

‘You know, I think you’re not far wrong there. Linnet asked him to come down and see what she’d done to the place, and he refused quite rudely.’

‘Of course. She ought to have known better than to ask him.’

‘And I believe he’s quite venomous about her – mutters things under his breath whenever he sees her. Can’t forgive her for having given him an absolutely top price for the worm-eaten family estate.’

‘And you can’t understand that?’ Mrs Allerton spoke sharply.

‘Frankly,’ said Tim calmly, ‘I can’t. Why live in the past? Why cling on to things that have been?’

‘What are you going to put in their place?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Excitement, perhaps. Novelty. The joy of never knowing what may turn up from day to day. Instead of inheriting a useless tract of land, the pleasure of making money for yourself – by your own brains and skill.’

‘A successful deal on the Stock Exchange, in fact!’

He laughed:

‘Why not?’

‘And what about an equal *loss* on the Stock Exchange?’

‘That, dear, is rather tactless. And quite inappropriate today... What about this Egypt plan?’

‘Well-’

He cut in smiling at her:

‘That’s settled. We’ve both always wanted to see Egypt.’

‘When do you suggest?’

‘Oh, next month. January’s about the best time there. We’ll enjoy the delightful society in this hotel a few weeks longer.’

‘Tim,’ said Mrs Allerton reproachfully. Then she added guiltily: ‘I’m afraid I promised Mrs Leech that you’d go with her to the police station. She doesn’t understand any Spanish.’

Tim made a grimace.

‘About her ring? The blood-red ruby of the horseleech’s daughter? Does she still persist in thinking it’s been stolen? I’ll go if you like, but it’s a waste of time. She’ll only get some wretched chambermaid into trouble. I distinctly saw it on her finger when she went into the sea that day. It came off in the water and she never noticed.’

‘She says she is quite sure she took it off and left it on her dressing table.’

‘Well, she didn’t. I saw it with my own eyes. The woman’s a fool. Any woman’s a fool who goes prancing into the sea in December, pretending the water’s quite warm just because the sun happens to be shining rather brightly at the moment. Stout women oughtn’t to be allowed to bathe anyway; they look so revolting in bathing dresses.’

Mrs Allerton murmured:

‘I really feel I ought to give up bathing.’

Tim gave a shout of laughter.

‘You? You can give most of the young things points and to spare.’

Mrs Allerton sighed and said,

‘I wish there were a few more young people for you here.’

Tim Allerton shook his head decidedly.

‘I don’t. You and I get along rather comfortably without outside distractions.’

‘You’d like it if Joanna were here.’

‘I wouldn’t.’ His tone was unexpectedly resolute. ‘You’re all wrong there. Joanna amuses me, but I don’t really like her, and to have her around much gets on my nerves. I’m thankful she isn’t here. I should be quite resigned if I were never to see Joanna again.’ He added, almost below his breath: ‘There’s only one woman in the world I’ve got a real respect and admiration for, and I think, Mrs Allerton, you know very well who that woman is.’

His mother blushed and looked quite confused.

Tim said gravely:

‘There aren’t very many really nice women in the world. You happen to be one of them.’

Chapter 9

In an apartment overlooking Central Park in New York Mrs Robson exclaimed:

‘If that isn’t just too lovely! You really are the luckiest girl, Cornelia.’

Cornelia Robson flushed responsively. She was a big clumsy-looking girl with brown doglike eyes.

‘Oh, it will be wonderful!’ she gasped.

Old Miss Van Schuyler inclined her head in a satisfied fashion at this correct attitude on the part of poor relations.

‘I’ve always dreamed of a trip to Europe,’ sighed Cornelia, ‘but I just didn’t feel I’d ever get there.’

‘Miss Bowers will come with me as usual, of course,’ said Miss Van Schuyler, ‘but as a social companion I find her limited – very limited. There are many little things that Cornelia can do for me.’

‘I’d just love to, Cousin Marie,’ said Cornelia eagerly.

‘Well, well, then that’s settled,’ said Miss Van Schuyler. ‘Just run and find Miss Bowers, my dear. It’s time for my eggnog.’

Cornelia departed. Her mother said:

‘My dear Marie, I’m really *most* grateful to you! You know I think Cornelia suffers a lot from not being a social success. It makes her feel kind of mortified. If I could afford to take her to places – but you know how it’s been since Ned died.’

‘I’m very glad to take her,’ said Miss Van Schuyler. ‘Cornelia has always been a nice handy girl, willing to run errands, and not so selfish as some of these young people nowadays.’

Mrs Robson rose and kissed her rich relative’s wrinkled and slightly yellow face.

‘I’m just ever so grateful,’ she declared.

On the stairs she met a tall capable-looking woman who was carrying a glass containing a yellow foamy liquid.

‘Well, Miss Bowers, so you’re off to Europe?’

‘Why, yes, Mrs Robson.’

‘What a lovely trip!’

‘Why, yes, I should think it would be very enjoyable.’

‘But you’ve been abroad before?’

‘Oh, yes, Mrs Robson. I went over to Paris with Miss Van Schuyler last fall. But I’ve never been to Egypt before.’

Mrs Robson hesitated.

‘I do hope – there won’t be any – trouble.’

She had lowered her voice. Miss Bowers, however, replied in her usual tone:

‘Oh, *no*, Mrs Robson; I shall take good care of *that*. I keep a very sharp look-out always.’

But there was still a faint shadow on Mrs Robson’s face as she slowly continued down the stairs.

Chapter 10

In his office downtown Mr Andrew Pennington was opening his personal mail. Suddenly his fist clenched itself and came down on his desk with a bang; his face crimsoned and two big veins stood out on his forehead. He pressed a buzzer on his desk and a smart-looking stenographer appeared with commendable promptitude.

‘Tell Mr Rockford to step in here.’

‘Yes, Mr Pennington.’

A few minutes later, Sterndale Rockford, Pennington’s partner, entered the office. The two men were not unlike – both tall, spare, with greying hair and cleanshaven clever faces.

‘What’s up, Pennington?’

Pennington looked up from the letter he was rereading. He said:

‘Linnet’s married...’

‘*What?*’

‘You heard what I said! Linnet Ridgeway’s *married!*’

‘How? When? Why didn’t we hear about it?’

Pennington glanced at the calendar on his desk.

‘She wasn’t married when she wrote this letter, but she’s married now. Morning of the fourth. That’s today.’

Rockford dropped into a chair.

‘Whew! No warning! Nothing? Who’s the man?’

Pennington referred again to the letter.

‘Doyle. Simon Doyle.’

‘What sort of a fellow is he? Ever heard of him?’

‘No. She doesn’t say much...’ He scanned the lines of clear, upright hand writing. ‘Got an idea there’s something hole-and-corner about this business... That doesn’t matter. The whole point is, she’s married.’

The eyes of the two men met. Rockford nodded.

‘This needs a bit of thinking out,’ he said quietly.

‘What are we going to do about it?’

'I'm asking you.'

The two men sat silent. Then Rockford said:

'Got any plan?'

Pennington said slowly:

'The *Normandie* sails today. One of us could just make it.'

'You're crazy! What's the big idea?'

Pennington began: 'Those Britisher lawyers-' and stopped.

'What about 'em. Surely you're not going over to tackle 'em? You're mad!'

'I'm not suggesting that you – or I – should go to England.'

'What's the big idea, then?'

Pennington smoothed out the letter on the table.

'Linnet's going to Egypt for her honeymoon. Expects to be there a month or more...'

'Egypt – eh?' Rockford considered. Then he looked up and met the other's glance. 'Egypt,' he said; *that's* your idea!'

'Yes – a chance meeting. Over on a trip. Linnet and her husband – honeymoon atmosphere. It might be done.'

Rockford said doubtfully:

'She's sharp, Linnet is... but-'

Pennington said softly: 'I think there might be ways of – managing it.'

Again their eyes met. Rockford nodded.

'All right, big boy.'

Pennington looked at the clock.

'We'll have to hustle – whichever of us is going.'

'You go,' said Rockford promptly. 'You always made a hit with Linnet. "Uncle Andrew." That's the ticket!'

Pennington's face had hardened.

He said: 'I hope I can pull it off.'

His partner said:

'You've got to pull it off. 'The situation's critical...'

Chapter 11

William Carmichael said to the thin, weedy youth who opened the door inquiringly:

'Send Mr Jim to me, please.'

Jim Fanthorp entered the room and looked inquiringly at his uncle. The older man looked up with a nod and a grunt.

'Humph, there you are.'

'You asked for me?'

'Just cast an eye over this.'

The young man sat down and drew the sheaf of papers towards him. The elder man watched him.

'Well?'

The answer came promptly.

'Looks fishy to me, sir.'

Again the senior partner of Carmichael, Grant amp; Carmichael uttered his characteristic grunt. Jim Fanthorp reread the letter which had just arrived by air mail from Egypt:

...It seems wicked to be writing business letters on such a day. We have spent a week at Mena House and made an expedition to the Fayum. The day after tomorrow we are going up the Nile to Luxor and Aswan by steamer, and perhaps on to Khartoum. When we went into Cook's this morning to see about our tickets who do you think was the first person I saw? – my American trustee, Andrew Pennington. I think you met him two years ago when he was over. I had no idea he was in Egypt and he had no idea that I was! Nor that I was married! My letter, telling him of my marriage, must just have missed him. He is actually going up the Nile on the same trip that we are. Isn't it a coincidence? Thank you so much for all you have done in this busy time. I-

As the young man was about to turn the page, Mr Carmichael took the letter from him. 'That's all,' he said. 'The rest doesn't matter. Well, what do you think?'

His nephew considered for a moment – then he said:

'Well – I think – not a coincidence...'

The other nodded approval.

'Like a trip to Egypt?' he barked out.

'You think that's advisable?'

'I think there's no time to lose.'

'But, why me?'

'Use your brains, boy; use your brains. Linnet Ridgeway has never met you; no more has Pennington. If you go by air you may get there in time.'

'I-I don't like it, sir. What am I to do?'

'Use your eyes. Use your ears. Use your brains – if you've got any. And if necessary – act.'

'I-I don't like it.'

'Perhaps not – but you've got to do it.'

'It's – necessary?'

'In my opinion,' said Mr Carmichael, 'it's absolutely vital.'

Chapter 12

Mrs Otterbourne, readjusting the turban of local material that she wore draped round her head, said fretfully:

'I really don't see why we shouldn't go on to Egypt. I'm sick and tired of Jerusalem.'

As her daughter made no reply, she said:

'You might at least answer when you're spoken to.'

Rosalie Otterbourne was looking at a newspaper reproduction of a face. Below it was printed:

Mrs Simon Doyle, who before her marriage was the well-known society beauty, Miss Linnet Ridgeway. Mr and Mrs Doyle are spending their honeymoon in Egypt.

Rosalie said, 'You'd like to move on to Egypt, Mother?'

'Yes, I would,' Mrs Otterbourne snapped. 'I consider they've treated us in a most cavalier fashion here. My being here is an advertisement – I ought to get a special reduction in terms. When I hinted as much, I consider they were most impertinent – *most* impertinent. I told them exactly what I thought of them.'

The girl sighed. She said:

'One place is very like another. I wish we could get right away.'

'And this morning,' went on Mrs Otterbourne, 'the manager actually had the impertinence to tell me that all the rooms had been booked in advance and that he would require ours in two days' time.'

‘So we’ve got to go somewhere.’

‘Not at all. I’m quite prepared to fight for my rights.’

Rosalie murmured: ‘I suppose we might as well go on to Egypt. It doesn’t make any difference.’

‘It’s certainly not a matter of life or death,’ said Mrs Otterbourne.

But there she was quite wrong – for a matter of life and death was exactly what it was.

Part two Egypt

Chapter 1

‘That’s Hercule Poirot, the detective,’ said Mrs Allerton.

She and her son were sitting in brightly painted scarlet basket chairs outside the Cataract Hotel in Aswan. They were watching the retreating figures of two people – a short man dressed in a white silk suit and a tall slim girl.

Tim Allerton sat up in an unusually alert fashion.

‘That funny little man?’ he asked incredulously.

‘That funny little man!’

‘What on earth’s he doing out here?’ Tim asked.

His mother laughed.

‘Darling, you sound quite excited. Why do men enjoy crime so much? I hate detective stories and never read them. But I don’t think Monsieur Poirot is here with any ulterior motive. He’s made a good deal of money and he’s seeing life, I fancy.’

‘Seems to have an eye for the best-looking girl in the place.’

Mrs Allerton tilted her head a little on one side as she considered the retreating backs of M. Poirot and his companion.

The girl by his side overtopped him by some three inches. She walked well, neither stiffly nor slouchingly.

‘I suppose she *is* quite good-looking,’ said Mrs Allerton.

She shot a little glance sideways at Tim. Somewhat to her amusement the fish rose at once.

‘She’s more than quite. Pity she looks so bad-tempered and sulky.’

‘Perhaps that’s just expression, dear.’

‘Unpleasant young devil, I think. But she’s pretty enough.’

The subject of these remarks was walking slowly by Poirot’s side. Rosalie Otterbourne was twirling an unopened parasol, and her expression certainly bore out what Tim had just said. She looked both sulky and bad-tempered. Her eyebrows were drawn together in a frown, and the scarlet line of her mouth was drawn downwards.

They turned to the left out of the hotel gate and entered the cool shade of the public gardens.

Hercule Poirot was prattling gently, his expression that of beatific good humour. He wore a white silk suit, carefully pressed, and a panama hat, and carried a highly ornamental fly whisk with a sham amber handle.

‘-it enchants me,’ he was saying. ‘The black rocks of Elephantine, and the sun, the little boats on the river. Yes, it is good to be alive.’ He paused and then added: ‘You do not find it so, Mademoiselle?’

Rosalie Otterbourne said shortly:

‘It’s all right, I suppose. I think Aswan’s a gloomy sort of place. The hotel’s half empty, and everyone’s about a hundred-’

She stopped – biting her lip.

Hercule Poirot’s eyes twinkled.

‘It is true, yes, I have one leg in the grave.’

‘I—I wasn’t thinking of you,’ said the girl. ‘I’m sorry. That sounded rude.’

‘Not at all. It is natural you should wish for young companions of your own age. Ah, well, there is *one* young man, at least.’

‘The one who sits with his mother all the time? I like *her* – but I think he looks dreadful – so conceited!’

Poirot smiled.

‘And I – am I conceited?’

‘Oh, I don’t think so.’

She was obviously uninterested – but the fact did not seem to annoy Poirot. He merely remarked with placid satisfaction:

‘My best friend says that I am very conceited.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Rosalie vaguely, ‘I suppose you have something to be conceited about. Unfortunately crime doesn’t interest me in the least.’

Poirot said solemnly:

‘I am delighted to learn that you have no guilty secret to hide.’

Just for a moment the sulky mask of her face was transformed as she shot him a swift questioning glance. Poirot did not seem to notice it as he went on.

‘Madame, your mother, was not at lunch today. She is not indisposed, I trust?’

‘This place doesn’t suit her,’ said Rosalie briefly. ‘I shall be glad when we leave.’

‘We are fellow passengers, are we not? We both make the excursion up to Wadi Halfa and the Second Cataract?’

‘Yes.’

They came out from the shade of the gardens on to a dusty stretch of road bordered by the river. Five watchful bead sellers, two vendors of postcards, three sellers of plaster scarabs, a couple of donkey boys and some detached but hopeful infantile riff-raff closed in upon them.

‘You want beads, sir? Very good, sir. Very cheap...’

‘Lady, you want scarab? Look – great queen – very lucky...’

‘You look, sir – real lapis. Very good, very cheap...’

‘You want ride donkey, sir? This very good donkey. This donkey Whiskey and Soda, sir...’

‘You want to go granite quarries, sir? This very good donkey. Other donkey very bad, sir, that donkey fall down...’

‘You want postcard – very cheap – very nice...’

‘Look, lady... Only ten piastres – very cheap – lapis – this ivory...’

‘This very good fly whisk – this all amber...’

‘You go out in boat, sir? I got very good boat, sir...’

‘You ride back to hotel, lady? This first-class donkey...’

Hercule Poirot made vague gestures to rid himself of this human cluster of flies. Rosalie stalked through them like a sleep walker.

‘It’s best to pretend to be deaf and blind,’ she remarked.

The infantile riff-raff ran alongside murmuring plaintively:

‘Bakshish? Bakshish? Hip hip hurrah – very good, very nice...’

Their gaily coloured rags trailed picturesquely, and the flies lay in clusters on their eyelids. They were the most persistent. The others fell back and launched a fresh attack on the next corner. Now Poirot and Rosalie only ran the gauntlet of the shops – suave, persuasive accents here...

‘You visit my shop today, sir?’

‘You want that ivory crocodile, sir?’

‘You not been in my shop yet, sir? I show you very beautiful things.’

They turned into the fifth shop and Rosalie handed over several rolls of film – the object of the walk.

Then they came out again and walked towards the river’s edge.

One of the Nile steamers was just mooring. Poirot and Rosalie looked interestedly at the passengers.

‘Quite a lot, aren’t there?’ commented Rosalie.

She turned her head as Tim Allerton came up and joined them. He was a little out of breath as though he had been walking fast. They stood there for a moment or two, and then Tim spoke.

‘An awful crowd as usual, I suppose,’ he remarked disparagingly, indicating the disembarking passengers.

‘They’re usually quite terrible,’ agreed Rosalie. All three wore the air of superiority assumed by people who are already in a place when studying new arrivals.

‘Hallo!’ exclaimed Tim, his voice suddenly excited. ‘I’m damned if that isn’t Linnet Ridgeway.’

If the information left Poirot unmoved, it stirred Rosalie’s interest. She leaned forward and her sulkiness quite dropped from her as she asked:

‘Where? That one in white?’

‘Yes, there with the tall man. They’re coming ashore now. He’s the new husband, I suppose. Can’t remember her name now.’

‘Doyle,’ said Rosalie. ‘Simon Doyle. It was in all the newspapers. She’s simply rolling, isn’t she?’

‘Only about the richest girl in England,’ said Tim cheerfully.

The three lookers-on were silent watching the passengers come ashore. Poirot gazed with interest at the subject of the remarks of his companions. He murmured:

‘She is beautiful.’

‘Some people have got everything,’ said Rosalie bitterly.

There was a queer grudging expression on her face as she watched the other girl come up the gangplank.

Linnet Doyle was looking as perfectly turned out as if she were stepping on to the centre of the stage in a revue. She had something too of the assurance of a famous actress. She was used to being looked at, to being admired, to being the centre of the stage wherever she went.

She was aware of the keen glances bent upon her – and at the same time almost unaware of them; such tributes were part of her life.

She came ashore playing a role, even though she played it unconsciously. The rich, beautiful society bride on her honeymoon. She turned, with a little smile and a light remark, to the tall man by her side. He answered, and the sound of his voice seemed to interest Hercule Poirot. His eyes lit up and he drew his brows together.

The couple passed close to him. He heard Simon Doyle say:

‘We’ll try and make time for it, darling. We can easily stay a week or two if you like it here.’

His face was turned towards her, eager, adoring, a little humble.

Poirot's eyes ran over him thoughtfully – the square shoulders, the bronzed face, the dark blue eyes, the rather childlike simplicity of the smile.

'Lucky devil,' said Tim after they had passed. 'Fancy finding an heiress who hasn't got adenoids and flat feet!'

'They look frightfully happy,' said Rosalie with a note of envy in her voice. She said suddenly, but so low that Tim did not catch the words: 'It isn't fair.'

Poirot heard, however. He had been frowning somewhat perplexedly, but now he flashed a quick glance towards her.

Tim said:

'I must collect some stuff for my mother now.'

He raised his hat and moved off. Poirot and Rosalie retraced their steps slowly in the direction of the hotel, waving aside fresh proffers of donkeys.

