

POIROT

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

THE UNDER
AND OTHER STORIES
DOGS

A
Hercule Poirot
Collection

Agatha Christie

The Under Dog
and Other Stories

A Hercule Poirot Collection

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THE UNDER DOG

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Lily Margrave smoothed her gloves out on her knee with a nervous gesture, and darted a glance at the occupant of the big chair opposite her.

She had heard of M. Hercule Poirot, the well-known investigator, but this was the first time she had seen him in the flesh.

The comic, almost ridiculous, aspect that he presented disturbed her conception of him. Could this funny little man, with the egg-shaped head and the enormous moustaches, really do the wonderful things that were claimed for him? His occupation at the moment struck her as particularly childish. He was piling small blocks of coloured wood one upon the other, and seemed far more interested in the result than in the story she was telling.

At her sudden silence, however, he looked sharply across at her.

“Mademoiselle, continue, I pray of you. It is not that I do not attend; I attend very carefully, assure you.”

He began once more to pile the little blocks of wood one upon the other, while the girl’s voice took up the tale again. It was a gruesome tale, a tale of violence and tragedy, but the voice was so calm and unemotional, the recital was so concise that something of the savour of humanity seemed to have been left out of it.

She stopped at last.

“I hope,” she said anxiously, “that I have made everything clear.”

Poirot nodded his head several times in emphatic assent. Then he swept his hand across the wooden blocks, scattering them over the table, and, leaning back in his chair, his fingertips pressed together and his eyes on the ceiling, he began to recapitulate.

“Sir Reuben Astwell was murdered ten days ago. On Wednesday, the day before yesterday, his nephew, Charles Leverson, was arrested by the police. The facts against him as far as you know are:—you will correct me if I am wrong, Mademoiselle—Sir Reuben was sitting up late writing in his own special sanctum, the Tower room. Mr. Leverson came in late, letting himself in with a latch-key. He was overheard quarrelling with his uncle by the butler, whose room is directly below the Tower room. The quarrel ended with a sudden thud as of a chair being thrown over and a half-smothered cry.

“The butler was alarmed, and thought of getting up to see what was the matter, but as a few seconds later he heard Mr. Leverson leave the room gaily whistling a tune, he thought nothing more of it. On the following morning, however, a housemaid discovered Sir Reuben dead by his desk. He had

been struck down by some heavy instrument. The butler, I gather, did not at once tell his story to the police. That was natural, I think, eh, Mademoiselle?"

The sudden question made Lily Margrave start.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"One looks for humanity in these matters, does one not?" said the little man. "As you recited the story to me—so admirably, so concisely—you made of the actors in the drama machines—puppets. But me, I look always for human nature. I say to myself, this butler, this—what did you say his name was?"

"His name is Parsons."

"This Parsons, then, he will have the characteristics of his class, he will object very strongly to the police, he will tell them as little as possible. Above all, he will say nothing that might seem to incriminate a member of the household. A house-breaker, a burglar, he will cling to that idea with all the strength of extreme obstinacy. Yes, the loyalties of the servant class are an interesting study."

He leaned back beaming.

"In the meantime," he went on, "everyone in the household has told his or her tale, Mr. Leverson among the rest, and his tale was that he had come in late and gone up to bed without seeing his uncle."

"That is what he said."

"And no one saw reason to doubt that tale," mused Poirot, "except, of course, Parsons. Then there comes down an inspector from Scotland Yard, Inspector Miller you said, did you not? I know him, I have come across him once or twice in the past. He is what they call the sharp man, the ferret, the weasel."

"Yes, I know him! And the sharp Inspector Miller, he sees what the local inspector has not seen—that Parsons is ill at ease and uncomfortable, and knows something that he has not told. *Eh bien*, he makes short work of Parsons. By now it has been clearly proved that no one broke into the house that night, that the murderer must be looked for inside the house and not outside. And Parsons is unhappy and frightened, and feels very relieved to have his secret knowledge drawn out of him."

"He has done his best to avoid scandal, but there are limits; and so Inspector Miller listens to Parsons' story, and asks a question or two, and then makes some private investigations of his own. The case he builds up is very strong—very strong."

"Blood-stained fingers rested on the corner of the chest in the Tower room, and the fingerprints were those of Charles Levenson. The housemaid told him she emptied a basin of bloodstained water from Mr. Levenson's room the morning after the crime. He explained to her that he had cut his finger, and that he *had* a little cut there, oh yes, but such a very little cut! The cuff of his evening shirt had been washed, but they found bloodstains in the sleeve of his coat. He was hard pressed for money, and he inherited money at Sir Reuben's death. Oh, yes, a very strong case, Mademoiselle." He paused.

"And yet you come to me today."

Lily Margrave shrugged her slender shoulders.

"As I told you, M. Poirot, Lady Astwell sent me."

"You would not have come of your own accord, eh?"

The little man glanced at her shrewdly. The girl did not answer.

"You do not reply to my question."

Lily Margrave began smoothing her gloves again.

“It is rather difficult for me, M. Poirot. I have my loyalty to Lady Astwell to consider. Strictly speaking, I am only her paid companion, but she has treated me more as though I were a daughter or niece. She has been extraordinarily kind and, whatever her faults, I should not like to appear to criticize her actions, or—well, to prejudice you against taking up the case.”

“Impossible to prejudice Hercule Poirot, *cela ne ce fait pas*,” declared the little man cheerily. “I can perceive that you think Lady Astwell has in her bonnet the buzzing bee. Come now, is it not so?”

“If I must say—”

“Speak, Mademoiselle.”

“I think the whole thing is simply silly.”

“It strikes you like that, eh?”

“I don’t want to say anything against Lady Astwell—”

“I comprehend,” murmured Poirot gently. “I comprehend perfectly.” His eyes invited her to go on.

“She really is a very good sort, and frightfully kind, but she isn’t—how can I put it? She isn’t a well-educated woman. You know she was an actress when Sir Reuben married her, and she has all sorts of prejudices and superstitions. If she says a thing, it must be so, and she simply won’t listen to reason. The inspector was not very tactful with her, and it put her back up. She says it is nonsense to suspect Mr. Leveson and just the sort of stupid, pigheaded mistake the police would make, and that, of course, dear Charles did not do it.”

“But she has no reasons, eh?”

“None whatever.”

“Ha! Is that so? Really, now.”

“I told her,” said Lily, “that it would be no good coming to you with a mere statement like that and nothing to go on.”

“You told her that,” said Poirot, “did you really? That is interesting.”

