The Murder on the Links

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TO MY HUSBAND

A fellow enthusiast for detective stories, and to whom I am indebted for much helpful advice and criticism.

1. A Fellow Traveller

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

"'Hell!' said the Duchess."

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

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

The Calais express was singularly empty—in fact, my own compartment held only one other traveller. I had made a somewhat hurried departure from the hotel and was busy assuring myself that I had duly collected all my traps when the train started. Up till then I had hardly noticed my companion, but I was now violently recalled to the fact of her existence. Jumping up from her seat, she let down the window

and stuck her head out, withdrawing it a moment later with the brief and forcible ejaculation "Hell!"

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

I looked up now, frowning slightly, into a pretty, impudent face, surmounted by a rakish little red hat. A thick cluster of black curls hid each ear. I judged that she was little more than seventeen, but her face was covered with powder, and her lips were quite impossibly scarlet.

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

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

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

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

I opened my mouth, but she forestalled me.

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

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

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

Her laughter was so infectious that I could not help joining in, though I hardly cared for the word "mutt." The girl was certainly all that I most disliked, but that was no reason why I should make myself ridiculous by my attitude. I prepared to unbend. After all, she was decidedly pretty….

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

"I am desolated!"

"That's a good boy!"

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

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

"Cut it out. I prefer the 'dignified disapproval' stunt. Oh, your face! 'Not one of us,' it said. And you were right there—though, mind you, it's pretty hard to tell nowadays. It's not every one who can distinguish between a demi and a duchess. There

now, I believe I've shocked you again! You've been dug out of the backwoods, you have. Not that I mind that. We could do with a few more of your sort. I just hate a fellow who gets fresh. It makes me mad."

She shook her head vigorously.

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

"A regular little devil! Don't care what I say, or what I do, either! I nearly did a chap in once. Yes, really. He'd have deserved it too. Italian blood I've got. I shall get into trouble one of these days."

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

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

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

"I'm an actress. No—not the kind you're thinking of, lunching at the Savoy covered with jewellery, and with their photograph in every paper saying how much they love Madame So and So's face cream. I've been on the boards since I was a kid of six—tumbling."

"I beg your pardon," I said puzzled.

"Haven't you seen child acrobats?"

"Oh, I understand."

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

"We?"

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

My new acquaintance leaned forward, and discoursed volubly, a great many of her terms being quite unintelligible to me. Yet I found myself evincing an increasing interest in her. She seemed such a curious mixture of child and woman. Though perfectly worldly-wise, and able, as she expressed it, to take care of herself, there was yet something curiously ingenuous in her single-minded attitude towards life, and her whole-hearted determination to "make good." This glimpse of a world unknown to me was not without its charm, and I enjoyed seeing her vivid little face light up as she talked.

We passed through Amiens. The name awakened many memories. My companion seemed to have an intuitive knowledge of what was in my mind.

"Thinking of the War?"

I nodded.

"You were through it, I suppose?"

"Pretty well. I was wounded once, and after the Somme they invalided me out altogether. I had a half fledged Army job for a bit. I'm a sort of private secretary now to an M. P."

"My! That's brainy!"

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

"Don't say you collect bugs!"

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

My companion listened with widening eyes.

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

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

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

I nodded.

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

Warming to my subject, I ran over the heads of the affair, working up to the triumphant and unexpected dénouement. The girl listened spellbound. In fact, we were so absorbed that the train drew into Calais station before we realized it.

"My goodness gracious me!" cried my companion. "Where's my powder-puff?"

She proceeded to bedaub her face liberally, and then applied a stick of lip salve to her lips, observing the effect in a small pocket glass, and betraying not the faintest sign of self-consciousness.

"I say," I hesitated. "I dare say it's cheek on my part, but why do all that sort of thing?"

The girl paused in her operations, and stared at me with undisguised surprise.

"It isn't as though you weren't so pretty that you can afford to do without it," I said stammeringly.