'So it is not fair, Mademoiselle?' asked Poirot gently.

The girl flushed angrily.

'I don't know what you mean.'

'I am repeating what you said just now under your breath. Oh, yes, you did.'

Rosalie Otterbourne shrugged her shoulders.

'It really seems a little too much for one person. Money, good looks, marvellous figure and-'

She paused and Poirot said:

'And love? Eh? And love? But you do not know – she may have been married for her money!'

'Didn't you see the way he looked at her?'

'Oh, yes, Mademoiselle. I saw all there was to see – indeed I saw something that you did not.'

'What was that?'

Poirot said slowly:

'I saw, Mademoiselle, dark lines below a woman's eyes. I saw a hand that clutched a sunshade so tight that the knuckles were white...'

Rosalie was staring at him.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that all is not the gold that glitters – I mean that though this lady is rich and beautiful and beloved, there is all the same *something* that is not right. And I know something else.'

'Yes?'

'I know,' said Poirot, frowning, 'that somewhere, at some time, *I have heard that voice before* – the voice of Monsieur Doyle – and I wish I could remember where.'

But Rosalie was not listening. She had stopped dead. With the point of her sunshade she was tracing patterns in the loose sand. Suddenly she broke out fiercely:

'I'm odious. I'm quite odious. I'm just a beast through and through. I'd like to tear the clothes off her back and stamp on her lovely, arrogant, self-confident face. I'm just a jealous cat – but that's what I feel like. She's so horribly successful and poised and assured.'

Hercule Poirot looked a little astonished by the outburst. He took her by the arm and gave her a friendly little shake.

'*Tenez* – you will feel better for having said that!'

'I just hate her! I've never hated anyone so much at first sight.'

'Magnificent!'

Rosalie looked at him doubtfully. Then her mouth twitched and she laughed.

'*Bien*,' said Poirot, and laughed too.

They proceeded amicably back to the hotel.

'I must find Mother,' said Rosalie, as they came into the cool dim hall.

Poirot passed out on the other side on to the terrace overlooking the Nile. Here were little tables set for tea, but it was early still. He stood for a few moments looking down on to the river, then strolled down through the gardens.

Some people were playing tennis in the hot sun. He paused to watch them for a while, then went on down the steep path. It was there, sitting on a bench overlooking the Nile, that he came upon the girl of Chez Ma Tante. He recognized her at once. Her face, as he had seen it that night, was securely etched upon his memory. The expression on it now was very different. She was paler, thinner, and there were lines that told of a great weariness and misery of spirit.

He drew back a little. She had not seen him, and he watched her for a while without her suspecting his presence. Her small foot tapped impatiently on the ground. Her eyes, dark with a kind of smouldering fire, had a queer kind of suffering dark triumph in them. She was looking out across the Nile where the white-sailed boats glided up and down the river.

A face – and a voice. He remembered them both. This girl's face and the voice he had heard just now, the voice of a newly made bridegroom...

And even as he stood there considering the unconscious girl, the next scene in the drama was played.

Voices sounded above. The girl on the seat started to her feet. Linnet Doyle and her husband came down the path. Linnet's voice was happy and confident. The look of strain and tenseness of muscle had quite disappeared, Linnet was happy.

The girl who was standing there took a step or two forward. The other two stopped dead.

'Hallo, Linnet,' said Jacqueline de Bellefort. 'So here you are! We never seem to stop running into each other. Hallo, Simon, how are you?'

Linnet Doyle had shrunk back against the rock with a little cry. Simon Doyle's good-looking face was suddenly convulsed with rage. He moved forward as though he would have liked to strike the slim girlish figure.

With a quick birdlike turn of her head she signalled her realization of a stranger's presence. Simon turned his head and noticed Poirot.

He said awkwardly:

'Hullo, Jacqueline; we didn't expect to see you here.'

The words were unconvincing in the extreme. The girl flashed white teeth at them.

'Quite a surprise?' she asked. Then, with a little nod, she walked up the path.

Poirot moved delicately in the opposite direction. As he went, he heard Linnet Doyle say:

'Simon – for God's sake – Simon – what can we do?'

Chapter 2

Dinner was over. The terrace outside the Cataract Hotel was softly lit. Most of the guests staying at the hotel were there sitting at little tables.

Simon and Linnet Doyle came out, a tall distinguished looking grey-haired man with a keen clean-shaven American face beside them. As the little group hesitated for a moment in the doorway, Tim Allerton rose from his chair nearby and came forward.

'You don't remember me, I'm sure,' he said pleasantly to Linnet, 'but I'm Joanna Southwood's cousin.'

'Of course – how stupid of me. You're Tim Allerton. This is my husband'-a faint tremor in the voice, pride, shyness? – 'and this is my American trustee, Mr Pennington.'

Tim said:

‘You must meet my mother.’

A few minutes later they were sitting together in a party – Linnet in the corner, Tim and Pennington each side of her, both talking to her, vying for her attention. Mrs Allerton talked to Simon Doyle.

The swing doors revolved. A sudden tension came into the beautiful upright figure sitting in the corner between the two men. Then it relaxed as a small man came out and walked across the terrace.

Mrs Allerton said:

‘You’re not the only celebrity here, my dear. That funny little man is Hercule Poirot.’

She had spoken lightly, just out of instinctive social tact to bridge an awkward pause, but Linnet seemed struck by the information.

‘Hercule Poirot? Of course – I’ve heard of him...’

She seemed to sink into a fit of abstraction. The two men on either side of her were momentarily at a loss.

Poirot had strolled across to the edge of the terrace, but his attention was immediately solicited.

‘Sit down, Monsieur Poirot. What a lovely night!’

He obeyed.

‘*Mais oui, Madame*, it is indeed beautiful.’

He smiled politely at Mrs Otterbourne. What draperies of black ninon and that ridiculous turban effect! Mrs Otterbourne went on in her high complaining voice:

‘Quite a lot of notabilities here now, aren’t there? I expect we shall see a paragraph about it in the papers soon. Society beauties, famous novelists-’

She paused with a slight mock-modest laugh.

Poirot felt, rather than saw, the sulky frowning girl opposite him flinch and set her mouth in a sulkier line than before.

‘You have a novel on the way at present, Madame?’ he inquired.

Mrs Otterbourne gave her little self-conscious laugh again.

‘I’m being dreadfully lazy. I really must set to. My public is getting terribly impatient – and my publisher, poor man! Appeals by every post! Even cables!’

Again he felt the girl shift in the darkness.

‘I don’t mind telling you, Monsieur Poirot, I am partly here for local colour. *Snow on the Desert’s Face* – that is the title of my new book. Powerful – suggestive. Snow – on the desert – melted in the first flaming breath of passion.’

Rosalie got up, muttering something, and moved away down into the dark garden.

‘One must be emphasis,’ went on Mrs Otterbourne, wagging the turban emphatically. ‘emphasis meat – that is what my books are. Libraries may ban them – no matter! I speak the truth. Sex – ah! Monsieur Poirot – why is everyone so afraid of sex? The pivot of the universe! You have read my books?’

‘Alas, Madame! You comprehend, I do not read many novels. My work-’

Mrs Otterbourne said firmly:

‘I must give you a copy of *Under the Fig Tree*. I think you will find it significant. It is outspoken – but it is *real*!’

‘That is most kind of you, Madame. I will read it with pleasure.’

Mrs Otterbourne was silent a minute or two. She fidgeted with a long chain of beads that was wound twice round her neck. She looked swiftly from side to side.

‘Perhaps – I’ll just slip up and get it for you now.’

‘Oh, Madame, pray do not trouble yourself. Later-’

‘No, no. It’s no trouble.’ She rose. ‘I’d like to show you-’

‘What is it, Mother?’

Rosalie was suddenly at her side.

‘Nothing, dear. I was just going up to get a book for Monsieur Poirot.’

‘The *Fig Tree*? I’ll get it.’

‘You don’t know where it is, dear. I’ll go.’

‘Yes, I do.’

The girl went swiftly across the terrace and into the hotel.

‘Let me congratulate you, Madame, on a very lovely daughter,’ said Poirot, with a bow.

‘Rosalie? Yes, yes – she is good looking. But she’s very *hard*, Monsieur Poirot. And no sympathy with illness. She always thinks she knows best. She imagines she knows more about my health than I do myself-’

Poirot signalled to a passing waiter.

‘A liqueur, Madame? A chartreuse? A crème de menthe?’

Mrs Otterbourne shook her head vigorously.

‘No, no. I am practically a teetotaller. You may have noticed I never drink anything but water – or perhaps lemonade. I cannot bear the taste of spirits.’

‘Then may I order you a lemon squash, Madame?’

He gave the order – one lemon squash and one benedictine.

The swing door revolved. Rosalie passed through and came towards them, a book in her hand.

‘Here you are,’ she said. Her voice was quite expressionless – almost remarkably so.

‘Monsieur Poirot has just ordered me a lemon squash,’ said her mother.

‘And you, Mademoiselle, what will you take?’

‘Nothing.’ She added, suddenly conscious of the curtness: ‘Nothing, thank you.’

Poirot took the volume which Mrs Otterbourne held out to him. It still bore its original jacket, a gaily coloured affair representing a lady with smartly shingled hair and scarlet fingernails sitting on a tiger skin in the traditional costume of Eve. Above her was a tree with the leaves of an oak, bearing large and improbably coloured apples.

It was entitled *Under the Fig Tree*, by Salome Otterbourne. On the inside was a publisher’s blurb. It spoke enthusiastically of the superb courage and realism of this study of a modern woman’s love life. Fearless, unconventional, realistic were the adjectives used.

Poirot bowed and murmured:

‘I am honoured, Madame.’

As he raised his head, his eyes met those of the authoress’s daughter. Almost involuntarily he made a little movement. He was astonished and grieved at the eloquent pain they revealed.

It was at that moment that the drinks arrived and created a welcome diversion.

Poirot lifted his glass gallantly.

‘*A votre santé, Madame – Mademoiselle.*’

Mrs Otterbourne, sipping her lemonade, murmured:

‘So refreshing – delicious.’

Silence fell on the three of them. They looked down to the shining black rocks in the Nile. There was something fantastic about them in the moonlight. They were like vast prehistoric monsters lying half out of the water. A little breeze came up suddenly and as suddenly died away. There was a feeling in the air of hush – of expectancy.

Hercule Poirot brought his gaze to the terrace and its occupants. Was he wrong, or was there the same hush of expectancy there? It was like a moment on the stage when one is waiting for the entrance of the leading lady.

And just at that moment the swing doors began to revolve once more. This time it seemed as though they did so with a special air of importance. Everyone had stopped talking and was looking towards them.

A dark slender girl in a wine-coloured evening frock came through. She paused for a minute, then walked deliberately across the terrace and sat down at an empty table. There was nothing flaunting, nothing out of the way about her demeanour, and yet it had somehow the studied effect of a stage entrance.

‘Well,’ said Mrs Otterbourne. She tossed her turbaned head. ‘She seems to think she is somebody, that girl!’

Poirot did not answer. He was watching. The girl had sat down in a place where she could look deliberately across at Linnet Doyle. Presently, Poirot noticed, Linnet Doyle leant forward and said something and a moment later got up and changed her seat. She was now sitting facing in the opposite direction.

Poirot nodded thoughtfully to himself.

It was about five minutes later that the other girl changed her seat to the opposite side of the terrace. She sat smoking and smiling quietly, the picture of contented ease. But always, as though unconsciously, her meditative gaze was on Simon Doyle’s wife.

After a quarter of an hour Linnet Doyle got up abruptly and went into the hotel. Her husband followed her almost immediately.

Jacqueline de Bellefort smiled and twisted her chair round. She lit a cigarette and stared out over the Nile. She went on smiling to herself.

Chapter 3

‘Monsieur Poirot.’

Poirot got hastily to his feet. He had remained sitting out on the terrace alone after everyone else had left. Lost in meditation, he had been staring at the smooth shiny black rocks when the sound of his name recalled him to himself.

It was a well-bred, assured voice, a charming voice, although perhaps a trifle arrogant.

Hercule Poirot, rising quickly, looked into the commanding eyes of Linnet Doyle. She wore a wrap of rich purple velvet over her white satin gown and she looked more lovely and more regal than Poirot had imagined possible.

‘You are Monsieur Hercule Poirot?’ said Linnet.

It was hardly a question.

‘At your service, Madame.’

‘You know who I am, perhaps?’

‘Yes, Madame. I have heard your name. I know exactly who you are.’

Linnet nodded. That was only what she had expected. She went on, in her charming autocratic manner:

‘Will you come with me into the card room, Monsieur Poirot? I am very anxious to speak to you.’

‘Certainly, Madame.’

She led the way into the hotel. He followed. She led him into the deserted card room and motioned him to close the door. Then she sank down on a chair at one of the tables and he sat down opposite her.

She plunged straightaway into what she wanted to say. There were no hesitations. Her speech came flowingly.

‘I have heard a great deal about you, Monsieur Poirot, and I know that you are a very clever man. It happens that I am urgently in need of someone to help me – and I think very possibly that you are the man who could do it.’

Poirot inclined his head.

‘You are very amiable, Madame. But you see, I am on holiday, and when I am on holiday I do not take cases.’

‘That could be arranged.’

It was not offensively said – only with the quiet confidence of a young woman who had always been able to arrange matters to her satisfaction.

Linnet Doyle went on:

‘I am the subject, Monsieur Poirot, of an intolerable persecution. That persecution has got to stop! My own idea was to go to the police about it, but my – my husband seems to think that the police would be powerless to do anything.’

‘Perhaps – if you would explain a little further?’ murmured Poirot politely.

‘Oh, yes, I will do so. The matter is perfectly simple.’

There was still no hesitation – no faltering. Linnet Doyle had a clear-cut businesslike mind. She only paused a minute so as to present the facts as concisely as possible.

‘Before I met my husband, he was engaged to a Miss de Bellefort. She was also a friend of mine. My husband broke off his engagement to her – they were not suited in any way. She, I am sorry to say, took it rather hard... I – am very sorry about that – but these things cannot be helped. She made certain – well, threats – to which I paid very little attention, and which, I may say, she has not attempted to carry out. But instead she has adopted the extraordinary course of – of following us about wherever we go.’

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

‘Ah – rather an unusual – er – revenge.’

‘Very unusual – and very ridiculous! But also – annoying.’

She bit her lip.

Poirot nodded.

‘Yes, I can imagine that. You are, I understand, on your honeymoon?’

‘Yes. It happened – the first time – at Venice. She was there – at Danielli’s. I thought it was just coincidence. Rather embarrassing, but that was all. Then we found her on board the boat at Brindisi. We – we understood that she was going on to Palestine. We left her, as we thought, on the boat. But – but when we got to Mena House she was there – waiting for us.’

Poirot nodded.

‘And now?’

‘We came up the Nile by boat. I – I was half expecting to find her on board. When she wasn’t there I thought she had stopped being so – so childish. But when we got here – she – she was here – waiting.’

Poirot eyed her keenly for a moment. She was still perfectly composed, but the knuckles of the hand that was gripping the table were white with the force of her grip.

He said:

‘And you are afraid this state of things may continue?’

‘Yes.’ She paused. ‘Of course the whole thing is idiotic! Jacqueline is making herself utterly ridiculous. I am surprised she hasn’t got more pride – more dignity.’

Poirot made a slight gesture.

‘There are times, Madame, when pride and dignity – they go by the board! There are other – emphasiser emotions.’

‘Yes, possibly.’ Linnet spoke impatiently. ‘But what on earth can she hope to *gain* by all this?’

‘It is not always a question of gain, Madame.’

Something in his tone struck Linnet disagreeably. She flushed and said quickly:

‘You are right. A discussion of motives is beside the point. The crux of the matter is that this has got to be stopped.’

‘And how do you propose that that should be accomplished, Madame?’ Poirot asked.

‘Well – naturally – my husband and I cannot continue being subjected to this annoyance. There must be some kind of legal redress against such a thing.’

She spoke impatiently. Poirot looked at her thoughtfully as he asked:

‘Has she threatened you in actual words in public? Used insulting language? Attempted any bodily harm?’

‘No.’

‘Then, frankly, Madame, *I do not see what you can do*. If it is a young lady’s pleasure to travel in certain places, and those places are the same where you and your husband find yourselves – *eh bien* – what of it? The air is free to all! There is no question of her forcing herself upon your privacy? It is always in public that these encounters take place?’

‘You mean there is nothing that I can do about it?’ Linnet sounded incredulous.

Poirot said placidly:

‘Nothing at all, as far as I can see. Mademoiselle de Bellefort is within her rights.’

‘But – but it is maddening! It is *intolerable* that I should have to put up with this!’

Poirot said dryly:

‘I must sympathize with you, Madame – especially as I imagine that you have not often had to put up with things.’

Linnet was frowning.

‘There *must* be some way of stopping it,’ she murmured.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘You can always leave – move on somewhere else,’ he suggested.

‘Then she will follow!’

‘Very possibly – yes.’

‘It’s absurd!’

‘Precisely.’

‘Anyway, why should I – we – run away? As though – as though-’

She stopped.

‘Exactly, Madame. As though-! It is all there, is it not?’

Linnet lifted her head and stared at him.

‘What do you mean?’

Poirot altered his tone. He leant forward; his voice was confidential, appealing. He said very gently:

‘*Why do you mind so much, Madame?*’

‘Why? But it’s maddening! Irritating to the last degree! I’ve told you why!’

Poirot shook his head.

‘Not altogether.’

Linnet said again: ‘What do you mean?’

Poirot leant back, folded his arms and spoke in a detached impersonal manner.

‘*Ecoutez*, Madame. I will recount to you a little history. It is that one day, a month or two ago, I am dining in a restaurant in London. At the table next to me are two people, a man and a girl. They are very happy, so it seems, very much in love. They talk with confidence of the future. It is not that I listen to what is not meant for me – they are quite oblivious of who hears them and who does not. The man’s back is to me, but I can watch the girl’s face. It is very intense. She is in love – heart, soul, and body – and she is not of those who love lightly and often. With her it is clearly the life and the death. They are engaged to be married, these two; that is what I gather; and they talk of where they shall pass the days of their honeymoon. They plan to go to Egypt.’

He paused.

Linnet said sharply:

‘Well?’

Poirot went on.

‘That is a month or two ago, but the girl’s face – I do not forget it. I know that I shall remember if I see it again. And I remember too the man’s voice. And I think you can guess, Madame, when it is I see the one and hear the other again. It is here in Egypt. The man is on his honeymoon, yes – but he is on his honeymoon *with another woman*.’

Linnet said sharply: ‘What of it? I had already mentioned the facts.’

‘The facts – yes.’

‘Well then?’

Poirot said slowly:

‘The girl in the restaurant mentioned a friend – a friend who she was very positive would not let her down. That friend, I think, was you, Madame.’

Linnet flushed.

‘Yes. I told you we had been friends.’

‘And she trusted you?’

‘Yes.’

She hesitated for a moment, biting her lip impatiently; then, as Poirot did not seem disposed to speak, she broke out:

‘Of course the whole thing was very unfortunate. But these things happen, Monsieur Poirot.’

‘Ah! yes, they happen, Madame.’ He paused. ‘You are of the Church of England, I presume?’

‘Yes.’ Linnet looked slightly bewildered.

‘Then you have heard portions of the Bible read aloud in church. You have heard of King David and of the rich man who had many flocks and herds and the poor man who had one ewe lamb – and of how the rich man took the poor man’s one ewe lamb. That was something that happened, Madame.’

Linnet sat up. Her eyes flashed angrily.