His eyes swept over Lily Margrave in a quick comprehensive survey, taking in the details of her neat black suit, the touch of white at her throat and the smart little black hat. He saw the elegance of her, the pretty face with its slightly pointed chin, and the dark-blue, long-lashed eyes. Insensibly his attitude changed; he was interested now, not so much in the case as in the girl sitting opposite him.

“Lady Astwell is, I should imagine, Mademoiselle, just a trifle inclined to be unbalanced and hysterical?”

Lily Margrave nodded eagerly.

“That describes her exactly. She is, as I told you, very kind, but it is impossible to argue with her or to make her see things logically.”

“Possibly she suspects someone on her own account,” suggested Poirot, “someone quite absurd.”

“That is exactly what she does do,” cried Lily. “She has taken a great dislike to Sir Reuben’s secretary, poor man. She says she *knows* he did it, and yet it has been proved quite conclusively that poor Owen Trefusis cannot possibly have done it.”

“And she has no reasons?”

“Of course not; it is all intuition with her.”

Lily Margrave’s voice was very scornful.

“I perceive, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, smiling, “that you do not believe in intuition?”

“I think it is nonsense,” replied Lily.

Poirot leaned back in his chair.

“*Les femmes*,” he murmured, “they like to think that it is a special weapon that the good God has given them, and for every once that it shows them the truth, at least nine times it leads them astray.”

“I know,” said Lily, “but I have told you what Lady Astwell is like. You simply cannot argue with her.”

“So you, Mademoiselle, being wise and discreet, came along to me as you were bidden, and have managed to put me *au courant* of the situation.”

Something in the tone of his voice made the girl look up sharply.

“Of course, I know,” said Lily apologetically, “how very valuable your time is.”

“You are too flattering, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, “but indeed—yes, it is true, at this present time I have many cases of moment on hand.”

“I was afraid that might be so,” said Lily, rising. “I will tell Lady Astwell—”

But Poirot did not rise also. Instead he lay back in his chair and looked steadily up at the girl.

“You are in haste to be gone, Mademoiselle? Sit down one more little moment, I pray of you.”

He saw the colour flood into her face and ebb out again. She sat down once more slowly and unwillingly.

“Mademoiselle is quick and decisive,” said Poirot. “She must make allowances for an old man like myself, who comes to his decisions slowly. You mistook me, Mademoiselle. I did not say that I would not go down to Lady Astwell.”

“You will come, then?”

The girl’s tone was flat. She did not look at Poirot, but down at the ground, and so was unaware of the keen scrutiny with which he regarded her.

“Tell Lady Astwell, Mademoiselle, that I am entirely at her service. I will be at—Mon Repos, is that not?—this afternoon.”

He rose. The girl followed suit.

“I—I will tell her. It is very good of you to come, M. Poirot. I am afraid, though, you will find you have been brought on a wild goose chase.”

“Very likely, but—who knows?”

He saw her out with punctilious courtesy to the door. Then he returned to the sitting room frowning, deep in thought. Once or twice he nodded his head, then he opened the door and called to his valet.

“My good George, prepare me, I pray of you, a little valise. I go down to the country this afternoon.”

“Very good, sir,” said George.

He was an extremely English-looking person. Tall, cadaverous and unemotional.

“A young girl is a very interesting phenomenon, George,” said Poirot, as he dropped once more into his armchair and lighted a tiny cigarette. “Especially, you understand, when she has brains. To ask someone to do a thing and at the same time to put them against doing it, that is a delicate operation. It requires finesse. She was very adroit—oh, very adroit—but Hercule Poirot, my good George, is of

cleverness quite exceptional.”

“I have heard you say so, sir.”

“It is not the secretary she has in mind,” mused Poirot. “Lady Astwell’s accusation of him she treats with contempt. Just the same she is anxious that no one should disturb the sleeping dogs. I, my good George, I go to disturb them, I go to make the dog fight! There is a drama there, at Mon Repos. A human drama, and it excites me. She was adroit, the little one, but not adroit enough. I wonder—wonder what I shall find there?”

Into the dramatic pause which succeeded these words George’s voice broke apologetically:

“Shall I pack dress clothes, sir?”

Poirot looked at him sadly.

“Always the concentration, the attention to your own job. You are very good for me, George.”

When the 4:55 drew up at Abbots Cross station, there descended from it M. Hercule Poirot, very neatly and foppishly attired, his moustaches waxed to a stiff point. He gave up his ticket, passed through the barrier, and was accosted by a tall chauffeur.

“M. Poirot?”

The little man beamed upon him.

“That is my name.”

“This way, sir, if you please.”

He held open the door of the big Rolls-Royce.

The house was a bare three minutes from the station. The chauffeur descended once more and opened the door of the car, and Poirot stepped out. The butler was already holding the front door open.

Poirot gave the outside of the house a swift appraising glance before passing through the open door. It was a big, solidly built red-brick mansion, with no pretensions to beauty, but with an air of solid comfort.

Poirot stepped into the hall. The butler relieved him deftly of his hat and overcoat, then murmured with that deferential undertone only to be achieved by the best servants:

“Her ladyship is expecting you, sir.”

Poirot followed the butler up the soft-carpeted stairs. This, without doubt, was Parsons, a very well-trained servant, with a manner suitably devoid of emotion. At the top of the staircase he turned to the right along a corridor. He passed through a door into a little anteroom, from which two more doors led. He threw open the left-hand one of these, and announced:

“M. Poirot, m’lady.”

The room was not a very large one, and it was crowded with furniture and knickknacks. A woman dressed in black, got up from a sofa and came quickly towards Poirot.

“M. Poirot,” she said with outstretched hand. Her eye ran rapidly over the dandified figure. She paused a minute, ignoring the little man’s bow over her hand, and his murmured “Madame,” and then releasing his hand after a sudden vigorous pressure, she exclaimed:

“I believe in small men! They are the clever ones.”

“Inspector Miller,” murmured Poirot, “is, I think, a tall man?”

“He is a bumptious idiot,” said Lady Astwell. “Sit down here by me, will you, M. Poirot?”

She indicated the sofa and went on:

“Lily did her best to put me off sending for you, but I have not come to my time of life without knowing my own mind.”

“A rare accomplishment,” said Poirot, as he followed her to the settee.

Lady Astwell settled herself comfortably among the cushions and turned so as to face him.

