

CHAPTER 3

In the succeeding weeks I was a good deal bored. Mrs Flemming and her friends seemed to me to be supremely uninteresting. They talked for hours of themselves and their children and of the difficulties of getting good milk for the children and of what they said to the dairy when the milk wasn't good. Then they would go on to servants, and the difficulties of getting good servants and of what they had said to the woman at the registry office and of what the woman at the registry office had said to them. They never seemed to read the papers or to care about what went on in the world. They disliked travelling—everything was so different to England. The Riviera was all right, of course, because one met all one's friends there.

I listened and contained myself with difficulty. Most of these women were rich. The whole wide beautiful world was theirs to wander in and they deliberately stayed in dirty dull London and talked about milkmen and servants! I think now, looking back, that I was perhaps a shade intolerant. But they *were* stupid—stupid even at their chosen

job: most of them kept the most extraordinarily inadequate and muddled housekeeping accounts.

My affairs did not progress very fast. The house and furniture had been sold, and the amount realized had just covered our debts. As yet, I had not been successful in finding a post. Not that I really wanted one! I had the firm conviction that, if I went about looking for adventure, adventure would meet me half-way. It is a theory of mine that one always gets what one wants.

My theory was about to be proved in practice.

It was early in January—the 8th, to be exact. I was returning from an unsuccessful interview with a lady who said she wanted a secretary-companion, but really seemed to require a strong charwoman who would work twelve hours a day for £25 a year. Having parted with mutual veiled impolitenesses, I walked down Edgware Road (the interview had taken place in a house in St John's Wood), and across Hyde Park to St George's Hospital. There I entered Hyde Park Corner Tube Station and took a ticket to Gloucester Road.

Once on the platform I walked to the extreme end of it. My inquiring mind wished to satisfy itself as to whether there really *were* points and an opening between the two tunnels just beyond the station in the direction of Down Street. I was foolishly pleased to find I was right. There were not many people on the platform, and at the extreme end there was only myself and one man. As I passed him, I sniffed dubiously. If there is one smell I cannot bear it is that of moth-balls! This man's heavy overcoat simply reeked of them. And yet most men begin to wear their winter

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overcoats before January, and consequently by this time the smell ought to have worn off. The man was beyond me, standing close to the edge of the tunnel. He seemed lost in thought, and I was able to stare at him without rudeness. He was a small thin man, very brown of face, with blue light eyes and a small dark beard.

‘Just come from abroad,’ I deduced. ‘That’s why his overcoat smells so. He’s come from India. Not an officer, or he wouldn’t have a beard. Perhaps a tea-planter.’

At this moment the man turned as though to retrace his steps along the platform. He glanced at me and then his eyes went on to something behind me, and his face changed. It was distorted by fear—almost panic. He took a step backwards as though involuntarily recoiling from some danger, forgetting that he was standing on the extreme edge of the platform, and went down and over.

There was a vivid flash from the rails and a crackling sound. I shrieked. People came running up. Two station officials seemed to materialize from nowhere and took command.

I remained where I was, rooted to the spot by a sort of horrible fascination. Part of me was appalled at the sudden disaster, and another part of me was coolly and dispassionately interested in the methods employed for lifting the man off the live rail and back on to the platform.

‘Let me pass, please. I am a medical man.’

A tall man with a brown beard pressed past me and bent over the motionless body.

As he examined it, a curious sense of unreality seemed to possess me. The thing wasn’t real—couldn’t be. Finally, the doctor stood upright and shook his head.

Agatha Christie

‘Dead as a door-nail. Nothing to be done.’

We had all crowded nearer, and an aggrieved porter raised his voice.

‘Now then, stand back there, will you? What’s the sense in crowding round?’

A sudden nausea seized me, and I turned blindly and ran up the stairs again towards the lift. I felt that it was too horrible. I must get out into the open air. The doctor who had examined the body was just ahead of me. The lift was just about to go up, another having descended, and he broke into a run. As he did so, he dropped a piece of paper.