‘I see perfectly what you are driving at, Monsieur Poirot! You think, to put it vulgarly, that I stole my friend’s young man. Looking at the matter sentimentally – which is, I suppose, the way people of your generation cannot help looking at things – that is possibly true. But the real hard truth is different. I don’t deny that Jackie was passionately in love with Simon, but I don’t think you take into account that he may not have been equally devoted to her. He was very fond of her, but I think that even before he met me he was beginning to feel that he had made a mistake. Look at it clearly,

Monsieur Poirot. Simon discovers that it is I he loves, not Jackie. What is he to do? Be heroically noble and marry a woman he does not care for – and thereby probably ruin three lives – for it is doubtful whether he could make Jackie happy under those circumstances? If he were actually married to her when he met me I agree that it *might* be his duty to stick to her – though I'm not really sure of that. If one person is unhappy the other suffers too. But an engagement is not really binding. If a mistake has been made, then surely it is better to face the fact before it is too late. I admit that it was very hard on Jackie, and I'm very sorry about it – but there it is. It was inevitable.'

'I wonder.'

She stared at him.

'What do you mean?'

'It is very sensible, very logical – all that you say! But it does not explain one thing.'

'What is that?'

'Your own attitude, Madame. See you, this pursuit of you, you might take it in two ways. It might cause you annoyance – yes, or it might stir your pity – that your friend should have been so deeply hurt as to throw all regard for the conventions aside. But that is not the way you react. No, to you this persecution is *intolerable* – and why? It can be for one reason only – *that you feel a sense of guilt*.'

Linnet sprang to her feet.

'How dare you? Really, Monsieur Poirot, this is going too far.'

'But I do dare, Madame! I am going to speak to you quite frankly. I suggest to you that, although you may have endeavoured to gloss over the fact to yourself, *you did deliberately set about taking your husband from your friend*. I suggest that you felt emphasisedly attracted to him at once. But I suggest that there was a moment when you hesitated, when you realized that there was a *choice* – that you could refrain or go on. I suggest that the initiative rested with *you* – not with Monsieur Doyle. You are beautiful, Madame, you are rich, you are clever, intelligent – and you have charm. You could have exercised that charm or you could have restrained it. You had everything, Madame, that life can offer. Your friend's life was bound up in one person. You knew that – but though you hesitated, you did not hold your hand. You stretched it out and, like King David, you took the poor man's one ewe lamb.'

There was a silence. Linnet controlled herself with an effort and said in a cold voice:

'All this is quite beside the point!'

'No, it is not beside the point. I am explaining to you just why the unexpected appearances of Mademoiselle de Bellefort have upset you so much. It is because though she may be unwomanly and undignified in what she is doing, you have the inner conviction that she has right on her side.'

'That's not true.'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'You refuse to be honest with yourself.'

'Not at all.'

Poirot said gently:

'I should say, Madame, that you have had a happy life, that you have been generous and kindly in your attitude towards others.'

'I have tried to be,' said Linnet. The impatient anger died out of her face. She spoke simply – almost forlornly.

'And that is why the feeling that you have deliberately caused injury to someone upsets you so much, and why you are so reluctant to admit the fact. Pardon me if I have been impertinent, but the psychology, it is the most important factor in a case.'

Linnet said slowly: 'Even supposing what you say were true – and I don't admit it, mind – what can be done about it now? One can't alter the past; one must deal with things as they are.'

Poirot nodded.

‘You have the clear brain. Yes, one cannot go back over the past. One must accept things as they are. And sometimes, Madame, that is all one can do – accept the consequences of one’s past deeds.’

‘You mean,’ said Linnet incredulously, ‘that I can do nothing – *nothing*?’

‘You must have courage, Madame; that is what it seems like to me.’

Linnet said slowly:

‘Couldn’t you – talk to Jackie – to Miss de Bellefort? Reason with her?’

‘Yes, I could do that. I will do that if you would like me to do so. But do not expect much result. I fancy that Mademoiselle de Bellefort is so much in the grip of a fixed idea that nothing will turn her from it.’

‘But surely we can do *something* to extricate ourselves?’

‘You could, of course, return to England and establish yourselves in your own house.’

‘Even then, I suppose, Jacqueline is capable of planting herself in the village, so that I should see her every time I went out of the grounds.’

‘True.’

‘Besides,’ said Linnet slowly, ‘I don’t think that Simon would agree to run away.’

‘What is his attitude in this?’

‘He’s furious – simply furious.’

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Linnet said appealingly:

‘You will – talk to her?’

‘Yes, I will do that. But it is my opinion that I shall not be able to accomplish anything.’

Linnet said violently: ‘Jackie is extraordinary! One can’t tell what she will do!’

‘You spoke just now of certain threats she had made. Would you tell me what those threats were?’

Linnet shrugged her shoulders.

‘She threatened to – well – kill us both. Jackie can be rather – hot-headed sometimes.’

‘I see.’ Poirot’s tone was grave.

Linnet turned to him appealingly.

‘You will act for me?’

‘No, Madame.’ His tone was firm. ‘I will not accept a commission from you. I will do what I can in the interests of humanity. That, yes. There is here a situation that is full of difficulty and danger. I will do what I can to clear it up – but I am not very sanguine as to my chance of success.’

Linnet Doyle said slowly:

‘But you will not act for *me*?’

‘No, Madame,’ said Hercule Poirot.

Chapter 4

Hercule Poirot found Jacqueline de Bellefort sitting on the rocks directly overlooking the Nile. He had felt fairly certain that she had not retired for the night and that he would find her somewhere about the grounds of the hotel.

She was sitting with her chin cupped in the palms of her hands, and she did not turn her head or look around at the sound of his approach.

‘Mademoiselle de Bellefort?’ asked Poirot. ‘You permit that I speak to you for a little moment?’

Jacqueline turned her head slightly. A faint smile played round her lips.

‘Certainly,’ she said. ‘You are Monsieur Hercule Poirot, I think? Shall I make a guess? You are acting for Mrs Doyle, who has promised you a large fee if you succeed in your mission.’

Poirot sat down on the bench near her.

'Your assumption is partially correct,' he said, smiling. 'I have just come from Madame Doyle, but I am not accepting any fee from her and, strictly speaking, I am not acting for her.'

'Oh!' Jacqueline studied him attentively. 'Then why have you come?' she asked abruptly.

Hercule Poirot's reply was in the form of another question.

'Have you ever seen me before, Mademoiselle?'

She shook her head.

'No, I do not think so.'

'Yet I have seen you. I sat next to you once at Chez Ma Tante. You were there with Monsieur Simon Doyle.'

A strange masklike expression came over the girl's face. She said,

'I remember that evening...'

'Since then,' said Poirot, 'many things have occurred.'

'As you say, many things have occurred.'

Her voice was hard with an undertone of desperate bitterness.

'Mademoiselle, I speak as a friend. *Bury your dead!*'

She looked startled.

'What do you mean?'

'Give up the past! Turn to the future! What is done is done. Bitterness will not undo it.'

'I'm sure that that would suit dear Linnet admirably.'

Poirot made a gesture.

'I am not thinking of her at this moment! I am thinking of *you*. You have suffered – yes – but what you are doing now will only prolong that suffering.'

She shook her head.

'You're wrong. There are times when I almost enjoy myself.'

'And that, Mademoiselle, is the worst of all.'

She looked up swiftly.

'You're not stupid,' she said. She added slowly, 'I believe you mean to be kind.'

'Go home, Mademoiselle. You are young, you have brains – the world is before you.'

Jacqueline shook her head slowly.

'You don't understand – or you won't. Simon is my world.'

'Love is not everything, Mademoiselle,' Poirot said gently. 'It is only when we are young that we think it is.'

But the girl still shook her head.

'You don't understand.' She shot him a quick look. 'You know all about it, of course? You've talked to Linnet? And you were in the restaurant that night... Simon and I loved each other.'

'I know that you loved him.'

She was quick to perceive the inflection of his words. She repeated with emphasis:

'*We loved each other*. And I loved Linnet... I trusted her. She was my best friend. All her life Linnet has been able to buy everything she wanted. She's never denied herself anything. When she saw Simon she wanted him – and she just took him.'

'And he allowed himself to be – bought?'

Jacqueline shook her dark head slowly.

'No, it's not quite like that. If it were, I shouldn't be here now... You're suggesting that Simon isn't worth caring for... If he'd married Linnet for her money, that would be true. But he didn't marry her for her money. It's more complicated than that. There's such a thing as *glamour*, Monsieur Poirot.'

And money helps that. Linnet had an “atmosphere”, you see. She was the queen of a kingdom – the young princess – luxurious to her fingertips. It was like a stage setting. She had the world at her feet, one of the richest and most sought-after peers in England wanting to marry her. And she stoops instead to the obscure Simon Doyle... Do you wonder it went to his head?’ She made a sudden gesture. ‘Look at the moon up there. You see her very plainly, don’t you? She’s very real. *But if the sun were to shine you wouldn’t be able to see her at all.* It was rather like that. I was the moon... When the sun came out, Simon couldn’t see me any more... He was dazzled. He couldn’t see anything but the sun – Linnet.’

She paused and then she went on:

‘So you see it was – glamour. She went to his head. And then there’s her complete assurance – her habit of command. She’s so sure of herself that she makes other people sure. Simon was – weak, perhaps, but then he’s a very simple person. He would have loved me and me only if Linnet hadn’t come along and snatched him up in her golden chariot. And I know – I know perfectly – that he wouldn’t ever have fallen in love with her if she hadn’t made him.’

‘That is what you think – yes.’

‘I *know* it. He loved me – he will always love me.’

Poirot said:

‘Even now?’

A quick answer seemed to rise to her lips, then be stifled. She looked at Poirot and a deep burning colour spread over her face. She looked away, her head dropped down. She said in a low stifled voice:

‘Yes, I know. He hates me now. Yes, hates me... He’d better be careful.’

With a quick gesture she fumbled in a little silk bag that lay on the seat. Then she held out her hand. On the palm of it was a small pearl-handled pistol – a dainty toy it looked.

‘Nice little thing, isn’t it?’ she said. ‘Looks too foolish to be real, but it is real! One of those bullets would kill a man or a woman. And I’m a good shot.’ She smiled a faraway, reminiscent smile. ‘When I went home as a child with my mother to South Carolina, my grandfather taught me to shoot. He was the old-fashioned kind that believes in shooting – especially where honour is concerned. My father, too, he fought several duels as a young man. He was a good swordsman. He killed a man once. That was over a woman. So you see, Monsieur Poirot’-she met his eyes squarely-‘I’ve hot blood in me! I bought this when it first happened. I meant to kill one or other of them – the trouble was I couldn’t decide which. Both of them would have been unsatisfactory. If I’d thought Linnet would have looked afraid – but she’s got plenty of physical courage. She can stand up to physical action. And then I thought I’d – wait! That appealed to me more and more. After all, I could do it any time; it would be more fun to wait and – think about it! And then this idea came to my mind – to follow them! Whenever they arrived at some faraway spot and were together and happy, they should see – *me*! And it worked! It got Linnet badly – in a way nothing else could have done! It got right under her skin... That was when I began to enjoy myself... And there’s nothing she can do about it! I’m always perfectly pleasant and polite! There’s not a word they can take hold of! It’s poisoning everything – everything – for them.’

Her laugh rang out, clear and silvery.

Poirot grasped her arm.

‘Be quiet. Quiet, I tell you.’

Jacqueline looked at him.

‘Well?’ she said. Her smile was definitely challenging.

‘Mademoiselle, I beseech you, do not do what you are doing.’

‘Leave dear Linnet alone, you mean!’

‘It is deeper than that. Do not open your heart to evil.’

Her lips fell apart; a look of bewilderment came into her eyes.

Poirot went on gravely:

‘Because – if you do – *evil will come* ... Yes, very surely evil will come... It will enter in and make its home within you, and after a little while it will no longer be possible to drive it out.’

Jacqueline stared at him. Her glance seemed to waver, to flicker uncertainly.

She said: ‘I – don’t know-’ Then she cried out definitely: ‘You can’t stop me.’

‘No,’ said Hercule Poirot. ‘I cannot stop you.’ His voice was sad.

‘Even if I were to – kill her, you couldn’t stop me.’

‘No – not if you were willing – to pay the price.’

Jacqueline de Bellefort laughed.

‘Oh, I’m not afraid of death! What have I got to live for, after all? I suppose you believe it’s very wrong to kill a person who has injured you – even if they’ve taken away everything you had in the world?’

Poirot said steadily:

‘Yes, Mademoiselle. I believe it is the unforgivable offence – to kill.’

Jacqueline laughed again.

‘Then you ought to approve of my present scheme of revenge. Because, you see, *as long as it works*, I shan’t use that pistol... But I’m afraid – yes, afraid sometimes – it all goes red – I want to hurt her – to stick a knife into her, to put my dear little pistol close against her head and then – just press with my finger – *Oh!*’

The exclamation startled him.

‘What is it, Mademoiselle!’

She turned her head and was staring into the shadows.

‘Someone – standing over there. He’s gone now.’

Hercule Poirot looked round sharply. The place seemed quite deserted.

‘There seems no one here but ourselves, Mademoiselle.’ He got up. ‘In any case I have said all I came to say. I wish you good night.’

Jacqueline got up too. She said almost pleadingly:

‘You do understand – that I can’t do what you ask me to do?’

Poirot shook his head.

‘No – for *you could do it!* There is always a moment! Your friend Linnet – there was a moment, too, in which she could have held her hand... She let it pass by. And if one does that, then one is committed to the enterprise and there comes no second chance.’

‘No second chance...’ said Jacqueline de Bellefort.

She stood brooding for a moment, then she lifted her head defiantly.

‘Good night, Monsieur Poirot.’

He shook his head sadly and followed her up the path to the hotel.

Chapter 5

On the following morning Simon Doyle joined Hercule Poirot as the latter was leaving the hotel to walk down to the town.

‘Good morning, Monsieur Poirot.’

‘Good morning, Monsieur Doyle.’

‘You going to the town? Mind if I stroll along with you?’

‘But certainly. I shall be delighted.’

The two men walked side by side, passed out through the gateway and turned into the cool shade of the gardens. Then Simon removed his pipe from his mouth and said,

‘I understand, Monsieur Poirot, that my wife had a talk with you last night?’

‘That is so.’

Simon Doyle was frowning a little. He belonged to that type of men of action who find it difficult to put thoughts into words and who have trouble in expressing themselves clearly.

‘I’m glad of one thing,’ he said. ‘You’ve made her realize that we’re more or less powerless in the matter.’

‘There is clearly no legal redress,’ agreed Poirot.

‘Exactly. Linnet didn’t seem to understand that.’ He gave a faint smile. ‘Linnet’s been brought up to believe that every annoyance can automatically be referred to the police.’

‘It would be pleasant if such were the case,’ said Poirot.

There was a pause. Then Simon said suddenly, his face going very red as he spoke:

‘It’s – it’s infamous that she should be victimized like this! She’s done nothing! If anyone likes to say I behaved like a cad, they’re welcome to say so! I suppose I did. But I won’t have the whole thing visited on Linnet. She had nothing whatever to do with it.’

Poirot bowed his head gravely but said nothing.

‘Did you – er – have you – talked to Jackie – Miss de Bellefort?’

‘Yes, I have spoken with her.’

‘Did you get her to see sense?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

Simon broke out irritably.

‘Can’t she see what an ass she’s making of herself? Doesn’t she realize that no decent woman would behave as she is doing? Hasn’t she got any pride or self-respect?’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘She has only a sense of – injury, shall we say?’ he replied.

‘Yes, but damn it all, man, decent girls don’t behave like this! I admit I was entirely to blame. I treated her damned badly and all that. I should quite understand her being thoroughly fed up with me and never wishing to see me again. But this following me round – it’s – it’s *indecent*! Making a show of herself! What the devil does she hope to get out of it?’

‘Perhaps – revenge!’

‘Idiotic! I’d really understand better if she’d tried to do something melodramatic – like taking a pot shot at me.’

‘You think that would be more like her – yes?’

‘Frankly I do. She’s hot-blooded – and she’s got an ungovernable temper. I shouldn’t be surprised at her doing anything while she was in a white-hot rage. But this spying business-’ He shook his head.

‘It is more subtle – yes! It is intelligent!’

Doyle stared at him.

‘You don’t understand. It’s playing hell with Linnet’s nerves.’

‘And yours?’

Simon looked at him with momentary surprise.

‘Me? I’d like to wring the little devil’s neck.’

‘There is nothing, then, of the old feeling left?’

‘My dear Monsieur Poirot – how can I put it? It’s like the moon when the sun comes out. You don’t know it’s there any more. When once I’d met Linnet – Jackie didn’t exist.’

'*Tiens, c'est drôle, ça!*' muttered Poirot.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Your simile interested me, that is all.'

Again flushing, Simon said:

'I suppose Jackie told you that I'd only married Linnet for her money? Well, that's a damned lie! I wouldn't marry any woman for money! What Jackie doesn't understand is that it's difficult for a fellow when – when – a woman cares for him as she cared for me.'

'Ah?'

Poirot looked up sharply.

Simon blundered on.

'It – it – sounds a caddish thing to say, but Jackie was *too* fond of me!'

'*Une qui aime et un qui se laisse aimer,*' murmured Poirot.

'Eh? What's that you say? You see, a man doesn't want to feel that a woman cares more for him than he does for her.' His voice grew warm as he went on. 'He doesn't want to feel *owned*, body and soul. It's that damned *possessive* attitude! This man is *mine* – he *belongs* to me! That's the sort of thing I can't stick – no man could stick! He wants to get away – to get free. He wants to own his woman – he doesn't want *her* to own *him*.'

He broke off, and with fingers that trembled slightly he lit a cigarette.

Poirot said:

'And it is like that that you felt with Mademoiselle Jacqueline?'

'Eh?' Simon stared and then admitted: 'Er – yes – well, yes, as a matter of fact I did. She doesn't realize that, of course. And it's not the sort of thing I could ever tell her. But I *was* feeling restless – and then I met Linnet, and she just swept me off my feet! I'd never seen anything so lovely. It was all so amazing. Everyone kowtowing to her – and then her singling out a poor chump like me.'

His tone held boyish awe and astonishment.

'I see,' said Poirot. He nodded thoughtfully. 'Yes – I see.'

'Why can't Jackie take it like a man?' demanded Simon resentfully.

A very faint smile twitched Poirot's upper lip.

'Well, you see, Monsieur Doyle, to begin with she is *not* a man.'

'No, no – but I meant take it like a good sport! After all, you've got to take your medicine when it comes to you. The fault's mine, I admit. But there it is! If you no longer care for a girl, it's simply madness to marry her. And now that I see what Jackie's really like and the lengths she is likely to go to, I feel I've had rather a lucky escape.'

'The lengths she is likely to go to,' Poirot repeated thoughtfully. 'Have you an idea, Monsieur Doyle, what those lengths are?'

Simon looked at him rather startled.

'No – at least, what do you mean?'

'You know she carries a pistol about with her?'

Simon frowned, then shook his head.

'I don't believe she'll use that – now. She might have done so earlier. But I believe it's got past that. She's just spiteful now – trying to take it out of us both.'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'It may be so,' he said doubtfully.

'It's Linnet I'm worrying about,' said Simon somewhat unnecessarily.

'I quite realize that,' said Poirot.

'I'm not really afraid of Jackie doing any melodramatic shooting stuff, but this spying and following business has absolutely got Linnet on the raw. I'll tell you the plan I've made, and perhaps

you can suggest improvements on it. To begin with, I've announced fairly openly that we're going to stay here ten days. But tomorrow – the steamer *Karnak* starts from Shellal to Wadi Halfa. I propose to book passages on that under an assumed name. Tomorrow we'll go on an excursion to Philae. Linnet's maid can take the luggage. We'll join the *Karnak* at Shellal. When Jackie finds we don't come back, it will be too late – we shall be well on our way. She'll assume we have given her the slip and gone back to Cairo. In fact I might even bribe the porter to say so. Enquiry at the tourist offices won't help her, because our names won't appear. How does that strike you?