“Lily is a dear girl,” said Lady Astwell, “but she thinks she knows everything, and as often as not in my experience those sort of people are wrong. I am not clever, M. Poirot, I never have been, but I am right where many a more stupid person is wrong. I believe in *guidance*. Now do you want me to tell you who is the murderer, or do you not? A woman knows, M. Poirot.”

“Does Miss Margrave know?”

“What did she tell you?” asked Lady Astwell sharply.

“She gave me the facts of the case.”

“The facts? Oh, of course they are dead against Charles, but I tell you, M. Poirot, he didn’t do it. I *know* he didn’t!” She bent upon him an earnestness that was almost disconcerting.

“You are very positive, Lady Astwell?”

“Trefusis killed my husband, M. Poirot. I am sure of it.”

“Why?”

“Why should he kill him, do you mean, or why am I sure? I tell you I *know* it! I am funny about those things. I make up my mind at once, and I stick to it.”

“Did Mr. Trefusis benefit in any way by Sir Reuben’s death?”

“Never left him a penny,” returned Lady Astwell promptly. “Now that shows you dear Reuben couldn’t have liked or trusted him.”

“Had he been with Sir Reuben long, then?”

“Close on nine years.”

“That is a long time,” said Poirot softly, “a very long time to remain in the employment of one man. Yes, Mr. Trefusis, he must have known his employer well.”

Lady Astwell stared at him.

“What are you driving at? I don’t see what that has to do with it.”

“I was following out a little idea of my own,” said Poirot. “A little idea, not interesting, perhaps, but original, on the effects of service.”

Lady Astwell still stared.

“You *are* very clever, aren’t you?” she said in rather a doubtful tone. “Everybody says so.”

Hercule Poirot laughed.

“Perhaps you shall pay me that compliment, too, Madame, one of these days. But let us return to the motive. Tell me now of your household, of the people who were here in the house on the day of the tragedy.”

“There was Charles, of course.”

“He was your husband’s nephew, I understand, not yours.”

“Yes, Charles was the only son of Reuben’s sister. She married a comparatively rich man, but one of those crashes came—they do, in the city—and he died, and his wife, too, and Charles came to live with us. He was twenty-three at the time, and going to be a barrister. But when the trouble came

Reuben took him into his office.”

“He was industrious, M. Charles?”

“I like a man who is quick on the uptake,” said Lady Astwell with a nod of approval. “No, that’s just the trouble, Charles was *not* industrious. He was always having rows with his uncle over some muddle or other that he had made. Not that poor Reuben was an easy man to get on with. Many’s the time I’ve told him he had forgotten what it was to be young himself. He was very different in those days, M. Poirot.”

Lady Astwell heaved a sigh of reminiscence.

“Changes must come, Madame,” said Poirot. “It is the law.”

“Still,” said Lady Astwell, “he was never really rude to *me*. At least if he was, he was always sorry afterwards—poor dear Reuben.”

“He was difficult, eh?” said Poirot.

“I could always manage him,” said Lady Astwell with the air of a successful lion tamer. “But it was rather awkward sometimes when he would lose his temper with the servants. There are ways of doing that, and Reuben’s was not the right way.”

“How exactly did Sir Reuben leave his money, Lady Astwell?”

“Half to me and half to Charles,” replied Lady Astwell promptly. “The lawyers don’t put it simply like that, but that’s what it amounts to.”

Poirot nodded his head.

“I see—I see,” he murmured. “Now, Lady Astwell, I will demand of you that you will describe to me the household. There was yourself, and Sir Reuben’s nephew, Mr. Charles Leverson, and the secretary, Mr. Owen Trefusis, and there was Miss Lily Margrave. Perhaps you will tell me something of that young lady.”

“You want to know about Lily?”

“Yes, she had been with you long?”

“About a year. I have had a lot of secretary-companions you know, but somehow or other they all got on my nerves. Lily was different. She was tactful and full of common sense and besides she looked so nice. I do like to have a pretty face about me, M. Poirot. I am a funny kind of person; I take likes and dislikes straight away. As soon as I saw that girl, I said to myself: ‘She’ll do.’ ”

“Did she come to you through friends, Lady Astwell?”

“I think she answered an advertisement. Yes—that was it.”

“You know something of her people, of where she comes from?”

“Her father and mother are out in India, I believe. I don’t really know much about them, but you can see at a glance that Lily is a lady, can’t you, M. Poirot?”

“Oh, perfectly, perfectly.”

“Of course,” went on Lady Astwell, “I am not a lady myself. I know it, and the servants know it, but there is nothing mean-spirited about me. I can appreciate the real thing when I see it, and no one could be nicer than Lily has been to me. I look upon that girl almost as a daughter, M. Poirot, indeed I do.”

Poirot’s right hand strayed out and straightened one or two of the objects lying on a table near him.

“Did Sir Reuben share this feeling?” he asked.

His eyes were on the knickknacks, but doubtless he noted the pause before Lady Astwell's answer came.

"With a man it's different. Of course they—they got on very well."

"Thank you, Madame," said Poirot. He was smiling to himself.

"And these were the only people in the house that night?" he asked. "Excepting, of course, the servants."

"Oh, there was Victor."

"Victor?"

"Yes, my husband's brother, you know, and his partner."

"He lived with you?"

"No, he had just arrived on a visit. He has been out in West Africa for the past few years."

"West Africa," murmured Poirot.

He had learned that Lady Astwell could be trusted to develop a subject herself if sufficient time was given her.

"They say it's a wonderful country, but I think it's the kind of place that has a very bad effect upon a man. They drink too much, and they get uncontrolled. None of the Astwells has a good temper, and Victor's, since he came back from Africa, has been simply too shocking. He has frightened *me* once twice."

"Did he frighten Miss Margrave, I wonder?" murmured Poirot gently.

"Lily? Oh, I don't think he has seen much of Lily."

Poirot made a note or two in a diminutive notebook; then he put the pencil back in its loop and returned the notebook to his pocket.

"I thank you, Lady Astwell. I will now, if I may, interview Parsons."

"Will you have him up here?"

Lady Astwell's hand moved towards the bell. Poirot arrested the gesture quickly.

"No, no, a thousand times no. I will descend to him."

"If you think it is better—"

Lady Astwell was clearly disappointed at not being able to participate in the forthcoming scene. Poirot adopted an air of secrecy.

"It is essential," he said mysteriously, and left Lady Astwell duly impressed.

He found Parsons in the butler's pantry, polishing silver. Poirot opened the proceedings with one of his funny little bows.

"I must explain myself," he said. "I am a detective agent."

"Yes, sir," said Parsons, "we gathered as much."