"My dear boy! I've got to do it. All the girls do. Think I want to look like a little frump up from the country?" She took one last look in the mirror, smiled approval, and put it and her vanity-box away in her bag. "That's better. Keeping up appearances is a bit of a fag, I grant, but if a girl respects herself it's up to her not to let herself get slack."

To this essentially moral sentiment, I had no reply. A point of view makes a great difference.

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

"Good-bye, and I'll mind my language better in future."

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

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

"Oh, but we're going to meet again, surely? I—" I hesitated. "I want to meet your sister."

We both laughed.

"That's real nice of you. I'll tell her what you say. But I don't fancy we'll meet again. You've been very good to me on the journey, especially after I cheeked you as I did. But what your face expressed first thing is quite true. I'm not your kind. And that brings trouble—*I* know that well enough…."

Her face changed. For the moment all the light-hearted gaiety died out of it. It looked angry—revengeful….

"So good-bye," she finished, in a lighter tone.

"Aren't you even going to tell me your name?" I cried, as she turned away.

She looked over her shoulder. A dimple appeared in each cheek. She was like a lovely picture by Greuze.

"Cinderella," she said, and laughed.

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

2. An Appeal for Help

It was five minutes past nine when I entered our joint sitting-room for breakfast on the following morning.

My friend Poirot, exact to the minute as usual, was just tapping the shell of his second egg.

He beamed upon me as I entered.

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

Elsewhere, I have described Hercule Poirot. An extraordinary little man! Height, five feet four inches, egg-shaped head carried a little to one side, eyes that shone green when he was excited, stiff military moustache, air of dignity immense! He was neat and dandified in appearance. For neatness of any kind, he had an absolute passion. To see an ornament set crooked, or a speck of dust, or a slight disarray in one's attire, was torture to the little man until he could ease his feelings by remedying the matter. "Order" and "Method" were his gods. He had a certain disdain for tangible evidence, such as

footprints and cigarette ash, and would maintain that, taken by themselves, they would never enable a detective to solve a problem. Then he would tap his egg-shaped head with absurd complacency, and remark with great satisfaction: "The true work, it is done from *within*. *The little grey cells*—remember always the little grey cells, *mon ami!*"

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

Poirot waved his egg-spoon in vigorous refutation of my remark.

"*Du tout!* If for an hour one experiences sensations and emotions of the most terrible, one has lived many hours! Does not one of your English poets say that time is counted, not by hours, but by heart-beats?"

"I fancy Browning was referring to something more romantic than sea sickness, though."

"Because he was an Englishman, an Islander to whom *la Manche* was nothing. Oh, you English! With *nous autres* it is different. Figure to yourself that a lady of my acquaintance at the beginning of the war fled to Ostend. There she had a terrible crisis of the nerves. Impossible to escape further except by crossing the sea! And she had a horror—*mais une horreur!*—of the sea! What was she to do? Daily *les*

Boches were drawing nearer. Imagine to yourself the terrible situation!"

"What did she do?" I inquired curiously.

"Fortunately her husband was *homme pratique*. He was also very calm, the crises of the nerves, they affected him not. *Il l'a emportée simplement!* Naturally when she reached England she was prostrate, but she still breathed."

Poirot shook his head seriously. I composed my face as best I could.

Suddenly he stiffened and pointed a dramatic finger at the toast rack.

"Ah, par exemple, c'est trop fort!" he cried.

"What is it?"

"This piece of toast. You remark him not?" He whipped the offender out of the rack, and held it up for me to examine.

"Is it square? No. Is it a triangle? Again no. Is it even round? No. Is it of any shape remotely pleasing to the eye? What symmetry have we here? None."

"It's cut from a cottage loaf," I explained soothingly.

Poirot threw me a withering glance.

"What an intelligence has my friend Hastings!" he exclaimed sarcastically. "Comprehend you not that I have forbidden such a loaf—a loaf haphazard and

shapeless, that no baker should permit himself to bake!"

I endeavoured to distract his mind.

"Anything interesting come by the post?"

Poirot shook his head with a dissatisfied air.