'It is well imagined, yes. And suppose she waits here till you return?'

'We may not return. We would go on to Khartoum and then perhaps by air to Kenya. She can't follow us all over the globe.'

'No, there must come a time when financial reasons forbid. She has very little money, I understand.'

Simon looked at him with admiration.

'That's clever of you. Do you know, I hadn't thought of that. Jackie's as poor as they make them.'

'And yet she has managed to follow you so far?'

Simon said doubtfully:

'She's got a small income, of course. Something under two hundred a year, I imagine. I suppose – yes, I suppose she must have sold out the capital to do what she's doing.'

'So that the time will come when she has exhausted her resources and is quite penniless?'

'Yes...'

Simon wriggled uneasily. The thought seemed to make him uncomfortable. Poirot watched him attentively.

'No,' he remarked. 'No, it is not a pretty thought...'

Simon said rather angrily:

'Well, *I* can't help it!' Then he added, 'What do you think of my plan?'

'I think it may work, yes. But it is, of course, a *retreat*.'

Simon flushed.

'You mean, we're running away? Yes, that's true... But Linnet-'

Poirot watched him, then gave a short nod.

'As you say, it may be the best way. But remember, Mademoiselle de Bellefort has brains.'

Simon said sombrely:

'Some day, I feel, we've got to make a stand and fight it out. Her attitude isn't reasonable.'

'Reasonable, *mon Dieu*!' cried Poirot.

'There's no reason why women shouldn't behave like rational beings,' said Simon stolidly.

Poirot said dryly:

'Quite frequently they do. That is even more upsetting!' He added, 'I, too, shall be on the *Karnak*. It is part of my itinerary.'

'Oh!' Simon hesitated, then said, choosing his words with some embarrassment: 'That isn't – isn't – er – on our account in any way? I mean I wouldn't like to think-'

Poirot disabused him quickly.

'Not at all. It was all arranged before I left London. I always make my plans well in advance.'

'You don't just move on from place to place as the fancy takes you? Isn't the latter really pleasanter?'

'Perhaps. But to succeed in life every detail should be arranged well beforehand.'

Simon laughed and said:

‘That is how the more skilful murderer behaves, I suppose.’

‘Yes – though I must admit that the most brilliant crime I remember and one of the most difficult to solve was committed on the spur of the moment.’

Simon said boyishly:

‘You must tell us something about your cases on board the *Karnak*.’

‘No, no; that would be to talk – what do you call it? – the shop.’

‘Yes, but your kind of shop is rather thrilling. Mrs Allerton thinks so. She’s longing to get a chance to cross-question you.’

‘Mrs Allerton? That is the charming grey-haired woman who has such a devoted son?’

‘Yes. She’ll be on the *Karnak* too.’

‘Does she know that you-?’

‘Certainly not,’ said Simon with emphasis. ‘Nobody knows. I’ve gone on the principle that it’s better not to trust anybody.’

‘An admirable sentiment – and one which I always adopt. By the way, the third member of your party, the tall grey-haired man-’

‘Pennington?’

‘Yes. He is travelling with you?’

Simon said grimly:

‘Not very usual on a honeymoon, you were thinking? Pennington is Linnet’s American trustee. We ran across him by chance in Cairo.’

‘Ah, *vraiment*! You permit a question? She is of age, Madame your wife?’

Simon looked amused.

‘She isn’t actually twenty-one yet – but she hadn’t got to ask anyone’s consent before marrying me. It was the greatest surprise to Pennington. He left New York on the *Carmanic* two days before Linnet’s letter got there telling him of our marriage. So he knew nothing about it.’

‘The *Carmanic*,’ murmured Poirot.

‘It was the greatest surprise to him when we ran into him at Shepherd’s in Cairo.’

‘That was indeed the coincidence!’

‘Yes, and we found that he was coming on this Nile trip – so naturally we foregathered – couldn’t have done anything else decently. Besides that, it’s been – well, a relief in some ways.’ He looked embarrassed again. ‘You see, Linnet’s been all strung up – expecting Jackie to turn up anywhere and everywhere. While we were alone together, the subject kept coming up. Andrew Pennington’s a help that way – we have to talk of outside matters.’

‘Your wife has not confided in Mr Pennington?’

‘No.’ Simon’s jaw looked aggressive. ‘It’s nothing to do with anyone else. Besides, when we started on this Nile trip we thought we’d seen the end of the business.’

Poirot shook his head.

‘You have not seen the end of it yet. No – the end is not yet at hand. I am very sure of that.’

‘I must say, Monsieur Poirot, you’re not very encouraging.’

Poirot looked at him with a slight feeling of irritation. He thought to himself: ‘The Anglo-Saxon, he takes nothing seriously but playing games! He does not grow up.’

Linnet Doyle – Jacqueline de Bellefort – both of them took the business seriously enough. But in Simon’s attitude he could find nothing but male impatience and annoyance.

He said:

‘You will permit me an impertinent question? Was it *your* idea to come to Egypt for your honeymoon?’

Simon flushed.

‘No, of course not. As a matter of fact I’d rather have gone anywhere else. But Linnet was absolutely set upon it. And so – and so-’

He stopped rather lamely.

‘Naturally,’ said Poirot gravely.

He appreciated the fact that if Linnet Doyle was set upon anything, that thing had to happen.

He thought to himself: ‘I have now heard three separate accounts of the affair – Linnet Doyle’s, Jacqueline de Bellefort’s, Simon Doyle’s. Which of them is nearest to the truth?’

Chapter 6

Simon and Linnet Doyle set off on their expedition to Philae about eleven o’clock the following morning. Jacqueline de Bellefort, sitting on the hotel balcony, watched them set off in the picturesque sailing boat. What she did not see was the departure of a car – laden with luggage, and in which sat a demure-looking maid – from the front door of the hotel. It turned to the right in the direction of Shellal.

Hercule Poirot decided to pass the remaining two hours before lunch on the island of Elephantine, immediately opposite the hotel.

He went down to the landing-stage. There were two men just stepping into one of the hotel boats, and Poirot joined them. The men were obviously strangers to each other. The younger of them had arrived by train the day before. He was a tall, dark-haired young man, with a thin face and a pugnacious chin. He was wearing an extremely dirty pair of grey flannel trousers and a highnecked polo jumper singularly unsuited to the climate. The other was a slightly podgy middle-aged man who lost no time in entering into conversation with Poirot in idiomatic but slightly broken English. Far from taking part in the conversation, the younger man merely scowled at them both and then deliberately turned his back on them and proceeded to admire the agility with which the boatman steered the boat with his toes as he manipulated the sail with his hands.

It was very peaceful on the water, the great smooth slippery black rocks gliding by and the soft breeze fanning their faces. Elephantine was reached very quickly and on going ashore Poirot and his loquacious acquaintance made straight for the museum. By this time the latter had produced a card which he handed to Poirot with a little bow. It bore the inscription:

‘Signor Guido Richetti, Archeologo.’

Not to be outdone, Poirot returned the bow and extracted his own card. These formalities completed, the two men stepped into the Museum together, the Italian pouring forth a stream of erudite information. They were by now conversing in French.

The young man in the flannel trousers strolled listlessly round the Museum, yawning from time to time, and then escaped to the outer air.

Poirot and Signor Richetti at last found him. The Italian was energetic in examining the ruins, but presently Poirot, espying a green-lined sunshade which he recognized on the rocks down by the river, escaped in that direction.

Mrs Allerton was sitting on a large rock, a sketchbook by her side and a book on her lap.

Poirot removed his hat politely and Mrs Allerton at once entered into conversation.

‘Good morning,’ she said. ‘I suppose it would be quite impossible to get rid of some of these awful children.’

A group of small figures surrounded her, all grinning and posturing and holding out imploring hands as they lisped ‘Bakshish’ at intervals hopefully.

‘I thought they’d get tired of me,’ said Mrs Allerton sadly. ‘They’ve been watching me for over two hours now – and they close in on me little by little; and then I yell “Imshi” and brandish my sunshade at them and they scatter for a minute or two. And then they come back and stare and stare, and I don’t believe I really like children – not unless they’re more or less washed and have the rudiments of manners.’

She laughed ruefully.

Poirot gallantly attempted to disperse the mob for her, but without avail. They scattered and then reappeared, closing in once more.

‘If there were only any peace in Egypt, I should like it better,’ said Mrs Allerton. ‘But you can never be alone anywhere – someone is always pestering you for money, or offering you donkeys, or beads, or expeditions to local villages, or duck shooting.’

‘It is the great disadvantage, that is true,’ said Poirot.

He spread his handkerchief cautiously on the rock and sat somewhat gingerly upon it.

‘Your son is not with you this morning?’ he went on.

‘No, Tim had some letters to get off before we leave. We’re doing the trip to the Second Cataract, you know.’

‘I, too.’

‘I’m so glad. I want to tell you that I’m quite thrilled to meet you. When we were in Majorca, there was a Mrs Leech there, and she was telling us the most wonderful things about you. She’d lost a ruby ring bathing, and she was just lamenting that you weren’t there to find it for her.

‘Ah, *parbleu*, but I am not the diving seal!’

They both laughed.

Mrs Allerton went on.

‘I saw you from my window walking down the drive with Simon Doyle this morning. Do tell me what you make of him! We’re so excited about him.’

‘Ah? Truly?’

‘Yes. You know his marriage to Linnet Ridgeway was the greatest surprise. She was supposed to be going to marry Lord Windlesham and then suddenly she gets engaged to this man no one had ever heard of!’

‘You know her well, Madame?’

‘No, but a cousin of mine, Joanna Southwood, is one of her best friends.’

‘Ah, yes, I have read that name in the papers.’ He was silent a moment and then went on, ‘She is a young lady very much in the news, Mademoiselle Joanna Southwood.’

‘Oh, she knows how to advertise herself all right,’ snapped Mrs Allerton.

‘You do not like her, Madame?’

‘That was a nasty remark of mine.’ Mrs Allerton looked penitent. ‘You see, I’m old-fashioned. I don’t like her much. Tim and she are the greatest of friends, though.’

‘I see,’ said Poirot.

His companion shot a quick look at him. She changed the subject.

‘How very few young people there are out here! That pretty girl with the chestnut hair and the appalling mother in the turban is almost the only young creature in the place. You have talked to her a good deal, I notice. She interests me, that child.’

‘Why is that, Madame?’

‘I feel sorry for her. You can suffer so much when you are young and sensitive. I think she is suffering.’

‘Yes, she is not happy, poor little one.’

'Tim and I call her the "sulky girl". I've tried to talk to her once or twice, but she's snubbed me on each occasion. However, I believe she's going on this Nile trip too, and I expect we'll have to be more or less all matey together, shan't we?'

'It is a possible contingency, Madame.'

'I'm very matey really – people interest me enormously. All the different types.' She paused, then said: 'Tim tells me that that girl – her name is de Bellefort – is the girl who was engaged to Simon Doyle. It's rather awkward for them – meeting like this.'

'It is awkward – yes,' agreed Poirot.

Mrs Allerton shot a quick glance at him.

'You know, it may sound foolish, but she almost frightened me. She looked so – intense.'

Poirot nodded his head slowly.

'You were not far wrong, Madame. A great force of emotion is always frightening.'

'Do people interest you too, Monsieur Poirot? Or do you reserve your interest for potential criminals?'

'Madame – that category would not leave many people outside it.'

Mrs Allerton looked a trifle startled.

'Do you really mean that?'

'Given the particular incentive, that is to say,' Poirot added.

'Which would differ?'

'Naturally.'

Mrs Allerton hesitated – a little smile on her lips.

'Even I perhaps?'

'Mothers, Madame, are particularly ruthless when their children are in danger.'

She said gravely:

'I think that's true – yes, you're quite right.'

She was silent a minute or two, then she said, smiling:

'I'm trying to imagine motives for crime suitable for everyone in the hotel. It's quite entertaining. Simon Doyle, for instance?'

Poirot said, smiling:

'A very simple crime – a direct short cut to his objective. No subtlety about it.'

'And therefore very easily detected?'

'Yes; he would not be ingenious.'

'And Linnet?'

'That would be like the Queen in your *Alice in Wonderland*, "Off with her head."'

'Of course. The divine right of monarchy! Just a little bit of the Naboth's vineyard touch. And the dangerous girl – Jacqueline de Bellefort – could *she* do a murder?'

Poirot hesitated for a minute or two, then he said doubtfully:

'Yes, I think she could.'

'But you're not sure?'

'No. She puzzles me, that little one.'

'I don't think Mr Pennington could do one, do you? He looks so desiccated and dyspeptic – with no red blood in him.'

'But possibly a emphasis sense of self-preservation.'

'Yes, I suppose so. And poor Mrs Otterbourne in her turban?'

'There is always vanity.'

'As a motive for murder?' Mrs Allerton asked doubtfully.

'Motives for murder are sometimes very trivial, Madame.'

‘What are the most usual motives, Monsieur Poirot?’

‘Most frequent – money. That is to say, gain in its various ramifications. Then there is revenge, and love, and fear – and pure hate, and beneficence-’

‘Monsieur Poirot!’

‘Oh, yes, Madame. I have known of – shall we say A? – being removed by B solely in order to benefit C. Political murders often come under that heading. Someone is considered to be harmful to civilization and is removed on that account. Such people forget that life and death are the affair of the good God.’

He spoke gravely.

Mrs Allerton said quietly:

‘I am glad to hear you say that. All the same, God chooses his instruments.’

‘There is a danger in thinking like that, Madame.’

She adopted a lighter tone:

‘After this conversation, Monsieur Poirot, I shall wonder that there is anyone left alive!’ She got up. ‘We must be getting back. We have to start immediately after lunch.’

When they reached the landing stage they found the young man in the polo jumper just taking his place in the boat. The Italian was already waiting. As the boatman cast the sail loose and they started, Poirot addressed a polite remark to the stranger:

‘There are very wonderful things to be seen in Egypt, are there not?’

The young man was now smoking a somewhat noisome pipe. He removed it from his mouth and remarked briefly and emphatically in astonishingly well-bred accents:

‘They make me sick.’

Mrs Allerton put on her pince-nez and surveyed him with pleasurable interest. Poirot said:

‘Indeed? And why is that?’

‘Take the Pyramids. Great blocks of useless masonry put up to minister to the egoism of a despotic bloated king. Think of the sweated masses who toiled to build them and died doing it. It makes me sick to think of the suffering and torture they represent.’

Mrs Allerton said cheerfully:

‘You’d rather have no Pyramids, no Parthenon, no beautiful tombs or temples – just the solid satisfaction of knowing that people got three meals a day and died in their beds.’

The young man directed his scowl in her direction.

‘I think human beings matter more than stones.’

‘But they do not endure as well,’ remarked Hercule Poirot.

‘I’d rather see a well fed worker than any so-called work of art. What matters is the future – not the past.’

This was too much for Signor Richetti, who burst into a torrent of impassioned speech not too easy to follow.

The young man retorted by telling everybody exactly what he thought of the capitalist system. He spoke with the utmost venom.

When the tirade was over they had arrived at the hotel landing-stage.

Mrs Allerton murmured cheerfully: ‘Well, well,’ and stepped ashore.

The young man directed a baleful glance after her.

In the hall of the hotel Poirot encountered Jacqueline de Bellefort. She was dressed in riding clothes. She gave him an ironical little bow.

‘I’m going donkey-riding. Do you recommend the local villages, Monsieur Poirot?’

‘Is that your excursion today, Mademoiselle? *Eh bien*, they are picturesque – but do not spend large sums on local curios.’

‘Which are shipped here from Europe? No, I am not so easy to deceive as that.’

With a little nod she passed out into the brilliant sunshine.

Poirot completed his packing – a very simple affair, since his possessions were always in the most meticulous order. Then he repaired to the dining room and ate an early lunch.

After lunch the hotel bus took the passengers for the Second Cataract to the station where they were to catch the daily express from Cairo to Shellal – a ten-minute run. The Allertons, Poirot, the young man in the dirty flannel trousers and the Italian were the passengers. Mrs Otterbourne and her daughter had made the expedition to the Dam and to Philae and would join the steamer at Shellal.

The train from Cairo and Luxor was about twenty minutes late. However, it arrived at last, and the usual scenes of wild activity occurred. Porters taking suitcases out of the train collided with other porters putting them in.

Finally, somewhat breathless, Poirot found himself with an assortment of his own, the Allertons’, and some totally unknown luggage in one compartment, while Tim and his mother were elsewhere with the remains of the assorted baggage.

The compartment in which Poirot found himself was occupied by an elderly lady with a very wrinkled face, a stiff white stock, a good many diamonds and an expression of reptilian contempt for the majority of mankind.

She treated Poirot to an aristocratic glare and retired behind the pages of an American magazine. A big, rather clumsy young woman of under thirty was sitting opposite her. She had eager brown eyes rather like a dog’s, untidy hair, and a terrific air of willingness to please. At intervals the old lady looked over the top of her magazine and snapped an order at her.

‘Cornelia, collect the rugs. When we arrive look after my dressing-case. On no account let anyone else handle it. Don’t forget my paper-cutter.’

The train run was brief. In ten minutes’ time they came to rest on the jetty where the *S. S. Karnak* was awaiting them. The Otterbournes were already on board.

The *Karnak* was a smaller steamer than the *Papyrus* and the *Lotus*, the First Cataract steamers, which are too large to pass through the locks of the Aswan dam. The passengers went on board and were shown their accommodation. Since the boat was not full, most of the passengers had accommodation on the promenade deck. The entire forward part of this deck was occupied by an observation saloon, all glass-enclosed, where the passengers could sit and watch the river unfold before them. On the deck below were a smoking room and a small drawing room and on the deck below that, the dining saloon.

Having seen his possessions disposed in his cabin, Poirot came out on the deck again to watch the process of departure. He joined Rosalie Otterbourne, who was leaning over the side.

‘So now we journey into Nubia. You are pleased, Mademoiselle?’

The girl drew a deep breath.

‘Yes. I feel that one’s really getting away from things at last.’ She made a gesture with her hand. There was a savage aspect about the sheet of water in front of them, the masses of rock without vegetation that came down to the water’s edge – here and there a trace of houses abandoned and ruined as a result of the damming up of the waters. The whole scene had a melancholy, almost sinister charm. ‘Away from *people*,’ said Rosalie Otterbourne.

‘Except those of our own number, Mademoiselle?’

She shrugged her shoulders. Then she said:

‘There’s something about this country that makes me feel – wicked. It brings to the surface all the things that are boiling inside one. Everything’s so unfair – so unjust.’

‘I wonder. You cannot judge by material evidence.’

Rosalie muttered:

‘Look at – at some people’s mothers – and look at mine. There is no God but Sex, and Salome Otterbourne is its Prophet.’ She stopped. ‘I shouldn’t have said that, I suppose.’

Poirot made a gesture with his hands.

‘Why not say it – to me? I am one of those who hear many things. If, as you say, you boil inside – like the jam – *Eh bien*, let the scum come to the surface, and then one can take it off with a spoon, so.’ He made a gesture of dropping something into the Nile. ‘Then, it has gone.’

Rosalie said:

‘What an extraordinary man you are!’ Her sulky mouth twisted into a smile. Then she suddenly stiffened as she exclaimed: ‘Well, here are Mrs Doyle and her husband! I’d no idea *they* were coming on this trip!’

Linnet had just emerged from a cabin halfway down the deck. Simon was behind her. Poirot was almost startled by the look of her – so radiant, so assured. She looked positively arrogant with happiness. Simon Doyle, too, was a transformed being. He was grinning from ear to ear and looking like a happy schoolboy.

‘This is grand,’ he said as he too leaned on the rail. ‘I’m really looking forward to this trip, aren’t you, Linnet? It feels somehow so much less touristic – as though we were really going into the heart of Egypt.’

His wife responded quickly:

‘I know. It’s so much – wilder, somehow.’