His tone was respectful but aloof.

"Lady Astwell sent for me," continued Poirot. "She is not satisfied; no, she is not satisfied at all."

"I have heard her ladyship say so on several occasions," said Parsons.

"In fact," said Poirot, "I recount to you the things you already know? Eh? Let us then not waste time on these bagatelles. Take me, if you will be so good, to your bedroom and tell me exactly what was you heard there on the night of the murder."

The butler's room was on the ground floor, adjoining the servants' hall. It had barred windows

and the strong-room was in one corner of it. Parsons indicated the narrow bed.

"I had retired, sir, at eleven o'clock. Miss Margrave had gone to bed, and Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben in the Tower room."

"Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben? Ah, proceed."

"The Tower room, sir, is directly over this. If people are talking in it one can hear the murmur of voices, but naturally not anything that is said. I must have fallen asleep about half past eleven. It was just twelve o'clock when I was awakened by the sound of the front door being slammed to and kneeling. Mr. Leverson had returned. Presently I heard footsteps overhead, and a minute or two later Mr. Leverson's voice talking to Sir Reuben.

"It was my fancy at the time, sir, that Mr. Leverson was—I should not exactly like to say drunk but inclined to be a little indiscreet and noisy. He was shouting at his uncle at the top of his voice. I caught a word or two here or there, but not enough to understand what it was all about, and then there was a sharp cry and a heavy thud."

There was a pause, and Parsons repeated the last words.

"A heavy thud," he said impressively.

"If I mistake not, it is a *dull* thud in most works of romance," murmured Poirot.

"Maybe, sir," said Parsons severely. "It was a *heavy* thud I heard."

"A thousand pardons," said Poirot.

"Do not mention it, sir. After the thud, in the silence, I heard Mr. Leverson's voice as plain as plain can be, raised high. 'My God,' he said, 'my God,' just like that, sir."

Parsons, from his first reluctance to tell the tale, had now progressed to a thorough enjoyment of it. He fancied himself mightily as a narrator. Poirot played up to him.

"*Mon Dieu*," he murmured. "What emotion you must have experienced!"

"Yes, indeed, sir," said Parsons, "as you say, sir. Not that I thought very much of it at the time. But it *did* occur to me to wonder if anything was amiss, and whether I had better go up and see. I went to turn the electric light on, and was unfortunate enough to knock over a chair.

"I opened the door, and went through the servants' hall, and opened the other door which gives one a passage. The back stairs lead up from there, and as I stood at the bottom of them, hesitating, I heard Mr. Leverson's voice from up above, speaking hearty and cheery-like. 'No harm done, luckily,' he says. 'Good night,' and I heard him move off along the passage to his own room, whistling.

"Of course I went back to bed at once. Just something knocked over, that's all I thought it was. I ask you, sir, was I to think Sir Reuben was murdered, with Mr. Leverson saying good night and all?"

"You are sure it was Mr. Leverson's voice you heard?"

Parsons looked at the little Belgian pityingly, and Poirot saw clearly enough that, right or wrong, Parsons' mind was made up on this point.

"Is there anything further you would like to ask me, sir?"

"There is one thing," said Poirot, "do you like Mr. Leverson?"

"I—I beg your pardon, sir?"

"It is a simple question. Do you like Mr. Leverson?"

Parsons, from being startled at first, now seemed embarrassed.

"The general opinion in the servants' hall, sir," he said, and paused.

“By all means,” said Poirot, “put it that way if it pleases you.”

“The opinion is, sir, that Mr. Leverson is an open-handed young gentleman, but not, if I may say so, particularly intelligent, sir.”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “Do you know, Parsons, that without having seen him, that is also precisely my opinion of Mr. Leverson.”

“Indeed, sir.”

“What is your opinion—I beg your pardon—the opinion of the servants’ hall of the secretary?”

“He is a very quiet, patient gentleman, sir. Anxious to give no trouble.”

“*Vraiment*,” said Poirot.

The butler coughed.

“Her ladyship, sir,” he murmured, “is apt to be a little hasty in her judgments.”

“Then, in the opinion of the servants’ hall, Mr. Leverson committed the crime?”

“We none of us wish to think it was Mr. Leverson,” said Parsons. “We—well, plainly, we didn’t think he had it in him, sir.”

“But he has a somewhat violent temper, has he not?” asked Poirot.

Parsons came nearer to him.

“If you are asking me who had the most violent temper in the house—”

Poirot held up a hand.

“Ah! But that is not the question I should ask,” he said softly. “My question would be, who has the best temper?” Parsons stared at him openmouthed.

Poirot wasted no further time on him. With an amiable little bow—he was always amiable—he left the room and wandered out into the big square hall of Mon Repos. There he stood a minute or two in thought, then, at a slight sound that came to him, cocked his head on one side in the manner of a pearl robin, and finally, with noiseless steps, crossed to one of the doors that led out of the hall.

He stood in the doorway, looking into the room; a small room furnished as a library. At a big desk at the farther end of it sat a thin, pale young man busily writing. He had a receding chin, and wore a pince-nez.

Poirot watched him for some minutes, and then he broke the silence by giving a completely artificial and theatrical cough.

“Ahem!” coughed M. Hercule Poirot.

The young man at the desk stopped writing and turned his head. He did not appear unduly startled, but an expression of perplexity gathered on his face as he eyed Poirot.

The latter came forward with a little bow.

“I have the honour of speaking to M. Trefusis, yes? Ah! My name is Poirot, Hercule Poirot. You may perhaps have heard of me.”

“Oh—er—yes, certainly,” said the young man.

Poirot eyed him attentively.

Owen Trefusis was about thirty-three years of age, and the detective saw at once why nobody was inclined to treat Lady Astwell’s accusation seriously. Mr. Owen Trefusis was a prim, proper young man, disarmingly meek, the type of man who can be, and is, systematically bullied. One could feel

quite sure that he would never display resentment.

“Lady Astwell sent for you, of course,” said the secretary. “She mentioned that she was going to do so. Is there any way in which I can help you?”

His manner was polite without being effusive. Poirot accepted a chair, and murmured gently:

“Has Lady Astwell said anything to you of her beliefs and suspicions?”

Owen Trefusis smiled a little.

“As far as that goes,” he said, “I believe she suspects me. It is absurd, but there it is. She has hardly spoken a civil word to me since Sir Reuben’s death, and she shrinks against the wall as I pass by.”

His manner was perfectly natural, and there was more amusement than resentment in his voice. Poirot nodded with an air of engaging frankness.