"I have not yet examined my letters, but nothing of interest arrives nowadays. The great criminals, the criminals of method, they do not exist. The cases I have been employed upon lately were *banal* to the last degree. In verity I am reduced to recovering lost lap-dogs for fashionable ladies! The last problem that presented any interest was that intricate little affair of the Yardly diamond, and that was—how many months ago, my friend?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How does he thank you?" I asked curiously, for I knew my Japp.

"He is kind enough to say that I am a wonderful sport for my age, and that he was glad to have had the chance of letting me in on the case."

This was so typical of Japp, that I could not forbear a chuckle. Poirot continued to read his correspondence placidly.

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

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

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

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

"Villa Geneviève

Merlinville-sur-Mer

France

"*Dear Sir*,

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

"Assuring you once more that the matter is *urgent*,

"Yours faithfully

"P. T. RENAULD."

Below the signature was a hastily scrawled line, almost illegible: "For God's sake, come!"

I handed the letter back with quickened pulses.

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

"Yes, indeed," said Poirot meditatively.

"You will go of course," I continued.

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

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

"Well—"

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

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

"Ta-ta-ta. I will manage M. Renauld. By the way, I seem to know the name?"

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

"But without doubt. That explains the mention of Santiago. Santiago is in Chile, and Chile it is in South America! Ah, but we progress finely."

"Dear me, Poirot," I said, my excitement rising, "I smell some goodly shekels in this. If we succeed, we shall make our fortunes!"

"Do not be too sure of that, my friend. A rich man and his money are not so easily parted. Me, I have

seen a well-known millionaire turn out a tramful of people to seek for a dropped halfpenny."

I acknowledged the wisdom of this.

"In any case," continued Poirot, "it is not the money which attracts me here. Certainly it will be pleasant to have *carte blanche* in our investigations; one can be sure that way of wasting no time, but it is something a little bizarre in this problem which arouses my interest. You remarked the postscript? How did it strike you?"

I considered.

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

But my friend shook his head energetically.

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

"Well?" I said puzzled.

"*Mon Dieu, mon ami*, but use your little grey cells! Is it not obvious? M. Renauld wrote his letter. Without blotting it, he reread it carefully. Then, not on impulse, but deliberately, he added those last words, and blotted the sheet."

"But why?"

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

"What?"

"*Mais, oui*—to make sure of my coming! He reread the letter and was dissatisfied. It was not strong enough!"

He paused, and then added softly, his eyes shining with that green light that always betokened inward excitement: "And so, *mon ami*, since that postscript was added, not on impulse, but soberly, in cold blood, the urgency is very great, and we must reach him as soon as possible."

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

Poirot nodded.

"It is a quiet little place—but chic! It lies about midway between Bolougne and Calais. It is rapidly becoming the fashion. Rich English people who wish to be quiet are taking it up. M. Renauld has a house in England, I suppose?"

"Yes, in Rutland Gate, as far as I remember. Also a big place in the country, somewhere in Hertfordshire. But I really know very little about him, he doesn't do much in a social way. I believe he has large South American interests in the City, and has spent most of his life out in Chile and the Argentino."

"Well, we shall hear all details from the man himself. Come, let us pack. A small suit-case each, and then a taxi to Victoria."

"And the Countess?" I inquired with a smile.

"Ah! *je m'en fiche!* Her case was certainly not interesting."

"Why so sure of that?"

"Because in that case she would have come, not written. A woman cannot wait—always remember that, Hastings."

Eleven o'clock saw our departure from Victoria on our way to Dover. Before starting Poirot had despatched a telegram to Mr. Renauld giving the time of our arrival at Calais. "I'm surprised you haven't invested in a few bottles of some sea sick remedy, Poirot," I observed maliciously, as I recalled our conversation at breakfast.

My friend, who was anxiously scanning the weather, turned a reproachful face upon me.

"Is it that you have forgotten the method most excellent of Laverguier? His system, I practise it always. One balances oneself, if you remember, turning the head from left to right, breathing in and out, counting six between each breath."

"H'm," I demurred. "You'll be rather tired of balancing yourself and counting six by the time you get to Santiago, or Buenos Ayres, or wherever it is you land."