Her hand slipped through his arm. He pressed it close to his side.

‘We’re off, Lin,’ he murmured.

The steamer was drawing away from the jetty. They had started on their seven-day journey to the Second Cataract and back.

Behind them a light silvery laugh rang out. Linnet whipped round.

Jacqueline de Bellefort was standing there. She seemed amused.

‘Hullo, Linnet! I didn’t expect to find you here. I thought you said you were staying in Aswan another ten days. This is a surprise!’

‘You – you didn’t-’ Linnet’s tongue stammered. She forced a ghastly conventional smile. ‘I didn’t expect to see you either.’

‘No?’

Jacqueline moved away to the other side of the boat. Linnet’s grasp on her husband’s arm tightened.

‘Simon – Simon-’

All Doyle’s good-natured pleasure had gone. He looked furious. His hands clenched themselves in spite of his effort at self-control.

The two of them moved a little away. Without turning his head Poirot caught scraps of disjointed words.

‘... turn back... impossible... we could...’ and then, slightly louder, Doyle’s voice, despairing but grim. ‘We can’t run away for ever, Lin. *We’ve got to go through with it now ...*’

It was some hours later. Daylight was just fading. Poirot stood in the glass-enclosed saloon looking straight ahead. The *Karnak* was going through a narrow gorge. The rocks came down with a kind of sheer ferocity to the river flowing deep and swift between them. They were in Nubia now.

He heard a movement and Linnet Doyle stood by his side. Her fingers twisted and untwisted themselves; she looked as he had never yet seen her look. There was about her the air of a bewildered child. She said:

‘Monsieur Poirot, I’m afraid – I’m afraid of everything. I’ve never felt like this before. All these wild rocks and the awful grimness and starkness. Where are we going? What’s going to happen? I’m afraid, I tell you. Everyone hates me. I’ve never felt like that before. I’ve always been nice to people

– I’ve done things for them – and they hate me – lots of people hate me. Except for Simon, I’m surrounded by enemies... It’s terrible to feel – that there are people who hate you...’

‘But what is all this, Madame?’

She shook her head.

‘I suppose – it’s nerves... I just feel that – everything’s unsafe all round me.’

She cast a quick nervous glance over his shoulder. Then she said abruptly: ‘How will all this end? We’re caught here. Trapped. There’s no way out. We’ve got to go on. I—I don’t know where I am.’

She slipped down on to a seat. Poirot looked down on her gravely; his glance was not untinged with compassion.

She said:

‘How did she know we were coming on this boat? How could she have known?’

Poirot shook his head as he answered:

‘She has brains, you know.’

‘I feel as though I shall never escape from her.’

Poirot said: ‘There is one plan you might have adopted. In fact I am surprised that it did not occur to you. After all, with you, Madame, money is no object. Why did you not engage in your own private dahabeeyah?’

Linnet shook her head rather helplessly.

‘If we’d known about all this – but you see we didn’t – then. And it was difficult...’ She flashed out with sudden impatience: ‘Oh! you don’t understand half my difficulties. I’ve got to be careful with Simon... He’s – he’s absurdly sensitive – about money. About my having so much! He wanted me to go to some little place in Spain with him – he – he wanted to pay all our honeymoon expenses himself. As if it *mattered*! Men are stupid! He’s got to get used to – to – living comfortably. The mere idea of a dahabeeyah upset him – the – the needless expense. I’ve got to educate him – gradually.’

She looked up, bit her lip vexedly, as though feeling that she had been led into discussing her difficulties rather too unguardedly.

She got up.

‘I must change. I’m sorry, Monsieur Poirot. I’m afraid I’ve been talking a lot of foolish nonsense.’

Chapter 7

Mrs Allerton, looking quiet and distinguished in her simple black lace evening gown, descended two decks to the dining room. At the door of it her son caught her up.

‘Sorry, darling. I thought I was going to be late.’

‘I wonder where we sit.’

The saloon was dotted with little tables. Mrs Allerton paused till the steward, who was busy seating a party of people, could attend to them.

‘By the way,’ she added, ‘I asked little Hercule Poirot to sit at our table.’

‘Mother, you didn’t!’ Tim sounded really taken aback and annoyed.

His mother stared at him in surprise. Tim was usually so easy going.

‘My dear, do you mind?’

‘Yes, I do. He’s an unmitigated little bounder!’

‘Oh, no, Tim! I don’t agree with you.’

‘Anyway, what do we want to get mixed up with an outsider for? Cooped up like this on a small boat, that sort of thing is always a bore. He’ll be with us morning, noon and night.’

‘I’m sorry, dear.’ Mrs Allerton looked distressed. ‘I thought really it would amuse you. After all, he must have had a varied experience. And you love detective stories.’

Tim grunted:

'I wish you wouldn't have these bright ideas, Mother. We can't get out of it now, I suppose?'

'Really, Tim, I don't see how we can.'

'Oh, well, we shall have to put up with it, I suppose.'

The steward came to them at this minute and led them to a table. Mrs Allerton's face wore rather a puzzled expression as she followed him. Tim was usually so easy-going and good-tempered. This outburst was quite unlike him. It wasn't as though he had the ordinary Britisher's dislike – and mistrust – of foreigners. Tim was very cosmopolitan. Oh, well – she sighed. Men were incomprehensible! Even one's nearest and dearest had unsuspected reactions and feelings.

As they took their places, Hercule Poirot came quickly and silently into the dining-saloon. He paused with his hand on the back of the third chair.

'You really permit, Madame, that I avail myself of your kind suggestion?'

'Of course. Sit down, Monsieur Poirot.'

'You are most amiable.'

She was uneasily conscious that as he seated himself he shot a swift glance at Tim, and that Tim had not quite succeeded in masking a somewhat sullen expression.

Mrs Allerton set herself to produce a pleasant atmosphere. As they drank their soup, she picked up the passenger list which had been placed beside her plate.

'Let's try and identify everybody,' she suggested cheerfully. 'I always think that's rather fun.' She began reading. 'Mrs Allerton, Mr T. Allerton. That's easy enough! Miss de Bellefort. They've put her at the same table as the Otterbournes, I see. I wonder what she and Rosalie will make of each other. Who comes next? Dr Bessner. Dr Bessner? Who can identify Dr Bessner?' She bent her glance on a table at which four men sat together. 'I think he must be the fat one with the closely shaved head and the moustache. A German, I should imagine. He seems to be enjoying his soup very much.' Certain succulent noises floated across to them.

Mrs Allerton continued:

'Miss Bowers? Can we make a guess at Miss Bowers? There are three or four women – no, we'll leave her for the present. Mr and Mrs Doyle. Yes, indeed, the lions of this trip. She really is very beautiful, and what a perfectly lovely frock she is wearing.'

Tim turned round in his chair. Linnet and her husband and Andrew Pennington had been given a table in the corner. Linnet was wearing a white dress and pearls.

'It looks frightfully simple to me,' said Tim. 'Just a length of stuff with a kind of cord round the middle.'

'Yes, darling,' said his mother. 'A very nice manly description of an eighty-guinea model.'

'I can't think why women pay so much for their clothes,' Tim said. 'It seems absurd to me.'

Mrs Allerton proceeded with her study of her fellow passengers.

'Mr Fanthorp must be the intensely quiet young man who never speaks, at the same table as the German. Rather a nice face, cautious but intelligent.'

Poirot agreed.

'He is intelligent – yes. He does not talk, but he listens very attentively and he also watches. Yes, he makes good use of his eyes. Not quite the type you would expect to find travelling for pleasure in this part of the world. I wonder what he is doing here.'

'Mr Ferguson,' read Mrs Allerton. 'I feel that Ferguson must be our anti-capitalist friend. Mrs Otterbourne, Miss Otterbourne. We know all about them. Mr Pennington? Alias Uncle Andrew. He's a good-looking man, I think.'

'Now, Mother,' said Tim.

‘I think he’s very good-looking in a dry sort of way,’ said Mrs Allerton. ‘Rather a ruthless jaw. Probably the kind of man one reads about in the paper, who operates on Wall Street – or is it *in* Wall Street? I’m sure he must be extremely rich. Next – Monsieur Hercule Poirot – whose talents are really being wasted. Can’t you get up a crime for Monsieur Poirot, Tim?’

But her well-meant banter only seemed to annoy her son anew. He scowled and Mrs Allerton hurried on.

‘Mr Richetti. Our Italian archaeological friend. Then Miss Robson and last of all Miss Van Schuyler. The last’s easy. The very ugly old American lady who obviously feels herself the queen of the boat and who is clearly going to be very exclusive and speak to nobody who doesn’t come up to the most exacting standards! She’s rather marvellous, isn’t she, really? A kind of period piece. The two women with her must be Miss Bowers and Miss Robson – perhaps a secretary, the thin one with pince-nez, and a poor relation, the rather pathetic young woman who is obviously enjoying herself in spite of being treated like a slave. I think Robson’s the secretary woman and Bowers is the poor relation.’

‘Wrong, Mother,’ said Tim, grinning. He had suddenly recovered his good humour.

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I was in the lounge before dinner and the old bean said to the companion woman: “Where’s Miss Bowers? Fetch her at once, Cornelia.” And away trotted Cornelia like an obedient dog.’

‘I shall have to talk to Miss Van Schuyler,’ mused Mrs Allerton.

Tim grinned again.

‘She’ll snub you, Mother.’

‘Not at all. I shall pave the way by sitting near her and conversing in low (but penetrating) well-bred tones about any titled relations and friends I can remember. I think a casual mention of your second cousin once removed, the Duke of Glasgow, would probably do the trick.’

‘How unscrupulous you are, Mother!’

Events after dinner were not without their amusing side to a student of human nature.

The socialistic young man (who turned out to be Mr Ferguson as deduced) retired to the smoking room, scorning the assemblage of passengers in the observation saloon on the top deck.

Miss Van Schuyler duly secured the best and most undraughty position there by advancing firmly on a table at which Mrs Otterbourne was sitting and saying:

‘You’ll excuse me, I am sure, but I *think* my knitting was left here!’

Fixed by a hypnotic eye, the turban rose and gave ground. Miss Van Schuyler established herself and her suite. Mrs Otterbourne sat down nearby and hazarded various remarks, which were met with such chilling politeness that she soon gave up. Miss Van Schuyler then sat in glorious isolation. The Doyles sat with the Allertons. Dr Bessner retained the quiet Mr Fanthorp as a companion. Jacqueline de Bellefort sat by herself with a book. Rosalie Otterbourne was restless. Mrs Allerton spoke to her once or twice and tried to draw her into their group, but the girl responded ungraciously.

M. Hercule Poirot spent his evening listening to an account of Mrs Otterbourne’s mission as a writer.

On his way to his cabin that night he encountered Jacqueline de Bellefort. She was leaning over the rail and as she turned her head he was struck by the look of acute misery on her face. There was now no insouciance, no malicious defiance, no dark flaming triumph.

‘Good night, Mademoiselle.’

‘Good night, Monsieur Poirot.’ She hesitated, then said: ‘You were surprised to find me here?’

'I was not so much surprised as sorry – very sorry...' He spoke gravely.

'You mean sorry – for *me*?'

'That is what I meant. You have chosen, Mademoiselle, the dangerous course... As we here in this boat have embarked on a journey, so you too have embarked on your own private journey – a journey on a swiftmoving river, between dangerous rocks, and heading for who knows what currents of disaster...'

'Why do you say this?'

'Because it is true... You have cut the bonds that moored you to safety. I doubt now if you could turn back if you would.'

She said very slowly: 'That is true...' Then she flung her head back. 'Ah, well – one must follow one's star – wherever it leads.'

'Beware, Mademoiselle, that it is not a false star...'

She laughed and mimicked the parrot cry of the donkey boys:

'That very bad star, sir! That star fall down...'

He was just dropping off to sleep when the murmur of voices awoke him. It was Simon Doyle's voice he heard, repeating the same words he had used when the steamer left Shellal.

'We've got to go through with it now...'

'Yes,' thought Hercule Poirot to himself, 'we have got to go through with it now...'

He was not happy.

Chapter 8

The steamer arrived early next morning at Ez-Zebua. Cornelia Robson, her face beaming, a large flapping hat on her head, was one of the first to hurry on shore. Cornelia was not good at snubbing people. She was of an amiable disposition and disposed to like all her fellow creatures. The sight of Hercule Poirot, in a white suit, pink shirt, large black bow tie and a white topee, did not make her wince as the aristocratic Miss Van Schuyler would assuredly have winced. As they walked together up an avenue of sphinxes, she responded readily to his conventional opening,

'Your companions are not coming ashore to view the temple?'

'Well, you see, Cousin Marie – that's Miss Van Schuyler – never gets up very early. She has to be very, very careful of her health. And of course she wanted Miss Bowers, that's her hospital nurse, to do things for her. And she said, too, that this isn't one of the best temples – but she was frightfully kind and said it would be quite all right for me to come.'

'That was very gracious of her,' said Poirot dryly.

The ingenuous Cornelia agreed unsuspectingly.

'Oh, she's very kind. It's simply wonderful of her to bring me on this trip. I do feel I'm a lucky girl. I just could hardly believe it when she suggested to Mother that I should come too.'

'And you have enjoyed it – yes?'

'Oh, it's been wonderful. I've seen Italy – Venice and Padua and Pisa – and then Cairo – only Cousin Marie wasn't very well in Cairo, so I couldn't get around much, and now this wonderful trip up to Wadi Halfa and back.'

Poirot said, smiling:

'You have the happy nature, Mademoiselle.'

He looked thoughtfully from her to the silent, frowning Rosalie, who was walking ahead by herself.

‘She’s very nice looking, isn’t she?’ said Cornelia, following his glance. ‘Only kind of scornful looking. She’s very English, of course. She’s not as lovely as Mrs Doyle. I think Mrs Doyle’s the loveliest, the most elegant woman I’ve ever seen! And her husband just worships the ground she walks on, doesn’t he? I think that greyhaired lady is kind of distinguished looking, don’t you? She’s a cousin of a duke, I believe. She was talking about him right near us last night. But she isn’t actually titled herself, is she?’

She prattled on until the dragoman in charge called a halt and began to intone:

‘This temple was dedicated to Egyptian God Amon and the Sun God Re-Harakhte – whose symbol was hawk’s head...’

It droned on. Dr Bessner, Baedeker in hand, mumbled to himself in German. He preferred the written word.

Tim Allerton had not joined the party. His mother was breaking the ice with the reserved Mr Fanthorp. Andrew Pennington, his arm through Linnet Doyle’s, was listening attentively, seemingly most interested in the measurements as recited by the guide.

‘Sixty-five feet high, is that so? Looks a little less to me. Great fellow, this Rameses. An Egyptian live wire.’

‘A big business man, Uncle Andrew.’

Andrew Pennington looked at her appreciatively.

‘You look fine this morning, Linnet. I’ve been a mite worried about you lately. You’ve looked kind of peaky.’

Chatting together, the party returned to the boat. Once more the *Karnak* glided up the river. The scenery was less stern now. There were palms, cultivation.

It was as though the change in the scenery had relieved some secret oppression that had brooded over the passengers. Tim Allerton had got over his fit of moodiness. Rosalie looked less sulky. Linnet seemed almost light hearted.

Pennington said to her: ‘It’s tactless to talk business to a bride on her honeymoon, but there are just one or two things-’

‘Why, of course, Uncle Andrew.’ Linnet at once became businesslike. ‘My marriage has made a difference, of course.’

‘That’s just it. Some time or other I want your signature to several documents.’

‘Why not now?’

Andrew Pennington glanced round. Their corner of the observation saloon was quite untenanted. Most of the people were outside on the deck space between the observation saloon and the cabin. The only occupants of the saloon were Mr Ferguson – who was drinking beer at a small table in the middle, his legs encased in their dirty flannel trousers stuck out in front of him, whilst he whistled to himself in the intervals of drinking – M. Hercule Poirot, who was sitting before him, and Miss Van Schuyler, who was sitting in a corner reading a book on Egypt.

‘That’s fine,’ said Andrew Pennington. He left the saloon.

Linnet and Simon smiled at each other – a slow smile that took a few minutes to come to full fruition.

He said: ‘All right, sweet?’

‘Yes, still all right... Funny how I’m not rattled any more.’

Simon said with deep conviction in his tone: ‘You’re marvellous.’

Pennington came back. He brought with him a sheaf of closely written documents.

‘Mercy!’ cried Linnet. ‘Have I got to sign all these?’

Andrew Pennington was apologetic.

‘It’s tough on you, I know. But I’d just like to get your affairs put in proper shape. First of all there’s the lease of the Fifth Avenue property... then there are the Western Land Concessions...’

He talked on, rustling and sorting the papers. Simon yawned.

The door to the deck swung open and Mr Fanthorp came in. He gazed aimlessly round, then strolled forward and stood by Poirot looking out at the pale blue water and the yellow enveloping sands...

‘-you sign just there,’ concluded Pennington, spreading a paper before Linnet and indicating a space.

Linnet picked up the document and glanced through it. She turned back once to the first page, then, taking up the fountain pen Pennington had laid beside her, she signed her name *Linnet Doyle*...

Pennington took away the paper and spread out another. Fanthorp wandered over in their direction. He peered out through the side window at something that seemed to interest him on the bank they were passing.

‘That’s just the transfer,’ said Pennington. ‘You needn’t read it.’

But Linnet took a brief glance through it. Pennington laid down a third paper. Again Linnet perused it carefully.

‘They’re all quite straightforward,’ said Andrew. ‘Nothing of interest. Only legal phraseology.’

Simon yawned again.

‘My dear girl, you’re not going to read the whole lot through, are you? You’ll be at it till lunch time and longer.’

‘I always read everything through,’ said Linnet. ‘Father taught me to do that. He said there might be some clerical error.’

Pennington laughed rather harshly.

‘You’re a grand woman of business, Linnet.’

‘She’s much more conscientious than I’d be,’ said Simon, laughing. ‘I’ve never read a legal document in my life. I sign where they tell me to sign on the dotted line – and that’s that.’

‘That’s frightfully slipshod,’ said Linnet disapprovingly.

‘I’ve no business head,’ said Simon cheerfully. ‘Never had. A fellow tells me to sign – I sign. It’s much the simplest way.’

Andrew Pennington was looking at him thoughtfully. He said dryly, stroking his upper lip, ‘A little risky sometimes, Doyle?’

‘Nonsense,’ replied Simon. ‘I’m not one of those people who believe the whole world is out to do one down. I’m a trusting kind of fellow – and it pays, you know. I’ve hardly ever been let down.’

Suddenly, to everyone’s surprise, the silent Mr Fanthorp swung around and addressed Linnet.

‘I hope I’m not butting in, but you must let me say how much I admire your businesslike capacity. In my profession – er – I am a lawyer – I find ladies sadly unbusinesslike. Never to sign a document unless you read it through is admirable – altogether admirable.’

He gave a little bow. Then, rather red in the face, he turned once more to contemplate the banks of the Nile.

Linnet said rather uncertainly, ‘Er – thank you...’ She bit her lip to repress a giggle. The young man had looked so preternaturally solemn. Andrew Pennington looked seriously annoyed. Simon Doyle looked uncertain whether to be annoyed or amused.

The backs of Mr Fanthorp’s ears were bright crimson.

'Next, please,' said Linnet, smiling up at Pennington.

But Pennington looked decidedly ruffled.

'I think perhaps some other time would be better,' he said stiffly. 'As – er – Doyle says, if you have to read through all these we shall be here till lunch time. We mustn't miss enjoying the scenery. Anyway those first two papers were the only urgent ones. We'll settle down to business later.'

Linnet said: 'It's frightfully hot in here. Let's go outside.'

The three of them passed through the swing door. Hercule Poirot turned his head. His gaze rested thoughtfully on Mr Fanthorp's back; then it shifted to the lounging figure of Mr Ferguson, who had his head thrown back and was still whistling softly to himself.