“Between ourselves,” he explained, “she said the same thing to me. I did not argue with her—we have made it a rule never to argue with very positive ladies. You comprehend, it is a waste of time.”

“Oh, quite.”

“I say, yes, Madame—oh, perfectly, Madame—*précisément*, Madame. They mean nothing, those words, but they soothe all the same. I make my investigations, for though it seems almost impossible that anyone except M. Leveson could have committed the crime, yet—well, the impossible has happened before now.”

“I understand your position perfectly,” said the secretary. “Please regard me as entirely at your service.”

“*Bon*,” said Poirot. “We understand one another. Now recount to me the events of that evening. Better start with dinner.”

“Leveson was not at dinner, as you doubtless know,” said the secretary. “He had a serious disagreement with his uncle, and went off to dine at the golf club. Sir Reuben was in a very bad temper in consequence.”

“Not too amiable, *ce Monsieur*, eh?” hinted Poirot delicately.

Trefusis laughed.

“Oh! He was a Tartar! I haven’t worked with him for nine years without knowing most of his little ways. He was an extraordinarily difficult man, M. Poirot. He would get into childish fits of rage and abuse anybody who came near him.

“I was used to it by that time. I got into the habit of paying absolutely no attention to anything he said. He was not bad-hearted really, but he could be most foolish and exasperating in his manner. The great thing was never to answer him back.”

“Were other people as wise as you were in that respect?”

Trefusis shrugged his shoulders.

“Lady Astwell enjoyed a good row,” he said. “She was not in the least afraid of Sir Reuben, and she always stood up to him and gave him as good as she got. They always made it up afterwards, and Sir Reuben was really devoted to her.”

“Did they quarrel that night?”

The secretary looked at him sideways, hesitated a minute, then he said:

“I believe so; what made you ask?”

“An idea, that is all.”

“I don’t know, of course,” explained the secretary, “but things looked as though they were working up that way.”

Poirot did not pursue the topic.

“Who else was at dinner?”

“Miss Margrave, Mr. Victor Astwell, and myself.”

“And afterwards?”

“We went into the drawing room. Sir Reuben did not accompany us. About ten minutes later he came in and hauled me over the coals for some trifling matter about a letter. I went up with him to the Tower room and set the thing straight; then Mr. Victor Astwell came in and said he had something he wished to talk to his brother about, so I went downstairs and joined the two ladies.

“About a quarter of an hour later I heard Sir Reuben’s bell ringing violently, and Parsons came to say I was to go up to Sir Reuben at once. As I entered the room, Mr. Victor Astwell was coming out. He nearly knocked me over. Something had evidently happened to upset him. He has a very violent temper. I really believe he didn’t see me.”

“Did Sir Reuben make any comment on the matter?”

“He said: ‘Victor is a lunatic; he will do for somebody some day when he is in one of these rages.’”

“Ah!” said Poirot. “Have you any idea what the trouble was about?”

“I couldn’t say at all.”

Poirot turned his head very slowly and looked at the secretary. Those last words had been uttered too hastily. He formed the conviction that Trefusis could have said more had he wished to do so. But once again Poirot did not press the question.

“And then? Proceed, I pray of you.”

“I worked with Sir Reuben for about an hour and a half. At eleven o’clock Lady Astwell came in and Sir Reuben told me I could go to bed.”

“And you went?”

“Yes.”

“Have you any idea how long she stayed with him?”

“None at all. Her room is on the first floor, and mine is on the second, so I would not hear her going to bed.”

“I see.”

Poirot nodded his head once or twice and sprang to his feet.

“And now, Monsieur, take me to the Tower room.”

He followed the secretary up the broad stairs to the first landing. Here Trefusis led him along the corridor, and through a baize door at the end of it, which gave on the servants’ staircase and on a short passage that ended in a door. They passed through this door and found themselves on the scene of the crime.

It was a lofty room twice as high as any of the others, and was roughly about thirty feet square. Swords and assagais adorned the walls, and many native curios were arranged about on tables. At the far end, in the embrasure of the window, was a large writing table. Poirot crossed straight to it.

“It was here Sir Reuben was found?”

Trefusis nodded.

“He was struck from behind, I understand?”

Again the secretary nodded.

“The crime was committed with one of these native clubs,” he explained. “A tremendously heavy thing. Death must have been practically instantaneous.”

“That strengthens the conviction that the crime was not premeditated. A sharp quarrel, and a weapon snatched up almost unconsciously.”

“Yes, it does not look well for poor Levenson.”

“And the body was found fallen forward on the desk?”

“No, it had slipped sideways to the ground.”

“Ah,” said Poirot, “that is curious.”

“Why curious?” asked the secretary.

“Because of this.”

Poirot pointed to a round irregular stain on the polished surface of the writing table.

“That is a bloodstain, *mon ami*.”

“It may have spattered there,” suggested Trefusis, “or it may have been made later, when the body was moved.”

“Very possibly, very possibly,” said the little man. “There is only the one door to this room?”

“There is a staircase here.”

Trefusis pulled aside a velvet curtain in the corner of the room nearest the door, where a small spiral staircase led upwards.

“This place was originally built by an astronomer. The stairs led up to the tower where the telescope was fixed. Sir Reuben had the place fitted up as a bedroom, and sometimes slept there if he was working very late.”

Poirot went nimbly up the stairs. The circular room upstairs was plainly furnished, with a camp bed, a chair and dressing table. Poirot satisfied himself that there was no other exit, and then came down again to where Trefusis stood waiting for him.

“Did you hear Mr. Levenson come in?” he asked.

Trefusis shook his head.

“I was fast asleep by that time.”

Poirot nodded. He looked slowly round the room.

“*Eh bien!*” he said at last. “I do not think there is anything further here, unless—perhaps you would be so kind as to draw the curtains.”

Obediently Trefusis pulled the heavy black curtains across the window at the far end of the room. Poirot switched on the light—which was masked by a big alabaster bowl hanging from the ceiling.

“There was a desk light?” he asked.

For reply the secretary clicked on a powerful green-shaded hand lamp, which stood on the writing table. Poirot switched the other light off, then on, then off again.

“*C’est bien!* I have finished here.”

“Dinner is at half past seven,” murmured the secretary.

“I thank you, M. Trefusis, for your many amiabilities.”

“Not at all.”

Poirot went thoughtfully along the corridor to the room appointed for him. The inscrutable George was there laying out his master's things.