"*Quelle idée!* You do not figure to yourself that I shall go to Santiago?"

"Mr. Renauld suggests it in his letter."

"He did not know the methods of Hercule Poirot. I do not run to and fro, making journeys, and agitating myself. My work is done from within—*here*—" he tapped his forehead significantly.

As usual, this remark roused my argumentative faculty.

"It's all very well, Poirot, but I think you are falling into the habit of despising certain things too much. A finger-print has led sometimes to the arrest and conviction of a murderer."

"And has, without doubt, hanged more than one innocent man," remarked Poirot dryly.

"But surely the study of finger-prints and footprints, cigarette ash, different kinds of mud, and other clues that comprise the minute observation of details—all these are of vital importance?"

"But certainly. I have never said otherwise. The trained observer, the expert, without doubt he is useful! But the others, the Hercules Poirots, they are above the experts! To them the experts bring the facts, their business is the method of the crime, its logical deduction, the proper sequence and order of the facts; above all, the true psychology of the case. You have hunted the fox, yes?"

"I have hunted a bit, now and again," I said, rather bewildered by this abrupt change of subject. "Why?"

"*Eh bien*, this hunting of the fox, you need the dogs, no?"

"Hounds," I corrected gently. "Yes, of course."

"But yet," Poirot wagged his finger at me. "You did not descend from your horse and run along the ground smelling with your nose and uttering loud Ow Ows?"

In spite of myself I laughed immoderately. Poirot nodded in a satisfied manner.

"So. You leave the work of the d— hounds to the hounds. Yet you demand that I, Hercule Poirot, should make myself ridiculous by lying down (possibly on damp grass) to study hypothetical footprints, and should scoop up cigarette ash when I do not know one kind from the other. Remember the Plymouth Express mystery. The good Japp departed to make a survey of the railway line. When he returned, I, without having moved from my apartments, was able to tell him exactly what he had found."

"So you are of the opinion that Japp wasted his time."

"Not at all, since his evidence confirmed my theory. But *I* should have wasted my time if *I* had gone. It is the same with so called 'experts.' Remember the handwriting testimony in the Cavendish Case. One counsel's questioning brings out testimony as to the resemblances, the defence brings evidence to show dissimilarity. All the language is very technical. And the result? What we all knew in the first place. The writing was very like

that of John Cavendish. And the psychological mind is faced with the question 'Why?' Because it was actually his? Or because some one wished us to think it was his? I answered that question, *mon ami*, and answered it correctly."

And Poirot, having effectually silenced, if not convinced me, leaned back with a satisfied air.

On the boat, I knew better than to disturb my friend's solitude. The weather was gorgeous, and the sea as smooth as the proverbial mill-pond, so I was hardly surprised to hear that Laverguier's method had once more justified itself when a smiling Poirot joined me on disembarking at Calais. A disappointment was in store for us, as no car had been sent to meet us, but Poirot put this down to his telegram having been delayed in transit.

"Since it is *carte blanche*, we will hire a car," he said cheerfully. And a few minutes later saw us creaking and jolting along, in the most ramshackle of automobiles that ever plied for hire, in the direction of Merlinville.

My spirits were at their highest.

"What gorgeous air!" I exclaimed. "This promises to be a delightful trip."

"For you, yes. For me, I have work to do, remember, at our journey's end."

"Bah!" I said cheerfully. "You will discover all, ensure this Mr. Renauld's safety, run the would-be

assassins to earth, and all will finish in a blaze of glory."

"You are sanguine, my friend."

"Yes, I feel absolutely assured of success. Are you not the one and only Hercule Poirot?"

But my little friend did not rise to the bait. He was observing me gravely.

"You are what the Scotch people call 'fey,' Hastings. It presages disaster."

"Nonsense. At any rate, you do not share my feelings."

"No, but I am afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I do not know. But I have a premonition—a *je ne sais quoi!*"

He spoke so gravely, that I was impressed in spite of myself.