Finally Poirot looked over at the upright figure of Miss Van Schuyler in her corner. Miss Van Schuyler was glaring at Mr Ferguson.

The swing door on the port side opened and Cornelia Robson hurried in.

'You've been a long time,' snapped the old lady. 'Where've you been?'

'I'm so sorry, Cousin Marie. The wool wasn't where you said it was. It was in another case altogether.'

'My dear child, you are perfectly hopeless at finding anything! You are willing, I know, my dear, but you must try to be a little cleverer and quicker. It only needs *concentration*.'

'I'm so sorry, Cousin Marie. I'm afraid I am very stupid.'

'Nobody need be stupid if they *try*, my dear. I have brought you on this trip, and I expect a little attention in return.'

Cornelia flushed.

'I'm very sorry, Cousin Marie.'

'And where is Miss Bowers? It was time for my drops ten minutes ago. Please go and find her at once. The doctor said it was most important.'

But at this stage Miss Bowers entered, carrying a small medicine glass.

'Your drops, Miss Van Schuyler.'

'I should have had them at eleven,' snapped the old lady. 'If there's one thing I detest it's unpunctuality.'

'Quite,' said Miss Bowers. She glanced at her wristwatch. 'It's exactly half a minute to eleven.'

'By my watch it's ten past.'

'I think you'll find my watch is right. It's a perfect timekeeper. It never loses or gains.' Miss Bowers was quite imperturbable.

Miss Van Schuyler swallowed the contents of the medicine glass.

'I feel definitely worse,' she snapped.

'I'm sorry to hear that, Miss Van Schuyler.'

Miss Bowers did not sound sorry. She sounded completely uninterested. She was obviously making the correct reply mechanically.

'It's too hot in here,' snapped Miss Van Schuyler. 'Find me a chair on the deck, Miss Bowers. Cornelia, bring my knitting. Don't be clumsy or drop it. And then I shall want you to wind some wool.'

The procession passed out.

Mr Ferguson sighed, stirred his legs and remarked to the world at large:

'Gosh, I'd like to scrag that dame.'

Poirot asked interestedly:

'She is a type you dislike, eh?'

'Dislike? I should say so. What good has that woman ever been to anyone or anything? She's never worked or lifted a finger. She's just batted on other people. She's a parasite – and a damned unpleasant parasite. There are a lot of people on this boat I'd say the world could do without.'

'Really?'

'Yes. That girl in here just now, signing share transfers and throwing her weight about. Hundreds and thousands of wretched workers slaving for a mere pittance to keep her in silk stockings and useless luxuries. One of the richest women in England, so someone told me – and never done a hand's turn in her life.'

'Who told you she was one of the richest women in England?'

Mr Ferguson cast a belligerent eye at him.

'A man you wouldn't be seen speaking to! A man who works with his hands and isn't ashamed of it! Not one of your dressed-up, foppish good-for-nothings.'

His eye rested unfavourably on the bow tie and pink shirt.

'Me, I work with my brains and am not ashamed of it,' said Poirot, answering the glance.

Mr Ferguson merely snorted.

'Ought to be shot – the lot of them!' he asserted.

'My dear young man,' said Poirot, 'what a passion you have for violence!'

'Can you tell me of any good that can be done without it? You've got to break down and destroy before you can build up.'

'It is certainly much easier and much noisier and much more spectacular.'

'What do *you* do for a living? Nothing at all, I bet. Probably call yourself a middle man.'

'I am not a middle man. I am a top man,' said Hercule Poirot with a slight arrogance.

'What *are* you?'

'I am a detective,' said Hercule Poirot with the modest air of one who says 'I am a king.'

'Good God!' The young man seemed seriously taken aback. 'Do you mean that girl actually totes about a dumb dick? Is she as careful of her precious skin as *that*?'

'I have no connection whatever with Monsieur and Madame Doyle,' said Poirot stiffly. 'I am on a holiday.'

'Enjoying a vacation – eh?'

'And you? Is it not that you are on holiday also?'

'Holiday!' Mr Ferguson snorted. Then he added cryptically: 'I'm studying conditions.'

'Very interesting,' murmured Poirot and moved gently out on to the deck.

Miss Van Schuyler was established in the best corner. Cornelia knelt in front of her, her arms outstretched with a skein of grey wool upon them. Miss Bowers was sitting very upright reading the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Poirot wandered gently onward down the starboard deck. As he passed round the stern of the boat he almost ran into a woman who turned a startled face towards him – a dark, piquant, Latin face. She was neatly dressed in black and had been standing talking to a big burly man in uniform – one of the engineers, by the look of him. There was a queer expression on both their faces – guilt and alarm. Poirot wondered what they had been talking about.

He rounded the stern and continued his walk along the port side. A cabin door opened and Mrs Otterbourne emerged and nearly fell into his arms. She was wearing a scarlet satin dressing gown.

‘So sorry,’ she apologized. ‘Dear Mr Poirot – so very sorry. The motion – just the motion, you know. Never did have any sea legs. If the boat would only keep still...’ She clutched at his arm. ‘It’s the pitching I can’t stand... Never really happy at sea... And left all alone here hour after hour. That girl of mine – no sympathy – no understanding of her poor old mother who’s done everything for her...’ Mrs Otterbourne began to weep. ‘Slaved for her I have – worn myself to the bone – to the bone. A *grande amoureuse* – that’s what I might have been – a *grande amoureuse* – sacrificed everything – everything... And nobody cares! But I’ll tell everyone – I’ll tell them now – how she neglects me – how hard she is – making me come on this journey – bored to death... I’ll go and tell them now-’

She surged forward. Poirot gently repressed the action.

‘I will send her to you, Madame. Re-enter your cabin. It is best that way-’

‘No. I want to tell everyone – everyone on the boat-’

‘It is too dangerous, Madame. The sea is too rough. You might be swept overboard.’

Mrs Otterbourne looked at him doubtfully.

‘You think so. You really think so?’

‘I do.’

He was successful. Mrs Otterbourne wavered, faltered and re-entered her cabin.

Poirot’s nostrils twitched once or twice. Then he nodded and walked on to where Rosalie Otterbourne was sitting between Mrs Allerton and Tim.

‘Your mother wants you, Mademoiselle.’

She had been laughing quite happily. Now her face clouded over. She shot a quick suspicious look at him and hurried along the deck.

‘I can’t make that child out,’ said Mrs Allerton. ‘She varies so. One day she’s friendly – the next day, she’s positively rude.’

‘Thoroughly spoilt and bad-tempered,’ said Tim.

Mrs Allerton shook her head.

‘No. I don’t think it’s that. I think she’s unhappy.’

Tim shrugged his shoulders.

‘Oh, well, I suppose we’ve all got our private troubles.’ His voice sounded hard and curt.

A booming noise was heard.

‘Lunch,’ cried Mrs Allerton delightedly. ‘I’m starving.’

That evening, Poirot noticed that Mrs Allerton was sitting talking to Miss Van Schuyler. As he passed, Mrs Allerton closed one eye and opened it again.

She was saying, ‘Of course at Calfries Castle – the dear Duke-’

Cornelia, released from attendance, was out on the deck. She was listening to Dr Bessner, who was instructing her somewhat ponderously in Egyptology as culled from the pages of Baedeker. Cornelia listened with rapt attention.

Leaning over the rail Tim Allerton was saying:

‘Anyhow, it’s a rotten world...’

Rosalie Otterbourne answered:

‘It’s unfair... some people have everything.’

Poirot sighed. He was glad that he was no longer young.

Chapter 9

On the Monday morning various expressions of delight and appreciation were heard on the deck of the *Karnak*. The steamer was moored to the bank and a few hundred yards away, the morning sun just striking it, was a great temple carved out of the face of the rock. Four colossal figures, hewn out of the cliff, look out eternally over the Nile and face the rising sun.

Cornelia Robson said incoherently:

‘Oh, Monsieur Poirot, isn’t it wonderful? I mean they’re so big and peaceful – and looking at them makes one feel that one’s so small – and rather like an insect – and that nothing matters very much really, does it?’

Mr Fanthorpe, who was standing near by, murmured,

‘Very – er – impressive.’

‘Grand, isn’t it?’ said Simon Doyle, strolling up. He went on confidentially to Poirot: ‘You know, I’m not much of a fellow for temples and sightseeing and all that, but a place like this sort of gets you, if you know what I mean. Those old Pharaohs must have been wonderful fellows.’

The other had drifted away. Simon lowered his voice.

‘I’m no end glad we came on this trip. It’s – well, it’s cleared things up. Amazing why it should – but there it is. Linnet’s got her nerve back. She says it’s because she’s actually *faced* the business at last.’

‘I think that is very probable,’ said Poirot.

‘She says that when she actually saw Jackie on the boat she felt terrible – and then, suddenly, it didn’t matter any more. We’re both agreed that we won’t try to dodge her any more. We’ll just meet her on her own ground and show her that this ridiculous stunt of hers doesn’t worry us a bit. It’s just damned bad form – that’s all. She thought she’d got us badly rattled – but now, well, we just aren’t rattled any more. That ought to show her.’

‘Yes,’ said Poirot thoughtfully.

‘So that’s splendid, isn’t it?’

‘Oh, yes, yes.’

Linnet came along the deck. She was dressed in a soft shade of apricot linen. She was smiling. She greeted Poirot with no particular enthusiasm, just gave him a cool nod and then drew her husband away.

Poirot realized with a momentary flicker of amusement that he had not made himself popular by his critical attitude. Linnet was used to unqualified admiration of all she was or did. Hercule Poirot had sinned noticeably against this creed.

Mrs Allerton, joining him, murmured:

‘What a difference in that girl! She looked worried and not very happy at Aswan. Today she looks so happy that one might almost be afraid she was fey.’

Before Poirot could respond as he meant, the party was called to order. The official dragoman took charge and the party was led ashore to visit Abu Simbel.

Poirot himself fell into step with Andrew Pennington.

‘It is your first visit to Egypt – yes?’ he asked.

‘Why, no, I was here in 1923. That is to say, I was in Cairo. I’ve never been this trip up the Nile before.’

‘You came over on the *Carmanic*, I believe – at least so Madame Doyle was telling me.’

Pennington shot a shrewd glance in his direction.

‘Why, yes, that is so,’ he admitted.

‘I wondered if you had happened to come across some friends of mine who were aboard – the Rushington Smiths.’

‘I can’t recall anyone of that name. The boat was full and we had bad weather. A lot of passengers hardly appeared, and in any case the voyage is so short one doesn’t get to know who is on board and who isn’t.’

‘Yes, that is very true. What a pleasant surprise your running into Madame Doyle and her husband. You had no idea they were married?’

‘No. Mrs Doyle had written me, but the letter was forwarded on and I only received it some days after our unexpected meeting in Cairo.’

‘You have known her for many years, I understand?’

‘Why, I should say I have, Monsieur Poirot. I’ve known Linnet Ridgeway since she was just a cute little thing so high-’ He made an illustrating gesture. ‘Her father and I were lifelong friends. A very remarkable man, Melhuish Ridgeway – and a very successful one.’

‘His daughter comes into a considerable fortune, I understand... Ah, *pardon* – perhaps it is not delicate what I say there.’

Andrew Pennington seemed slightly amused.

‘Oh, that’s pretty common knowledge. Yes, Linnet’s a wealthy woman.’

‘I suppose, though, that the recent slump is bound to affect any stocks, however sound they may be?’

Pennington took a moment or two to answer. He said at last:

‘That, of course, is true to a certain extent. The position is very difficult in these days.’

Poirot murmured: ‘I should imagine, however, that Madame Doyle has a keen business head.’

‘That is so. Yes, that is so. Linnet is a clever practical girl.’

They came to a halt. The guide proceeded to instruct them on the subject of the temple built by the great Rameses. The four colossi of Rameses himself, one pair on each side of the entrance, hewn out of the living rock, looked down on the straggling little party of tourists.

Signor Richetti, disdaining the remarks of the dragoman, was busy examining the reliefs of African and Syrian captives on the bases of the colossi on either side of the entrance.

When the party entered the temple, a sense of dimness and peace came over them. The still vividly coloured reliefs on some of the inner walls were pointed out, but the party tended to break up into groups.

Dr Bessner read sonorously in German from a Baedeker, pausing every now and then to translate for the benefit of Cornelia, who walked in a docile manner beside him. This was not to continue, however. Miss Van Schuyler, entering on the arm of the phlegmatic Miss Bowers, uttered a commanding, ‘Cornelia, come here,’ and the instruction had perforce to cease. Dr Bessner beamed after her vaguely through his thick lenses.

‘A very nice maiden, that,’ he announced to Poirot. ‘She does not look so starved as some of these young women – no, she has the nice curves. She listens too very intelligently; it is a pleasure to instruct her.’

It fled across Poirot’s mind that it seemed to be Cornelia’s fate either to be bullied or instructed. In any case she was always the listener, never the talker.

Miss Bowers, momentarily released by the peremptory summons of Cornelia, was standing in the middle of the temple, looking about her with her cool, incurious gaze. Her reaction to the wonders of the past was succinct.

‘The guide says the name of one of these gods or goddesses was Mut. Can you beat it?’

There was an inner sanctuary where sat four figures eternally presiding, stangely dignified in their dim aloofness.

Before them stood Linnet and her husband. Her arm was in his, her face lifted – a typical face of the new civilization, intelligent, curious, untouched by the past.

Simon said suddenly: 'Let's get out of here. I don't like these four fellows – especially the one in the high hat.'

'That's Amon, I suppose. And that one is Rameses. Why don't you like them? I think they're very impressive.'

'They're a damned sight too impressive – there's something uncanny about them. Come out into the sunlight.'

Linnet laughed, but yielded.

They came out of the temple into the sunshine with the sand yellow and warm about their feet. Linnet began to laugh. At their feet in a row, presenting a momentarily gruesome appearance as though sawn from their bodies, were the heads of half a dozen boys. The eyes rolled, the heads moved rhythmically from side to side, the lips chanted a new invocation:

'Hip, hip *hurray*! Hip, hip *hurray*! Very good, very nice. Thank you very much.'

'How absurd! How do they do it? Are they really buried very deep?'

Simon produced some small change.

'Very good, very nice, very expensive,' he mimicked.

Two small boys in charge of the 'show' picked up the coins neatly.

Linnet and Simon passed on. They had no wish to return to the boat, and they were weary of sightseeing. They settled themselves with their backs to the cliff and let the warm sun bake them through.

'How lovely the sun is,' thought Linnet. 'How warm – how safe... How lovely it is to be happy... How lovely to be me – me – me – Linnet-'

Her eyes closed. She was half asleep, half awake, drifting in the midst of thought that was like the sand drifting and blowing.

Simon's eyes were open. They too held contentment. What a fool he'd been to be rattled that first night... There was nothing to be rattled about... Everything was all right... After all, one could trust Jackie-

There was a shout – people running towards him waving their arms – shouting...

Simon stared stupidly for a moment. Then he sprang to his feet and dragged Linnet with him.

Not a minute too soon. A big boulder hurtling down the cliff crashed past them. If Linnet had remained where she was she would have been crushed to atoms.

White-faced they clung together. Hercule Poirot and Tim Allerton ran up to them.

'*Ma foi*, Madame, that was a near thing.'

All four instinctively looked up at the cliff. There was nothing to be seen. But there was a path along the top. Poirot remembered seeing some locals walking along there when they had first come ashore.

He looked at the husband and wife. Linnet looked dazed still – bewildered. Simon, however, was inarticulate with rage.

'God damn her!' he ejaculated. He checked himself with a quick glance at Tim Allerton.

The latter said:

'Phew, that was near! Did some fool bowl that thing over, or did it get detached on its own?'

Linnet was very pale. She said with difficulty:

'I think – some fool must have done it.'
'Might have crushed you like an eggshell. Sure you haven't got an enemy, Linnet?'
Linnet swallowed twice and found difficulty in answering the light-hearted raillery.
Poirot said quickly: 'Come back to the boat, Madame. You must have a restorative.'

They walked quickly, Simon still full of pent-up rage, Tim trying to talk cheerfully and distract Linnet's mind from the danger she had run, Poirot with a grave face.

And then, just as they reached the gangplank, Simon stopped dead. A look of amazement spread over his face.

Jacqueline de Bellefort was just coming ashore. Dressed in blue gingham, she looked childish this morning.

'Good God!' said Simon under his breath. 'So it *was* an accident, after all.'

The anger went out of his face. An overwhelming relief showed so plainly that Jacqueline noticed something amiss.

'Good morning,' she said. 'I'm afraid I'm a little on the late side.'

She gave them all a nod and stepped ashore and proceeded in the direction of the temple.

Simon clutched Poirot's arm. The other two had gone on.

'My God, that's a relief. I thought – I thought –'

Poirot nodded.

'Yes, yes, I know what you thought.' But he himself still looked grave and preoccupied. He turned his head and noted carefully what had become of the rest of the party from the ship.

Miss Van Schuyler was slowly returning on the arm of Miss Bowers.

A little farther away Mrs Allerton was standing laughing at the little row of heads. Mrs Otterbourne was with her.

The others were nowhere in sight.

Poirot shook his head as he followed Simon slowly onto the boat.

Chapter 10

'Will you explain to me, Madame, the meaning of the word "fey"?'

Mrs Allerton looked slightly surprised. She and Poirot were toiling slowly up to the rock overlooking the Second Cataract. Most of the others had gone up on camels, but Poirot had felt that the motion of the camel was slightly reminiscent of that of a ship. Mrs Allerton had put it on the grounds of personal indignity.

They had arrived at Wadi Halfa the night before. This morning two launches had conveyed all the party to the Second Cataract, with the exception of Signor Richetti, who had insisted on making an excursion of his own to a remote spot called Semna, which he explained was of paramount interest as being the gateway of Nubia in the time of Amenemhet III. Everything had been done to discourage this example of individuality, but with no avail. Signor Richetti was determined and had waved aside each objection: (1) that the expedition was not worth making, (2) that the expedition could not be made, owing to the impossibility of getting a car there, (3) that no car could be obtained to do the trip, (4) that a car would be a prohibitive price. Having scoffed at (1), expressed incredulity at (2), offered to find a car himself to (3), and bargained fluently in Arabic for (4), Signor Richetti had at last departed – his departure being arranged in a secret and furtive manner in case some of the other tourists should take it into their heads to stray from the appointed paths of sightseeing.

‘Fey?’ Mrs Allerton put her head on one side as she considered her reply. ‘Well, it’s a Scottish word, really. It means the kind of exalted happiness that comes before disaster. You know – it’s too good to be true.’

She enlarged on the theme. Poirot listened attentively.

‘I thank you, Madame. I understand now. It is odd that you should have said that yesterday – when Madame Doyle was to escape death so shortly afterwards.’

Mrs Allerton gave a little shiver.

‘It must have been a very near escape. Do you think some of these little wretches rolled it over for fun? It’s the sort of thing boys might do all over the world – not perhaps really meaning any harm.’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘It may be, Madame.’

He changed the subject, talking of Majorca and asking various practical questions from the point of view of a possible visit.

Mrs Allerton had grown to like the little man very much – partly perhaps out of a contradictory spirit. Tim, she felt, was always trying to make her less friendly to Hercule Poirot, whom he had summarized firmly as ‘the worst kind of bounder’. But she herself did not call him a bounder; she supposed it was his somewhat foreign exotic clothing which roused her son’s prejudices. She herself found him an intelligent and stimulating companion. He was also extremely sympathetic. She found herself suddenly confiding in him her dislike of Joanna Southwood. It eased her to talk of the matter. And after all, why not? He did not know Joanna – would probably never meet her. Why should she not ease herself of that constantly borne burden of jealous thought?