“My good George,” he said presently, “I shall, I hope, meet at dinner a certain gentleman who begins to intrigue me greatly. A man who has come home from the tropics, George. With a tropical temper—so it is said. A man whom Parsons tries to tell me about, and whom Lily Margrave does not mention. The late Sir Reuben had a temper of his own, George. Supposing such a man to come in contact with a man whose temper was worse than his own—how do you say it? The fur would jump about, eh?”

“‘Would fly’ is the correct expression, sir, and it is not always the case, sir, not by a long way.”

“No?”

“No, sir. There was my Aunt Jemima, sir, a most shrewish tongue she had, bullied a poor sister of hers who lived with her, something shocking she did. Nearly worried the life out of her. But if anyone came along who stood up to her, well, it was a very different thing. It was meekness she could not bear.”

“Ha!” said Poirot, “it is suggestive—that.”

George coughed apologetically.

“Is there anything I can do in any way,” he inquired delicately, “to—er—assist you, sir?”

“Certainly,” said Poirot promptly. “You can find out for me what colour evening dress Miss Lily Margrave wore that night, and which housemaid attends her.”

George received these commands with his usual stolidity.

“Very good, sir, I will have the information for you in the morning.”

Poirot rose from his seat and stood gazing into the fire.

“You are very useful to me, George,” he murmured. “Do you know, I shall not forget your Aunt Jemima?”

Poirot did not, after all, see Victor Astwell that night. A telephone message came from him that he was detained in London.

“He attends to the affairs of your late husband's business, eh?” asked Poirot of Lady Astwell.

“Victor is a partner,” she explained. “He went out to Africa to look into some mining concession for the firm. It was mining, wasn't it, Lily?”

“Yes, Lady Astwell.”

“Gold mines, I think, or was it copper or tin? You ought to know, Lily, you were always asking Reuben questions about it all. Oh, do be careful, dear, you will have that vase over!”

“It is dreadfully hot in here with the fire,” said the girl. “Shall I—shall I open the window a little?”

“If you like, dear,” said Lady Astwell placidly.

Poirot watched while the girl went across to the window and opened it. She stood there a minute or two breathing in the cool night air. When she returned and sat down in her seat, Poirot said to her politely:

“So Mademoiselle is interested in mines?”

“Oh, not really,” said the girl indifferently. “I listened to Sir Reuben, but I don’t know anything about the subject.”

“You pretended very well, then,” said Lady Astwell. “Poor Reuben actually thought you had some ulterior motive in asking all those questions.”

The little detective’s eyes had not moved from the fire, into which he was steadily staring, but nevertheless, he did not miss the quick flush of vexation on Lily Margrave’s face. Tactfully he changed the conversation. When the hour for good nights came, Poirot said to his hostess:

“May I have just two little words with you, Madame?”

Lily Margrave vanished discreetly. Lady Astwell looked inquiringly at the detective.

“You were the last person to see Sir Reuben alive that night?”

She nodded. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she hastily held a black-edged handkerchief to them.

“Ah, do not distress yourself, I beg of you do not distress yourself.”

“It’s all very well, M. Poirot, but I can’t help it.”

“I am a triple imbecile thus to vex you.”

“No, no, go on. What were you going to say?”

“It was about eleven o’clock, I fancy, when you went into the Tower room, and Sir Reuben dismissed Mr. Trefusis. Is that right?”

“It must have been about then.”

“How long were you with him?”

“It was just a quarter to twelve when I got up to my room; I remember glancing at the clock.”

“Lady Astwell, will you tell me what your conversation with your husband was about?”

Lady Astwell sank down on the sofa and broke down completely. Her sobs were vigorous.

“We—qua—qua—quarrelled,” she moaned.

“What about?” Poirot’s voice was coaxing, almost tender.

“L-l-lots of things. It b-b-began with L-Lily. Reuben took a dislike to her—for no reason, and said he had caught her interfering with his papers. He wanted to send her away, and I said she was a dear girl, and I would not have it. And then he s-s-started shouting me down, and I wouldn’t have that, so I just told him what I thought of him.

“Not that I really meant it, M. Poirot. He said he had taken me out of the gutter to marry me, and I said—ah, but what does it all matter now? I shall never forgive myself. You know how it is, M. Poirot. I always did say a good row clears the air, and how was I to know someone was going to murder him that very night? Poor old Reuben.”

Poirot had listened sympathetically to all this outburst.

“I have caused you suffering,” he said. “I apologize. Let us now be very businesslike—very practical, very exact. You still cling to your idea that Mr. Trefusis murdered your husband?”

Lady Astwell drew herself up.

“A woman’s instinct, M. Poirot,” she said solemnly, “never lies.”

“Exactly, exactly,” said Poirot. “But when did he do it?”

“When? After I left him, of course.”

“You left Sir Reuben at a quarter to twelve. At five minutes to twelve Mr. Leverson came in. I saw that ten minutes you say the secretary came along from his bedroom and murdered him?”

“It is perfectly possible.”

“So many things are possible,” said Poirot. “It could be done in ten minutes. Oh, yes! But was it?”

“Of course he says he was in bed and fast asleep,” said Lady Astwell, “but who is to know if he was or not?”

“Nobody saw him about,” Poirot reminded her.

“Everybody was in bed and fast asleep,” said Lady Astwell triumphantly. “Of course nobody saw him.”

“I wonder,” said Poirot to himself.

A short pause.

“*Eh bien*, Lady Astwell, I wish you good night.”

George deposited a tray of early-morning coffee by his master’s bedside.

“Miss Margrave, sir, wore a dress of light green chiffon on the night in question.”

“Thank you, George, you are most reliable.”

“The third housemaid looks after Miss Margrave, sir. Her name is Gladys.”

“Thank you, George. You are invaluable.”

“Not at all, sir.”

“It is a fine morning,” said Poirot, looking out of the window, “and no one is likely to be astir very early. I think, my good George, that we shall have the Tower room to ourselves if we proceed there to make a little experiment.”

“You need me, sir?”

“The experiment,” said Poirot, “will not be painful.”

The curtains were still drawn in the Tower room when they arrived there. George was about to pull them, when Poirot restrained him.

“We will leave the room as it is. Just turn on the desk lamp.”

The valet obeyed.

“Now, my good George, sit down in that chair. Dispose yourself as though you were writing. *Tout va bien*. Me, I seize a club, I steal up behind you, so, and I hit you on the back of the head.”

“Yes, sir,” said George.