"I have a feeling," he said slowly, "that this is going to be a big affair—a long, troublesome problem that will not be easy to work out."

I would have questioned him further, but we were just coming into the little town of Merlinville, and we slowed up to inquire the way to the Villa Geneviève.

"Straight on, monsieur, through the town. The Villa Geneviève is about half a mile the other side. You cannot miss it. A big Villa, overlooking the sea."

We thanked our informant, and drove on, leaving the town behind. A fork in the road brought us to a second halt. A peasant was trudging towards us, and we waited for him to come up to us in order to ask the way again. There was a tiny Villa standing right by the road, but it was too small and dilapidated to be the one we wanted. As we waited, the gate of it swung open and a girl came out.

The peasant was passing us now, and the driver leaned forward from his seat and asked for direction.

"The Villa Geneviève? Just a few steps up this road to the right, monsieur. You could see it if it were not for the curve."

The chauffeur thanked him, and started the car again. My eyes were fascinated by the girl who still stood, with one hand on the gate, watching us. I am an admirer of beauty, and here was one whom nobody could have passed without remark. Very tall, with the proportions of a young goddess, her uncovered golden head gleaming in the sunlight, I swore to myself that she was one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen. As we swung up the rough road, I turned my head to look after her.

"By Jove, Poirot," I exclaimed, "did you see that young goddess."

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"*Ça commence!*" he murmured. "Already you have seen a goddess!"

"But, hang it all, wasn't she?"

"Possibly. I did not remark the fact."

"Surely you noticed her?"

"*Mon ami*, two people rarely see the same thing. You, for instance, saw a goddess. I—" he hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I saw only a girl with anxious eyes," said Poirot gravely.

But at that moment we drew up at a big green gate, and, simultaneously, we both uttered an exclamation. Before it stood an imposing *sergent de ville*. He held up his hand to bar our way.

"You cannot pass, monsieurs."

"But we wish to see Mr. Renauld," I cried. "We have an appointment. This is his Villa, isn't it?"

"Yes, monsieur, but—"

Poirot leaned forward.

"But what?"

"M. Renauld was murdered this morning."

3. At the Villa Geneviève

In a moment Poirot had leapt from the car, his eyes blazing with excitement. He caught the man by the shoulder.

"What is that you say? Murdered? When? How?"

The *sergent de ville* drew himself up.

"I cannot answer any questions, monsieur."

"True. I comprehend." Poirot reflected for a minute. "The Commissary of Police, he is without doubt within?"

"Yes, monsieur."

Poirot took out a card, and scribbled a few words on it.

"*Voilà!* Will you have the goodness to see that this card is sent in to the commissary at once?"

The man took it and, turning his head over his shoulder, whistled. In a few seconds a comrade joined him and was handed Poirot's message. There was a wait of some minutes, and then a short stout man with a huge moustache came bustling down to the gate. The *sergent de ville* saluted and stood aside.

"My dear M. Poirot," cried the new-comer, "I am delighted to see you. Your arrival is most opportune."

Poirot's face had lighted up.

"M. Bex! This is indeed a pleasure." He turned to me. "This is an English friend of mine, Captain Hastings—M. Lucien Bex."

The commissary and I bowed to each other ceremoniously, then M. Bex turned once more to Poirot.

"*Mon vieux*, I have not seen you since 1909, that time in Ostend. I heard that you had left the Force?"

"So I have. I run a private business in London."

"And you say you have information to give which may assist us?"

"Possibly you know it already. You were aware that I had been sent for?"

"No. By whom?"

"The dead man. It seems he knew an attempt was going to be made on his life. Unfortunately he sent for me too late."

"*Sacri tonnerre!*" ejaculated the Frenchman. "So he foresaw his own murder? That upsets our theories considerably! But come inside."

He held the gate open, and we commenced walking towards the house. M. Bex continued to talk:

"The examining magistrate, M. Hautet, must hear of this at once. He has just finished examining the scene of the crime and is about to begin his interrogations. A charming man. You will like him. Most sympathetic. Original in his methods, but an excellent judge."