At the same moment Tim and Rosalie Otterbourne were talking of her. Tim had just been half-jestingly abusing his luck. His rotten health, never bad enough to be really interesting, yet not good enough for him to have led the life he would have chosen. Very little money, no congenial occupation.

‘A thoroughly lukewarm, tame existence,’ he finished discontentedly.

Rosalie said abruptly: ‘You’ve got something heaps of people would envy you.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Your mother.’

Tim was surprised and pleased.

‘Mother? Yes, of course she is quite unique. It’s nice of you to see it.’

‘I think she’s marvellous. She looks so lovely – so composed and calm – as though nothing could ever touch her, and yet – and yet somehow she’s always ready to be funny about things too...’

Rosalie was stammering slightly in her earnestness.

Tim felt a rising warmth towards the girl. He wished he could return the compliment, but lamentably Mrs Otterbourne was his idea of the world’s greatest menace. The inability to respond in kind made him embarrassed.

Miss Van Schuyler had stayed in the launch. She could not risk the ascent either on a camel or on her legs. She had said snappily:

‘I’m sorry to have to ask you to stay with me, Miss Bowers. I intended you to go and Cornelia to stay, but girls are so selfish. She rushed off without a word to me. And I actually saw her talking to that very unpleasant and ill-bred young man, Ferguson. Cornelia has disappointed me sadly. She has absolutely no social sense.’

Miss Bowers replied in her usual matter-of-fact fashion:

‘That’s quite all right, Miss Van Schuyler. It would have been a hot walk up there, and I don’t fancy the look of those saddles on the camels. Fleas, as likely as not.’ She adjusted her glasses, screwed up her eyes to look at the party descending the hill and remarked: ‘Miss Robson isn’t with that young man any more. She’s with Dr Bessner.’

Miss Van Schuyler grunted.

Since she had discovered that Dr Bessner had a large clinic in Czechoslovakia and a European reputation as a fashionable physician, she was disposed to be gracious to him. Besides, she might need his professional services before the journey was over.

When the party returned to the *Karnak*, Linnet gave a cry of surprise.

‘A telegram for me.’ She snatched it off the board and tore it open. ‘Why – I don’t understand – potatoes, beetroots – what does it mean, Simon?’

Simon was just coming to look over her shoulder when a furious voice said:

‘Excuse me, that telegram is for me. And Signor Richetti snatched it rudely from her hand, fixing her with a furious glare as he did so.

Linnet stared in surprise for a moment, then turned over the envelope.

‘Oh, Simon, what a fool I am! It’s Richetti – not Ridgeway – and anyway of course my name isn’t Ridgeway now. I must apologize.’

She followed the little archaeologist up to the stern of the boat.

‘I am so sorry, Signor Richetti. You see my name was Ridgeway before I married, and I haven’t been married very long, and so...’

She paused, her face dimpled with smiles, inviting him to smile upon a young bride’s *faux pas*.

But Richetti was obviously ‘not amused’. Queen Victoria at her most disapproving could not have looked more grim.

‘Names should be read carefully. It is inexcusable to be careless in these matters.’

Linnet bit her lip and her colour rose. She was not accustomed to have her apologies received in this fashion. She turned away and, rejoining Simon, said angrily,

‘These Italians are really insupportable.’

‘Never mind, darling; let’s go and look at that big ivory crocodile you liked.’

They went ashore together.

Poirot, watching them walk up the landing stage, heard a sharp indrawn breath. He turned to see Jacqueline de Bellefort at his side. Her hands were clenched on the rail. The expression on her face as she turned it towards him quite startled him. It was no longer gay or malicious. She looked devoured by some inner consuming fire.

‘They don’t care any more.’ The words came low and fast. ‘They’ve got beyond me. I can’t reach them... They don’t mind if I’m here or not... I can’t – I can’t hurt them any more...’

Her hands on the rail trembled.

‘Mademoiselle-’

She broke in: ‘Oh, it’s too late now – too late for warnings... You were right. I ought not to have come. Not on this journey. What did you call it? A journey of the soul? I can’t go back – I’ve got to go on. And I’m going on. They shan’t be happy together – they shan’t. I’d kill him sooner...’

She turned abruptly away. Poirot, staring after her, felt a hand on his shoulder.

‘Your girl friend seems a trifle upset, Monsieur Poirot.’

Poirot turned. He stared in surprise, seeing an old acquaintance.

‘Colonel Race.’

The tall bronzed man smiled.

‘Bit of a surprise, eh?’

Hercule Poirot had come across Colonel Race a year previously in London. They had been fellow guests at a very strange dinner party – a dinner party that had ended in death for that strange man, their host.

Poirot knew that Race was a man of unadvertised goings and comings. He was usually to be found in one of the outposts of Empire where trouble was brewing.

‘So you are here at Wadi Halfa,’ Poirot marked thoughtfully.

‘I am here on this boat.’

‘You mean?’

‘That I am making the return journey with you to Shellal.’

Hercule Poirot’s eyebrows rose.

‘That is very interesting. Shall we, perhaps, have a little drink?’

They went into the observation saloon, now quite empty. Poirot ordered a whisky for the Colonel and a double orangeade full of sugar for himself.

‘So you make the return journey with us,’ said Poirot as he sipped. ‘You would go faster, would you not, on the Government steamer, which travels by night as well as day?’

Colonel Race’s face creased appreciatively.

‘You’re right on the spot as usual, Monsieur Poirot,’ he said pleasantly.

‘It is, then, the passengers?’

‘One of the passengers.’

‘Now which one, I wonder?’ Hercule Poirot asked of the ornate ceiling.

‘Unfortunately I don’t know myself,’ said Race ruefully.

Poirot looked interested. Race said:

‘There’s no need to be mysterious to you. We’ve had a good deal of trouble out here – one way and another. It isn’t the people who ostensibly lead the rioters that we’re after. It’s the men who very cleverly put the match to the gunpowder. There were three of them. One’s dead. One’s in prison. I want the third man – a man with five or six cold-blooded murders to his credit. He’s one of the cleverest paid agitators that ever existed... He’s on this boat. I know that from a passage in a letter that passed through our hands. Decoded it said: “X will be on the *Karnak* trip February seventh to thirteenth.” It didn’t say under what name X would be passing.’

‘Have you any description of him?’

‘No. American, Irish, and French descent. That doesn’t help us much. Have you got any ideas?’

‘An idea – it is all very well,’ said Poirot meditatively.

Such was the understanding between them that Race pressed him no further. He knew Hercule Poirot did not ever speak unless he was sure.

Poirot rubbed his nose and said unhappily:

‘There passes itself something on this boat that causes me much inquietude.’

Race looked at him inquiringly.

‘Figure to yourself,’ said Poirot, ‘a person A who has grievously wronged a person B. The person B desires the revenge. The person B makes the threats.’

‘A and B being both on this boat?’

Poirot nodded.

‘Precisely.’

‘And B, I gather, being a woman?’

‘Exactly.’

Race lit a cigarette.

‘I shouldn’t worry. People who go about talking of what they are going to do don’t usually do it.’

‘And particularly is that the case with *les femmes*, you would say!

‘Yes, that is true.’

But he still did not look happy.

‘Anything else?’ asked Race.

‘Yes, there is something. Yesterday the person A had a very near escape from death. The kind of death that might very conveniently be called an accident.’

‘Engineered by B?’

‘No, that is just the point. B could have had nothing to do with it.’

‘Then it *was* an accident.’

‘I suppose so – but I do not like such accidents.’

‘You’re quite sure B could have had no hand in it?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Oh, well, coincidences do happen. Who is A, by the way? A particularly disagreeable person?’

‘On the contrary. A is a charming, rich, and beautiful young lady.’

Race grinned.

‘Sounds quite like a novelette.’

‘*Peut-être*. But I tell you, I am not happy, my friend. If I am right, and after all I am constantly in the habit of being right’-Race smiled into his moustache at this typical utterance-‘then there is matter for grave inquietude. And now, *you* come to add yet another complication. You tell me that there is a man on the *Karnak* who kills.’

‘He doesn’t usually kill charming young ladies.’

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

‘I am afraid, my friend,’ he said. ‘I am afraid... Today, I advised this lady, Madame Doyle, to go with her husband to Khartoum, not to return on this boat. But they would not agree. I pray to Heaven that we may arrive at Shellal without catastrophe.’

‘Aren’t you taking rather a gloomy view?’

Poirot shook his head.

‘I am afraid,’ he said simply. ‘Yes, I, Hercule Poirot, am afraid...’

Chapter 11

Cornelia Robson stood inside the temple of Abu Simbel. It was the evening of the following day – a hot still evening. The *Karnak* was anchored once more at Abu Simbel to permit a second visit to be made to the temple, this time by artificial light. The difference this made was considerable, and Cornelia commented wonderingly on the fact to Mr Ferguson, who was standing by her side.

‘Why, you see it ever so much better now!’ she exclaimed. ‘All those enemies having their heads cut off by the King – they just stand right out. That’s a cute kind of castle there that I never noticed before. I wish Dr Bessner was here, he’d tell me what it was.’

‘How you can stand that old fool beats me,’ said Ferguson gloomily.

‘Why, he’s just one of the kindest men I’ve ever met.’

‘Pompous old bore.’

‘I don’t think you ought to speak that way.’

The young man gripped her suddenly by the arm. They were just emerging from the temple into the moonlight.

‘Why do you stick being bored by fat old men – and bullied and snubbed by a vicious old harri-dan?’

‘Why, Mr Ferguson!’

‘Haven’t you got any spirit? Don’t you know you’re just as good as she is?’

‘But I’m not!’ Cornelia spoke with honest conviction.

‘You’re not as rich; that’s all you mean.’

‘No, it isn’t. Cousin Marie’s very cultured, and-’

‘Cultured!’ The young man let go of her arm as suddenly as he had taken it. ‘That word makes me sick.’

Cornelia looked at him in alarm.

‘She doesn’t like you talking to me, does she?’ said the young man.

Cornelia blushed and looked embarrassed.

‘Why? Because she thinks I’m not her social equal! Pah! Doesn’t that make you see red?’

Cornelia faltered out:

‘I wish you wouldn’t get so mad about things.’

‘Don’t you realize – and you an American – that everyone is born free and equal?’

‘They’re not,’ said Cornelia with calm certainty.

‘My good girl, it’s part of your constitution!’

‘Cousin Marie says politicians aren’t gentlemen,’ said Cornelia. ‘And of course people aren’t equal. It doesn’t make sense. I know I’m kind of homely looking, and I used to feel mortified about it sometimes, but I’ve got over that. I’d like to have been born elegant and beautiful like Mrs Doyle, but I wasn’t, so I guess it’s no use worrying.’

‘Mrs Doyle!’ exclaimed Ferguson with deep contempt. ‘She’s the sort of woman who ought to be shot as an example.’

Cornelia looked at him anxiously.

‘I believe it’s your digestion,’ she said kindly. ‘I’ve got a special kind of pepsin that Cousin Marie tried once. Would you like to try it?’

Mr Ferguson said:

‘You’re impossible!’

He turned and strode away. Cornelia went on towards the boat. Just as she was crossing onto the gangway he caught her up once more.

‘You’re the nicest person on the boat,’ he said. ‘And mind you remember it.’

Blushing with pleasure Cornelia repaired to the observation saloon. Miss Van Schuyler was conversing with Dr Bessner – an agreeable conversation dealing with certain royal patients of his.

Cornelia said guiltily:

‘I do hope I haven’t been a long time, Cousin Marie.’

Glancing at her watch, the old lady snapped:

‘You haven’t exactly hurried, my dear. And what have you done with my velvet stole?’

Cornelia looked round.

‘Shall I see if it’s in the cabin, Cousin Marie?’

‘Of course it isn’t! I had it just after dinner in here, and I haven’t moved out of the place. It was on that chair.’

Cornelia made a desultory search.

‘I can’t see it anywhere, Cousin Marie.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Miss Van Schuyler. ‘Look about.’

It was an order such as one might give to a dog, and in her doglike fashion Cornelia obeyed. The quiet Mr Fanthorp, who was sitting at a table near by, rose and assisted her. But the stole could not be found.

The day had been such an unusually hot and sultry one that most people had retired early after going ashore to view the temple. The DoYLES were playing bridge with Pennington and Race at a table in a corner. The only other occupant of the saloon was Hercule Poirot, who was yawning his head off at a small table near the door.

Miss Van Schuyler, making a Royal Progress bedward, with Cornelia and Miss Bowers in attendance, paused by his chair. He sprang politely to his feet, stifling a yawn of gargantuan dimensions.

Miss Van Schuyler said:

‘I have only just realized who you are, Monsieur Poirot. I may tell you that I have heard of you from my old friend Rufus Van Aldin. You must tell me about your cases sometime.’

Poirot, his eyes twinkling a little through their sleepiness, bowed in an exaggerated manner. With a kindly but condescending nod, Miss Van Schuyler passed on.

Then he yawned once more. He felt heavy and stupid with sleep and could hardly keep his eyes open. He glanced over at the bridge players, absorbed in their game, then at young Fanthorp, who was deep in a book. Apart from them the saloon was empty.

He passed through the swinging door out on to the deck. Jacqueline de Bellefort, coming precipitately along the deck, almost collided with him.

‘Pardon, Mademoiselle.’

She said: ‘You look sleepy, Monsieur Poirot.’

He admitted it frankly.

‘*Mais oui* – I am consumed with sleep. I can hardly keep my eyes open. It has been a day very close and oppressive.’

‘Yes.’ She seemed to brood over it. ‘It’s been the sort of day when things – snap! Break! When one can’t go on...’

Her voice was low and charged with passion. She looked not at him, but towards the sandy shore. Her hands were clenched, rigid...

Suddenly the tension relaxed. She said:

‘Good night, Monsieur Poirot.’

‘Good night, Mademoiselle.’

Her eyes met his, just for a swift moment. Thinking it over the next day, he came to the conclusion that there had been appeal in that glance. He was to remember it afterwards.

Then he passed on to his cabin and she went towards the saloon.

Cornelia, having dealt with Miss Van Schuyler’s many needs and fantasies, took some needlework with her back to the saloon. She herself did not feel in the least sleepy. On the contrary she felt wide awake and slightly excited.

The bridge four were still at it. In another chair the quiet Fanthorp read a book. Cornelia sat down to her needlework.

Suddenly the door opened and Jacqueline de Bellefort came in. She stood in the doorway, her head thrown back. Then she pressed a bell and sauntered across to Cornelia and sat down.

‘Been ashore?’ she asked.

‘Yes. I thought it was just fascinating in the moonlight.’

Jacqueline nodded.

‘Yes, lovely night... A real honeymoon night.’

Her eyes went to the bridge table – rested a moment on Linnet Doyle.

The servant came in answer to the bell. Jacqueline ordered a double gin. As she gave the order Simon Doyle shot a quick glance at her. A faint line of anxiety showed between his eyebrows.

His wife said:

‘Simon, we’re waiting for you to call.’

Jacqueline hummed a little tune to herself. When the drink came, she picked it up, said: ‘Well, here’s to crime,’ drank it off and ordered another.

Again Simon looked across from the bridge table. His calls became slightly absent-minded. His partner, Pennington, took him to task.

Jacqueline began to hum again, at first under her breath, then louder: ‘*He was her man and he did her wrong ...*’

‘Sorry,’ said Simon to Pennington. ‘Stupid of me not to return your lead. That gives ’em rubber.’

Linnet rose to her feet.

‘I’m sleepy. I think I’ll go to bed.’

‘About time to turn in,’ said Colonel Race.

‘I’m with you,’ agreed Pennington.

‘Coming, Simon?’

Doyle said slowly:

‘Not just yet. I think I’ll have a drink first.’

Linnet nodded and went out. Race followed her. Pennington finished his drink and then followed suit.

Cornelia began to gather up her embroidery.

‘Don’t go to bed, Miss Robson,’ said Jacqueline. ‘Please don’t. I feel like making a night of it. Don’t desert me.’

Cornelia sat down again.

‘We girls must stick together,’ said Jacqueline.

She threw back her head and laughed – a shrill laugh without merriment.

The second drink came.

‘Have something,’ said Jacqueline.

‘No, thank you very much,’ replied Cornelia.

Jacqueline tilted back her chair. She hummed now loudly: ‘*He was her man and he did her wrong...*’

Mr Fanthorp turned a page of *Europe from Within*.

Simon Doyle picked up a magazine.

‘Really, I think I’ll go to bed,’ said Cornelia. ‘It’s getting very late.’

‘You can’t go to bed yet,’ Jacqueline declared. ‘I forbid you to. Tell me about yourself.’

‘Well – I don’t know – there isn’t much to tell,’ Cornelia faltered. ‘I’ve just lived at home and I haven’t been around much. This is my first trip to Europe. I’m just loving every minute of it.’

Jacqueline laughed.

‘You’re a happy sort of person, aren’t you? God, I’d like to be you.’

‘Oh, would you? But I mean – I’m sure-’

Cornelia felt flustered. Undoubtedly Miss de Bellefort was drinking too much. That wasn’t exactly a novelty to Cornelia. She had seen plenty of drunkenness during Prohibition years. But there was something else... Jacqueline de Bellefort was talking to her – was looking at her – and yet, Cornelia felt, it was as though, somehow, she was talking to someone else...

But there were only two other people in the room, Mr Fanthorp and Mr Doyle. Mr Fanthorp seemed quite absorbed in his book. Mr Doyle was looking rather odd – a queer sort of watchful look on his face.

Jacqueline said again:

‘Tell me all about yourself.’

Always obedient, Cornelia tried to comply. She talked, rather heavily, going into unnecessary small details about her daily life. She was so unused to being the talker. Her role was so constantly that of the listener. And yet Miss de Bellefort seemed to want to know. When Cornelia faltered to a standstill, the other girl was quick to prompt her.

‘Go on – tell me more.’

And so Cornelia went on (‘Of course, Mother’s very delicate – some days she touches nothing but cereals-’) unhappily conscious that all she said was supremely uninteresting, yet flattered by the other girl’s seeming interest. But was she interested? Wasn’t she, somehow, listening to something else – or, perhaps, *for* something else? She was looking at Cornelia, yes, but wasn’t there *someone else*, sitting in the room...?

‘And of course we get very good art classes, and last winter I had a course of-’

(How late was it? Surely very late. She had been talking and talking. If only something definite would happen...)

And immediately, as though in answer to the wish, something did happen. Only, at that moment, it seemed very natural.

Jacqueline turned her head and spoke to Simon Doyle.

‘Ring the bell, Simon. I want another drink.’

Simon Doyle looked up from his magazine and said quietly:

‘The stewards have gone to bed. It’s after midnight.’

‘I tell you I want another drink.’

Simon said: ‘You’ve had quite enough to drink, Jackie.’

She swung round at him.

‘What damned business is it of yours?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘None.’

She watched him for a minute or two. Then she said:

‘What’s the matter, Simon? Are you afraid?’

Simon did not answer. Rather elaborately he picked up his magazine again.

Cornelia murmured:

‘Oh, dear – as late as that – I-must-’

She began to fumble, dropped a thimble...

Jacqueline said: ‘Don’t go to bed. I’d like another woman here – to support me.’ She began to laugh again. ‘Do you know what Simon over there is afraid of? He’s afraid *I’m* going to tell you the story of *my* life.’

‘Oh – er-’ Cornelia spluttered a little.

Jacqueline said clearly:

‘You see, he and I were once engaged.’

‘Oh, really?’

Cornelia was the prey of conflicting emotions. She was deeply embarrassed but at the same time pleasurable thrilled. How – how *black* Simon Doyle was looking.

‘Yes, it’s a very sad story,’ said Jacqueline; her soft voice was low and mocking. ‘He treated me rather badly, didn’t you, Simon?’

Simon Doyle said brutally: ‘Go to bed, Jackie. You’re drunk.’

‘If you’re embarrassed, Simon dear, you’d better leave the room.’