“Ah!” said Poirot, “but when I hit you, do not continue to write. You comprehend I cannot be exact. I cannot hit you with the same force with which the assassin hit Sir Reuben. When it comes to that point, we must do the make-believe. I hit you on the head, and you collapse, so. The arms were relaxed, the body limp. Permit me to arrange you. But no, do not flex your muscles.”

He heaved a sigh of exasperation.

“You press admirably the trousers, George,” he said, “but the imagination you possess it not. Get up and let me take your place.”

Poirot in his turn sat down at the writing table.

“I write,” he declared, “I write busily. You steal up behind me, you hit me on the head with the club. Crash! The pen slips from my fingers, I drop forward, but not very far forward, for the chair is low, and the desk is high, and, moreover, my arms support me. Have the goodness, George, to go back to the door, stand there, and tell me what you see.”

“Ahem!”

“Yes, George?” encouragingly.

“I see you, sir, sitting at the desk.”

“*Sitting* at the desk?”

“It is a little difficult to see plainly, sir,” explained George, “being such a long way away, sir, and the lamp being so heavily shaded. If I might turn on this light, sir?”

His hand reached out to the switch.

“Not at all,” said Poirot sharply. “We shall do very well as we are. Here am I bending over the desk, there are you standing by the door. Advance now, George, advance, and put your hand on my shoulder.”

George obeyed.

“Lean on me a little, George, to steady yourself on your feet, as it were. Ah! *Voilà*.”

Hercule Poirot’s limp body slid artistically sideways.

“I collapse—so!” he observed. “Yes, it is very well imagined. There is now something more important that must be done.”

“Indeed, sir?” said the valet.

“Yes, it is necessary that I should breakfast well.”

The little man laughed heartily at his own joke.

“The stomach, George; it must not be ignored.”

George maintained a disapproving silence. Poirot went downstairs chuckling happily to himself. He was pleased at the way things were shaping. After breakfast he made the acquaintance of Gladys, the third housemaid. He was very interested in what she could tell him of the crime. She was sympathetic towards Charles, although she had no doubt of his guilt.

“Poor young gentleman, sir, it seems hard, it does, him not being quite himself at the time.”

“He and Miss Margrave should have got on well together,” suggested Poirot, “as the only two young people in the house.”

Gladys shook her head.

“Very stand-offish Miss Lily was with him. She wouldn’t have no carryings-on, and she made plain.”

“He was fond of her, was he?”

“Oh, only in passing, so to speak; no harm in it, sir. Mr. Victor Astwell, now he *is* properly gone on Miss Lily.”

She giggled.

“Ah *vraiment!*”

Gladys giggled again.

“Sweet on her straightaway he was. Miss Lily *is* just like a lily, isn’t she, sir? So tall and such a lovely shade of gold hair.”

“She should wear a green evening frock,” mused Poirot. “There is a certain shade of green—”

“She has one, sir,” said Gladys. “Of course, she can’t wear it now, being in mourning, but she had it on the very night Sir Reuben died.”

“It should be a light green, not a dark green,” said Poirot.

“It is a light green, sir. If you wait a minute I’ll show it to you. Miss Lily has just gone out with the dogs.”

Poirot nodded. He knew that as well as Gladys did. In fact, it was only after seeing Lily safely out of the premises that he had gone in search of the housemaid. Gladys hurried away, and returned a few minutes later with a green evening dress on a hanger.

“*Exquis!*” murmured Poirot, holding up hands of admiration. “Permit me to take it to the light for a minute.”

He took the dress from Gladys, turned his back on her and hurried to the window. He bent over and then held it out at arm’s length.

“It is perfect,” he declared. “Perfectly ravishing. A thousand thanks for showing it to me.”

“Not at all, sir,” said Gladys. “We all know that Frenchmen are interested in ladies’ dresses.”

“You are too kind,” murmured Poirot.

He watched her hurry away again with the dress. Then he looked down at his two hands and smiled. In the right hand was a tiny pair of nail scissors, in the left was a neatly clipped fragment of green chiffon.

“And now,” he murmured, “to be heroic.”

He returned to his own apartment and summoned George.

“On the dressing table, my good George, you will perceive a gold scarf pin.”

“Yes, sir.”

“On the washstand is a solution of carbolic. Immerse, I pray you, the point of the pin in the carbolic.”

George did as he was bid. He had long ago ceased to wonder at the vagaries of his master.

“I have done that, sir.”

“*Très bien!* Now approach. I tender to you my first finger; insert the point of the pin in it.”

“Excuse me, sir, you want me to prick you, sir?”

“But yes, you have guessed correctly. You must draw blood, you understand, but not too much.”

George took hold of his master’s finger. Poirot shut his eyes and leaned back. The valet stabbed the finger with the scarf pin, and Poirot uttered a shrill yell.

“*Je vous remercie,* George,” he said. “What you have done is ample.”

Taking a small piece of green chiffon from his pocket, he dabbed his finger with it gingerly.

“The operation has succeeded to a miracle,” he remarked, gazing at the result. “You have no curiosity, George? Now, that is admirable!”

The valet had just taken a discreet look out of the window.

“Excuse me, sir,” he murmured, “a gentleman has driven up in a large car.”

“Ah! Ah!” said Poirot. He rose briskly to his feet. “The elusive Mr. Victor Astwell. I go down to make his acquaintance.”

Poirot was destined to hear Mr. Victor Astwell some time before he saw him. A loud voice rang out from the hall.

“Mind what you are doing, you damned idiot! That case has got glass in it. Curse you, Parsons, get out of the way! Put it down, you fool!”

Poirot skipped nimbly down the stairs. Victor Astwell was a big man. Poirot bowed to him.

politely.

“Who the devil are you?” roared the big man.

Poirot bowed again.

“My name is Hercule Poirot.”

“Lord!” said Victor Astwell. “So Nancy sent for you, after all, did she?”

He put a hand on Poirot’s shoulder and steered him into the library.

“So you are the fellow they make such a fuss about,” he remarked, looking him up and down.

“Sorry for my language just now. That chauffeur of mine is a damned ass, and Parsons always does g
on my nerves, blithering old idiot.

“I don’t suffer fools gladly, you know,” he said, half-apologetically, “but by all accounts you are
not a fool, eh, M. Poirot?”

He laughed breezily.

“Those who have thought so have been sadly mistaken,” said Poirot placidly.

“Is that so? Well, so Nancy has carted you down here—got a bee in her bonnet about the secretar
There is nothing in that; Trefusis is as mild as milk—drinks milk, too, I believe. The fellow is
teetotaler. Rather a waste of your time isn’t it?”