I stopped, picked it up, and ran after him. But the lift gates clanged in my face, and I was left holding the paper in my hand. By the time the second lift reached street level, there was no sign of my quarry. I hoped it was nothing important that he had lost, and for the first time I examined it.

It was a plain half-sheet of notepaper with some figures and words scrawled upon it in pencil. This is a facsimile of it:

17.1.22 Kilbrorden Castle

On the face of it, it certainly did not appear to be of any importance. Still, I hesitated to throw it away. As I stood there holding it, I involuntarily wrinkled my nose in displeasure. Moth-balls again! I held the paper gingerly to my nose. Yes, it smelt strongly of them. But, then—

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I folded up the paper carefully and put it in my bag. I walked home slowly and did a good deal of thinking.

I explained to Mrs Flemming that I had witnessed a nasty accident in the Tube and that I was rather upset and would go to my room and lie down. The kind woman insisted on my having a cup of tea. After that I was left to my own devices, and I proceeded to carry out a plan I had formed coming home. I wanted to know what it was that had produced that curious feeling of unreality whilst I was watching the doctor examine the body. First I lay down on the floor in the attitude of the corpse, then I laid a bolster down in my stead, and proceeded to duplicate, so far as I could remember, every motion and gesture of the doctor. When I had finished I had got what I wanted. I sat back on my heels and frowned at the opposite walls.

There was a brief notice in the evening papers that a man had been killed in the Tube, and a doubt was expressed whether it was suicide or accident. That seemed to me to make my duty clear, and when Mr Flemming heard my story he quite agreed with me.

‘Undoubtedly you will be wanted at the inquest. You say no one else was near enough to see what happened?’

‘I had the feeling someone was coming up behind me, but I can’t be sure—and, anyway, they wouldn’t be as near as I was.’

The inquest was held. Mr Flemming made all the arrangements and took me there with him. He seemed to fear that it would be a great ordeal for me, and I had to conceal from him my complete composure.

The deceased had been identified as L. B. Carton. Nothing

had been found in his pockets except a house-agent's order to view a house on the river near Marlow. It was in the name of L. B. Carton, Russell Hotel. The bureau clerk from the hotel identified the man as having arrived the day before and booked a room under that name. He had registered as L. B. Carton, Kimberley, S. Africa. He had evidently come straight off the steamer.

I was the only person who had seen anything of the affair.

'You think it was an accident?' the coroner asked me.

'I am positive of it. Something alarmed him, and he stepped backwards blindly without thinking what he was doing.'

'But what could have alarmed him?'

'That I don't know. But there was something. He looked panic-stricken.'

A stolid jurymen suggested that some men were terrified of cats. The man might have seen a cat. I didn't think his suggestion a very brilliant one, but it seemed to pass muster with the jury, who were obviously impatient to get home and only too pleased at being able to give a verdict of accident as opposed to suicide.

'It is extraordinary to me,' said the coroner, 'that the doctor who first examined the body has not come forward. His name and address should have been taken at the time. It was most irregular not to do so.'

I smiled to myself. I had my own theory in regard to the doctor. In pursuance of it, I determined to make a call upon Scotland Yard at an early date.

But the next morning brought a surprise. The Flemmings

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took in the *Daily Budget*, and the *Daily Budget* was having a day after its own heart.

EXTRAORDINARY SEQUEL
TO TUBE ACCIDENT

WOMAN FOUND STRANGLED
IN LONELY HOUSE

I read eagerly.

‘A sensational discovery was made yesterday at the Mill House, Marlow. The Mill House, which is the property of Sir Eustace Pedler, MP, is to be let unfurnished, and an order to view this property was found in the pocket of the man who was at first thought to have committed suicide by throwing himself on the live rail at Hyde Park Corner Tube Station. In an upper room of the Mill House the body of a beautiful young woman was discovered yesterday, strangled. She is thought to be a foreigner, but so far has not been identified. The police are reported to have a clue. Sir Eustace Pedler, the owner of the Mill House, is wintering on the Riviera.’