Simon Doyle looked at her. The hand that held the magazine shook a little, but he spoke bluntly.

‘I’m staying,’ he said.

Cornelia murmured for the third time, ‘I really must – it’s so late-’

‘You’re not to go,’ said Jacqueline. Her hand shot out and held the other girl in her chair. ‘You’re to stay and hear what I’ve got to say.’

‘Jackie,’ said Simon sharply, ‘you’re making a fool of yourself! For God’s sake, go to bed.’

Jacqueline sat up suddenly in her chair. Words poured from her rapidly in a soft hissing stream.

‘You’re afraid of a scene, aren’t you? That’s because you’re so English – so reticent! You want me to behave “decently”, don’t you? But I don’t care whether I behave decently or not! You’d better get out of here quickly – because I’m going to talk – a lot.’

Jim Fanthorp carefully shut his book, yawned, glanced at his watch, got up and strolled out. It was a very British and utterly unconvincing performance.

Jacqueline swung round in her chair and glared at Simon.

‘You damned fool,’ she said thickly, ‘do you think you can treat me as you have done and get away with it?’

Simon Doyle opened his lips, then shut them again. He sat quite still as though he were hoping that her outburst would exhaust itself if he said nothing to provoke her further.

Jacqueline’s voice came thick and blurred. It fascinated Cornelia, totally unused to naked emotions of any kind.

‘I told you,’ said Jacqueline, ‘that I’d kill you sooner than see you go to another woman... You don’t think I meant that? *You’re wrong*. I’ve only been – waiting! You’re *my* man! Do you hear? You belong to me...’

Still half did not speak. Jacqueline’s hand fumbled a moment or two on her lap. She leant forward.

‘I told you I’d kill you and I meant it...’ Her hand came up suddenly with something in it that flashed and gleamed. ‘I’ll shoot you like a dog – like the dirty dog you are...’

Now at last Simon acted. He sprang to his feet, but at the same moment she pulled the trigger...

Simon half twisted – fell across a chair... Cornelia screamed and rushed to the door. Jim Fanthorp was on the deck leaning over the rail. She called to him.

‘Mr Fanthorp... Mr Fanthorp...’

He ran to her; she clutched at him incoherently...

‘She’s shot him – Oh! She’s shot him...’

Simon Doyle still lay as he had fallen half into and across a chair... Jacqueline stood as though paralysed. She was trembling violently, and her eyes, dilated and frightened, were staring at the crimson stain slowly soaking through Simon’s trouser leg just below the knee where he held a handkerchief close against the wound.

She stammered out:

‘I didn’t mean... Oh, my God, I didn’t really mean...’

The pistol dropped from her nervous fingers with a clatter on the floor. She kicked it away with her foot. It slid under one of the settees.

Simon, his voice faint, murmured:

‘Fanthorp, for heaven’s sake – there’s someone coming... Say it’s all right – an accident – something. There mustn’t be a scandal over this.’

Fanthorp nodded in quick comprehension. He wheeled round to the door where a startled face showed. He said:

‘All right – all right – just fun!’

The servant’s face looked doubtful, puzzled, then reassured. He nodded and went off. Fanthorp turned back.

‘That’s all right. Don’t think anybody else heard. Only sounded like a cork, you know. Now the next thing-’

He was startled. Jacqueline suddenly began to weep hysterically.

‘Oh, God, I wish I were dead... I’ll kill myself. I’ll be better dead... Oh, what have I done – what have I done?’

Cornelia hurried to her.

‘Hush, dear, hush.’

Simon, his brow wet, his face twisted with pain, said urgently:

‘Get her away. For God’s sake, get her out of here! Get her to her cabin, Fanthorp. Look here, Miss Robson, get that hospital nurse of yours.’ He looked appealingly from one to the other of them. ‘Don’t leave her. Make quite sure she’s safe with the nurse looking after her. Then get hold of old Bessner and bring him here. For God’s sake, don’t let any news of this get to my wife.’

Jim Fanthorp nodded comprehendingly. The quiet young man was cool and competent in an emergency.

Between them he and Cornelia got the weeping, struggling girl out of the saloon and along the deck to her cabin. There they had more trouble with her. She fought to free herself; her sobs redoubled.

‘I’ll drown myself... I’ll drown myself... I’m not fit to live... Oh, Simon – Simon!’

Fanthorp said to Cornelia:

‘Better get hold of Miss Bowers. I’ll stay while you get her.’

Cornelia nodded and hurried out.

As soon as she left, Jacqueline clutched Fanthorp.

‘His leg – it’s bleeding – broken... He may bleed to death. I must go to him... Oh, Simon – Simon – how could I?’

Her voice rose. Fanthorp said urgently:

‘Quietly – quietly... He’ll be all right.’

She began to struggle again.

‘Let me go! Let me throw myself overboard... Let me kill myself!’

Fanthorp, holding her by the shoulders, forced her back on to the bed.

‘You must stay here. Don’t make a fuss. Pull yourself together. It’s all right, I tell you.’

To his relief, the distraught girl did manage to control herself a little, but he was thankful when the curtains were pushed aside and the efficient Miss Bowers, neatly dressed in a hideous kimono, entered accompanied by Cornelia.

‘Now then,’ said Miss Bowers briskly, ‘what’s all this?’

She took charge without any sign of surprise and alarm.

Fanthorp thankfully left the overwrought girl in her capable hands and hurried along to the cabin occupied by Dr Bessner. He knocked and entered on top of the knock.

‘Dr Bessner?’

A terrific snore resolved itself, and a startled voice said:

‘So? What is it?’

By this time Fanthorp had switched the light on. The doctor blinked up at him, looking rather like a large owl.

‘It’s Doyle. He’s been shot. Miss de Bellefort shot him. He’s in the saloon. Can you come?’

The stout doctor reacted promptly. He asked a few curt questions, pulled on his bedroom slippers and a dressinggown, picked up a little case of necessities and accompanied Fanthorp to the lounge.

Simon had managed to get the window beside him open. He was leaning his head against it, inhaling the air. His face was a ghastly colour.

Dr Bessner came over to him.

‘Ha? So? What have we here?’

A handkerchief sodden with blood lay on the carpet, and on the carpet itself was a dark stain.

The doctor’s examination was punctuated with grunts and exclamations.

‘Yes, it is bad this... The bone is fractured. And a big loss of blood. Herr Fanthorp, you and I must get him to my cabin. So – like this. He cannot walk. We must carry him, thus.’

As they lifted him Cornelia appeared in the doorway. Catching sight of her, the doctor uttered a grunt of satisfaction.

‘Ach, it is you? Goot. Come with us. I have need of assistance. You will be better than my friend here. He looks a little pale already.’

Fanthorp emitted a rather sickly smile.

‘Shall I get Miss Bowers?’ he asked.

Dr Bessner threw a considering glance over Cornelia.

‘You will do very well, young lady,’ he announced. ‘You will not faint or be foolish, hein?’

‘I can do what you tell me,’ said Cornelia eagerly.

Bessner nodded in a satisfied fashion.

The procession passed along the deck.

The next ten minutes were purely surgical and Mr Jim Fanthorp did not enjoy it at all. He felt secretly ashamed of the superior fortitude exhibited by Cornelia.

‘So, that is the best I can do,’ announced Dr Bessner at last. ‘You have been a hero, my friend.’ He patted Simon approvingly on the shoulder. Then he rolled up his sleeve and produced a hypodermic needle. ‘And now I will give you something to make you sleep. Your wife, what about her?’

Simon said weakly:

‘She needn’t know till the morning...’ He went on: ‘I – you mustn’t blame Jackie... It’s been all my fault. I treated her disgracefully... poor kid – she didn’t know what she was doing...’

Dr Bessner nodded comprehendingly.

‘Yes, yes – I understand...’

‘My fault-’ Simon urged. His eyes went to Cornelia. ‘Someone – ought to stay with her. She might – hurt herself-’

Dr Bessner injected the needle. Cornelia said, with quiet competence:

'It's all right, Mr Doyle. Miss Bowers is going to stay with her all night...'

A grateful look flashed over Simon's face. His body relaxed. His eyes closed. Suddenly he jerked them open.

'Fanthorp?'

'Yes, Doyle.'

'The pistol... Ought not to leave it... lying about... The servants will find it in the morning...'

Fanthorp nodded.

'Quite right. I'll go and get hold of it now.'

He went out of the cabin and along the deck. Miss Bowers appeared at the door of Jacqueline's cabin.

'She'll be all right now,' she announced. 'I've given her a morphine injection.'

'But you'll stay with her?'

'Oh, yes. Morphia excites some people. I shall stay all night.'

Fanthorp went on to the lounge.

Some three minutes later there was a tap on Bessner's cabin door.

'Dr Bessner?'

'Yes?' The stout man appeared.

Fanthorp beckoned him out on the deck.

'Look here – I can't find that pistol...'

'What is that?'

'The pistol. It dropped out of the girl's hand. She kicked it away and it went under a settee.'

It isn't under that settee now.'

They stared at each other.

'But who can have taken it?'

Fanthorp shrugged his shoulders.

Bessner said:

'It is curious, that. But I do not see what we can do about it.'

Puzzled and vaguely alarmed, the two men separated.

Chapter 12

Hercule Poirot was just wiping the lather from his freshly shaved face when there was a quick tap on the door and hard on top of it Colonel Race entered unceremoniously. He closed the door behind him. He said:

'Your instinct was quite correct. It's happened.'

Poirot straightened up and asked sharply:

'What has happened?'

'Linnet Doyle's dead – shot through the head last night.'

Poirot was silent for a minute, two memories vividly before him – a girl in a garden at Aswan saying in a hard breathless voice, 'I'd like to put my dear little pistol against her head and just press the trigger,' and another more recent memory, the same voice saying: 'One feels one can't go on – the kind of day when something breaks'-and that strange momentary flash of appeal in her eyes. What had been the matter with him not to respond to that appeal? He had been blind, deaf, stupid with his need for sleep...

Race went on:

'I've got some slight official standing – they sent for me, put it in my hands. The boat's due to start in half an hour, but it will be delayed till I give the word. There's a possibility, of course, that the murderer came from the shore.'

Poirot shook his head.

Race acquiesced in the gesture.

‘I agree. One can pretty well rule that out. Well, man, it’s up to you. This is your show.’

Poirot had been attiring himself with a neat-fingered celerity. He said now:

‘I am at your disposal.’

‘Bessner should be there by now. I sent the steward for him.’

There were four cabins de luxe, with bathrooms, on the boat. Of the two on the port side one was occupied by Dr Bessner, the other by Andrew Pennington. On the starboard side the first was occupied by Miss Van Schuyler, and the one next to it by Linnet Doyle. Her husband’s dressing cabin was next door.

A steward was standing outside the door of Linnet Doyle’s cabin. He opened the door for them and they passed inside. Dr Bessner was bending over the bed. He looked up and grunted as the other two entered.

‘What can you tell us, Doctor, about this business?’ asked Race.

Bessner rubbed his unshaven jaw meditatively.

‘Ach! She was shot – shot at close quarters. See – here just above the ear – that is where the bullet entered. A very little bullet – I should say a.22. The pistol, it was held close against her head – see, there is blackening here, the skin is scorched.’

Again in a sick wave of memory Poirot thought of those words uttered in Aswan.

Bessner went on.

‘She was asleep – there was no struggle – the murderer crept up in the dark and shot her as she lay there.’

‘Ah! *non!*’ Poirot cried out. His sense of psychology was outraged. Jacqueline de Bellefort creeping into a darkened cabin, pistol in hand – no, it did not ‘fit’, that picture.

Bessner stared at him with his thick lenses.

‘But that is what happened, I tell you.’

‘Yes, yes. I did not mean what you thought. I was not contradicting you.’

Bessner gave a satisfied grunt.

Poirot came up and stood beside him. Linnet Doyle was lying on her side. Her attitude was natural and peaceful. But above the ear was a tiny hole with an incrustation of dried blood round it.

Poirot shook his head sadly. Then his gaze fell on the white painted wall just in front of him and he drew in his breath sharply. Its white neatness was marred by a big wavering letter J scrawled in some brownish-red medium.

Poirot stared at it, then he leaned over the dead girl and very gently picked up her right hand. One finger of it was stained a brownish-red.

‘*Non d’un nom d’un nom!*’ ejaculated Hercule Poirot.

‘Eh? What is that?’

Dr Bessner looked up.

‘Ach! *That.*’

Race said:

‘Well, I’m damned. What do you make of that, Poirot?’

Poirot swayed a little on his toes.

‘You ask me what I make of it. *Eh bien*, it is very simple, is it not? Madame Doyle is dying; she wishes to indicate her murderer, and so she writes with her finger, dipped in her own blood, the initial letter of her murderer’s name. Oh, yes, it is astonishingly simple.’

‘Ach, but-’

Dr Bessner was about to break out, but a peremptory gesture from Race silenced him.

‘So it strikes you that?’ he asked slowly.

Poirot turned round on him, nodding his head.

‘Yes, yes. It is, as I say, of an astonishing simplicity! It is so familiar, is it not? *It has been done so often*, in the pages of the romance of crime! It is now, indeed, a little *vieux jeu*! It leads one to suspect that our murderer is – old-fashioned!’

Race drew a long breath.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘I thought at first-’ He stopped.

Poirot said with a very faint smile:

‘That I believed in all the old clichés of melodrama? But pardon, Dr Bessner, you were about to say-?’

Bessner broke out gutturally:

‘What do I say? Pah! I say it is absurd – it is the nonsense! The poor lady she died instantaneously. To dip her finger in the blood (and as you see, there is hardly any blood) and write the latter J upon the wall. Bah – it is the nonsense – the melodramatic nonsense!’

‘*C’est de l’enfantillage*,’ agreed Poirot.

‘But it was done with a purpose,’ suggested Race.

‘That – naturally,’ agreed Poirot, and his face was grave.

Race said. ‘What does J stand for?’

Poirot replied promptly:

‘J stands for Jacqueline de Bellefort, a young lady who declared to me less than a week ago that she would like nothing better than to-’ he paused and then deliberately quoted, ‘“to put my dear little pistol close against her head and then just press with my finger...”’

‘*Gott im Himmel!*’ exclaimed Dr Bessner.

There was a momentary silence. Then Race drew a deep breath and said:

‘*Which is just what was done here?*’

Bessner nodded.

‘That is so, yes. It was a pistol of very small calibre – as I say, probably a.22. The bullet has got to be extracted, of course, before we can say definitely.’

Race nodded in swift comprehension. Then he said:

‘What about time of death?’

Bessner stroked his jaw again. His finger made a rasping sound.

‘I would not care to be too precise. It is now eight o’clock. I will say, with due regard to the temperature last night, that she has been dead certainly six hours and probably not longer than eight.’

‘That puts it between midnight and two a. m.’

‘That is so.’

There was a pause. Race looked around.

‘What about her husband? I suppose he sleeps in the cabin next door.’

‘At the moment,’ said Dr Bessner, ‘he is asleep in my cabin.’

Both men looked very surprised.

Bessner nodded his head several times.

‘Ach, so. I see you have not been told about that. Mr Doyle was shot last night in the saloon.’

‘Shot? By whom?’

‘By the young lady, Jacqueline de Bellefort.’

Race asked sharply: ‘Is he badly hurt?’

‘Yes, the bone was splintered. I have done all that is possible at the moment, but it is necessary, you understand, that the fracture should be X-rayed as soon as possible and proper treatment given, such as is impossible on this boat.’

Poirot murmured:

‘Jacqueline de Bellefort.’

His eyes went again to the J on the wall.

Race said abruptly: ‘If there is nothing more we can do here for the moment, let’s go below. The management has put the smoking room at our disposal. We must get the details of what happened last night.’

They left the cabin. Race locked the door and took the key with him.

‘We can come back later,’ he said. ‘The first thing to do is to get all the facts clear.’

They went down to the deck below, where they found the manager of the *Karnak* waiting uneasily in the doorway of the smoking room.

The poor man was terribly upset and worried over the whole business, and was eager to leave everything in Colonel Race’s hands.

‘I feel I can’t do better than leave it to you, sir, seeing your official position. I’d had orders to put myself at your disposal in the – er – other matter. If you will take charge, I’ll see that everything is done as you wish.’

‘Good man! To begin with I’d like this room kept clear for me and Monsieur Poirot during this inquiry.’

‘Certainly, sir.’

‘That’s all at present. Go on with your own work. I know where to find you.’

Looking slightly relieved, the manager left the room.

Race said:

‘Sit down, Bessner, and let’s have the whole story of what happened last night.’

They listened in silence to the doctor’s rumbling voice.

‘Clear enough,’ said Race, when he had finished. ‘The girl worked herself up, helped by a drink or two, and finally took a pot shot at the man with a .22 pistol. Then she went along to Linnet Doyle’s cabin and shot her as well.’

But Dr Bessner was shaking his head.

‘No, no, I do not think so. I do not think that was *possible*. For one thing she would not write her own initial on the wall – it would be ridiculous, *nicht wahr*?’

‘She might,’ Race declared, ‘if she were as blindly mad and jealous as she sounds; she might want to – well – sign her name to the crime, so to speak.’

Poirot shook his head.

‘No, no, I do not think she would be as – as *crude* as that.’

‘Then there’s only one reason for that J. It was put there by someone else deliberately to throw suspicion on her.’

The doctor said:

‘Yes, and the criminal was unlucky, because, you see, it is not only *unlikely* that the young Fräulein did the murder – it is also I think *impossible*.’

‘How’s that?’

Bessner explained Jacqueline’s hysterics and the circumstances which had led Miss Bowers to take charge of her.

‘And I think – I am sure – that Miss Bowers stayed with her all night.’

Race said: ‘If that’s so, it’s going to simplify matters very much.’

Poirot asked: ‘Who discovered the crime?’

‘Mrs Doyle’s maid, Louise Bourget. She went to call her mistress as usual, found her dead, and came out and flopped into the steward’s arms in a dead faint. He went to the manager, who came to me. I got hold of Bessner and then came for you.’

Poirot nodded.

Race said:

‘Doyle’s got to know. You say he’s asleep still?’

The doctor said:

‘Yes, he’s still asleep in my cabin. I gave him a emphasis opiate last night.’

Race turned to Poirot.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I don’t think we need detain the doctor any longer, eh? Thank you, Doctor.’

Bessner rose.

‘I will have my breakfast, yes. And then I will go back to my cabin and see if Mr Doyle is ready to wake.’

‘Thanks.’

Bessner went out. The two men looked at each other.

‘Well, what about it, Poirot?’ Race asked. ‘You’re the man in charge. I’ll take my orders from you. You say what’s to be done.’

Poirot bowed.

‘*Eh bien!*’ he said, ‘we must hold the court of inquiry. First of all, I think we must verify the story of the affair last night. That is to say, we must question Fanthorp and Miss Robson, who were the actual witnesses of what occurred. The disappearance of the pistol is very significant.’

Race rang a bell and sent a message by the steward.

Poirot sighed and shook his head.

‘It is bad, this,’ he murmured. ‘It is bad.’

‘Have you any ideas?’ asked Race curiously.

‘My ideas conflict. They are not well arranged – they are not orderly. There is, you see, the big fact that this girl hated Linnet Doyle and wanted to kill her.’

‘You think she’s capable of it?’

‘I think so – yes.’ Poirot sounded doubtful.

‘But not in this way? That’s what’s worrying you, isn’t it? Not to creep into her cabin in the dark and shoot her while she was sleeping. It’s the cold-bloodedness that strikes you as not ringing true.’

‘In a sense, yes.’

‘You think that this girl, Jacqueline de Bellefort, is incapable of a premeditated cold-blooded murder.’

Poirot said slowly: 'I am not sure, you see. She would have the brains – yes. But I doubt if, physically, she could bring herself to do the *act*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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