“If one has an opportunity to observe human nature, time is never wasted,” said Poirot quietly.

“Human nature, eh?”

Victor Astwell stared at him, then he flung himself down in a chair.

“Anything I can do for you?”

“Yes, you can tell me what your quarrel with your brother was about that evening.”

Victor Astwell shook his head.

“Nothing to do with the case,” he said decisively.

“One can never be sure,” said Poirot.

“It had nothing to do with Charles Levenson.”

“Lady Astwell thinks that Charles had nothing to do with the murder.”

“Oh, Nancy!”

“Parsons assumes that it was M. Charles Levenson who came in that night, but he didn’t see him
Remember nobody saw him.”

“It’s very simple. Reuben had been pitching into young Charles—not without good reason, I mu
say. Later on he tried to bully me. I told him a few home truths and, just to annoy him, I made up m
mind to back the boy. I meant to see him that night, so as to tell him how the land lay. When I went u
to my room I didn’t go to bed. Instead, I left the door ajar and sat on a chair smoking. My room is o
the second floor, M. Poirot, and Charles’s room is next to it.”

“Pardon my interrupting you—Mr. Trefusis, he, too, sleeps on that floor?”

Astwell nodded.

“Yes, his room is just beyond mine.”

“Nearer the stairs?”

“No, the other way.”

A curious light came into Poirot’s face, but the other didn’t notice it and went on:

“As I say, I waited up for Charles. I heard the front door slam, as I thought, about five minutes

twelve, but there was no sign of Charles for about ten minutes. When he did come up the stairs I saw that it was no good tackling him that night.”

He lifted his elbow significantly.

“I see,” murmured Poirot.

“Poor devil couldn’t walk straight,” said Astwell. “He was looking pretty ghastly, too. I put down to his condition at the time. Of course, now, I realize that he had come straight from committing the crime.”

Poirot interposed a quick question.

“You heard nothing from the Tower room?”

“No, but you must remember that I was right at the other end of the building. The walls are thick and I don’t believe you would even hear a pistol shot fired from there.”

Poirot nodded.

“I asked if he would like some help getting to bed,” continued Astwell. “But he said he was all right and went into his room and banged the door. I undressed and went to bed.”

Poirot was staring thoughtfully at the carpet.

“You realize, M. Astwell,” he said at last, “that your evidence is very important?”

“I suppose so, at least—what do you mean?”

“Your evidence that ten minutes elapsed between the slamming of the front door and Levenson’s appearance upstairs. He himself says, so I understand, that he came into the house and went straight up to bed. But there is more than that. Lady Astwell’s accusation of the secretary is fantastic, I admit, yet up to now it has not been proved impossible. But your evidence creates an alibi.”

“How is that?”

“Lady Astwell says that she left her husband at a quarter to twelve, while the secretary had gone to bed at eleven o’clock. The only time he could have committed the crime was between a quarter to twelve and Charles Levenson’s return. Now, if, as you say, you sat with your door open, he could not have come out of his room without your seeing him.”

“That is so,” agreed the other.

“There is no other staircase?”

“No, to get down to the Tower room he would have had to pass my door, and he didn’t, I am quite sure of that. And, anyway, M. Poirot, as I said just now, the man is as meek as a parson, I assure you.”

“But yes, but yes,” said Poirot soothingly, “I understand all that.” He paused. “And you will not tell me the subject of your quarrel with Sir Reuben?”

The other’s face turned a dark red.

“You’ll get nothing out of me.”

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

“I can always be discreet,” he murmured, “where a lady is concerned.”

Victor Astwell sprang to his feet.

“Damn you, how did you—what do you mean?”

“I was thinking,” said Poirot, “of Miss Lily Margrave.”

Victor Astwell stood undecided for a minute or two, then his colour subsided, and he sat down again.

“You are too clever for me, M. Poirot. Yes, it was Lily we quarrelled about. Reuben had his knife into her; he had ferreted out something or other about the girl—false references, something of the kind. I don’t believe a word of it myself.

“And then he went further than he had any right to go, talked about her stealing down at night and getting out of the house to meet some fellow or other. My God! I gave it to him; I told him that better men than he had been killed for saying less. That shut him up. Reuben was inclined to be a bit afraid of me when I got going.”

“I hardly wonder at it,” murmured Poirot politely.

“I think a lot of Lily Margrave,” said Victor in another tone. “A nice girl through and through.”

Poirot did not answer. He was staring in front of him, seemingly lost in abstraction. He came out of his brown study with a jerk.

“I must, I think, promenade myself a little. There is a hotel here, yes?”

“Two,” said Victor Astwell, “the Golf Hotel up by the links and the Mitre down by the station.”

“I thank you,” said Poirot. “Yes, certainly I must promenade myself a little.”

The Golf Hotel, as befits its name, stands on the golf links almost adjoining the club house. It was this hostelry that Poirot repaired first in the course of that “promenade” which he had advertised himself as being about to take. The little man had his own way of doing things. Three minutes after he had entered the Golf Hotel he was in private consultation with Miss Langdon, the manageress.

“I regret to incommode you in any way, Mademoiselle,” said Poirot, “but you see I am a detective.”

Simplicity always appealed to him. In this case the method proved efficacious at once.

“A detective!” exclaimed Miss Langdon, looking at him doubtfully.

“Not from Scotland Yard,” Poirot assured her. “In fact—you may have noticed it? I am not an Englishman. No, I make the private inquiries into the death of Sir Reuben Astwell.”

“You don’t say, now!” Miss Langdon goggled at him expectantly.

“Precisely,” said Poirot beaming. “Only to someone of discretion like yourself would I reveal the fact. I think, Mademoiselle, you may be able to aid me. Can you tell me of any gentleman staying here on the night of the murder who was absent from the hotel that evening and returned to it about twelve or half past?”

Miss Langdon’s eyes opened wider than ever.

“You don’t think—?” she breathed.

“That you had the murderer here? No, but I have reason to believe that a guest staying here promenaded himself in the direction of Mon Repos that night, and if so he may have seen something which, though conveying no meaning to him, might be very useful to me.”

The manageress nodded her head sapiently, with an air of one thoroughly well up in the annals of detective logic.

“I understand perfectly. Now, let me see; who did we have staying here?”

She frowned, evidently running over the names in her mind, and helping her memory by occasionally checking them off on her fingertips.

“Captain Swann, Mr. Elkins, Major Blyunt, old Mr. Benson. No, really, sir, I don’t believe anyone else.”

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