"When was the crime committed?" asked Poirot.

"The body was discovered this morning about nine o'clock. Madame Renauld's evidence, and that of the doctors goes to show that the death must have occurred about 2 a.m. But enter, I pray of you."

We had arrived at the steps which led up to the front door of the Villa. In the hall another *sergent de ville* was sitting. He rose at sight of the commissary.

"Where is M. Hautet now?" inquired the latter.

"In the *salon*, monsieur."

M. Bex opened a door to the left of the hall, and we passed in. M. Hautet and his clerk were sitting at a big round table. They looked up as we entered. The commissary introduced us, and explained our presence.

M. Hautet, the Juge d'Instruction, was a tall, gaunt man, with piercing dark eyes, and a neatly cut grey beard, which he had a habit of caressing as he talked. Standing by the mantelpiece was an elderly man, with slightly stooping shoulders, who was introduced to us as Dr. Durand.

"Most extraordinary," remarked M. Hautet, as the commissary finished speaking. "You have the letter here, monsieur?"

Poirot handed it to him, and the magistrate read it.

"H'm. He speaks of a secret. What a pity he was not more explicit. We are much indebted to you, M. Poirot. I hope you will do us the honour of assisting us in our investigations. Or are you obliged to return to London?"

"M. le juge, I propose to remain. I did not arrive in time to prevent my client's death, but I feel myself bound in honour to discover the assassin."

The magistrate bowed.

"These sentiments do you honour. Also, without doubt, Madame Renauld will wish to retain your services. We are expecting M. Giraud from the Sûreté in Paris any moment, and I am sure that you and he will be able to give each other mutual assistance in your investigations. In the meantime, I hope that you will do me the honour to be present at my interrogations, and I need hardly say that if there is any assistance you require it is at your disposal."

"I thank you, monsieur. You will comprehend that at present I am completely in the dark. I know nothing whatever."

M. Hautet nodded to the commissary, and the latter took up the tale:

"This morning, the old servant Françoise, on descending to start her work, found the front door ajar. Feeling a momentary alarm as to burglars, she looked into the dining-room, but seeing the silver was safe she thought no more about it, concluding that her master had, without doubt, risen early, and gone for a stroll."

"Pardon, monsieur, for interrupting, but was that a common practice of his?"

"No, it was not, but old Françoise has the common idea as regards the English—that they are mad, and liable to do the most unaccountable things at any moment! Going to call her mistress as usual, a younger maid, Léonie, was horrified to discover her gagged and bound, and almost at the same moment news was brought that M. Renauld's body had been discovered, stone dead, stabbed in the back."

"Where?"

"That is one of the most extraordinary features of the case. M. Poirot, the body was lying, face downwards, *in an open grave*."

"What?"

"Yes. The pit was freshly dug—just a few yards outside the boundary of the Villa grounds."

"And he had been dead—how long?"

Dr. Durand answered this.

"I examined the body this morning at ten o'clock. Death must have taken place at least seven, and possibly ten hours previously."

"H'm, that fixes it at between midnight and 3 a.m."

"Exactly, and Madame Renauld's evidence places it at after 2 a.m. which narrows the field still further. Death must have been instantaneous, and naturally could not have been self-inflicted."

Poirot nodded, and the commissary resumed:

"Madame Renauld was hastily freed from the cords that bound her by the horrified servants. She was in a terrible condition of weakness, almost unconscious from the pain of her bonds. It appears that two masked men entered the bedroom, gagged and bound her, whilst forcibly abducting her husband. This we know at second hand from the servants. On hearing the tragic news, she fell at once into an alarming state of agitation. On arrival, Dr. Durand immediately prescribed a sedative, and we have not yet been able to question her. But without doubt she will awake more calm, and be equal to bearing the strain of the interrogation."

The commissary paused.

"And the inmates of the house, monsieur?"

"There is old Françoise, the housekeeper, she lived for many years with the former owners of the Villa Geneviève. Then there are two young girls, sisters, Denise and Léonie Oulard. Their home is in Merlinville, and they come of the most respectable