

AN EXTRACT FROM

**THE KILLINGS
AT KINGFISHER HILL**

CHAPTER I
MIDNIGHT GATHERING

It is not midnight when this tale begins, but ten minutes before two on the afternoon of 22nd February 1931. That was when the strangeness started, as M. Hercule Poirot and Inspector Edward Catchpool (his friend, and the teller of this story) stood with thirty strangers in a dispersed huddle—no one too close to anybody else, but all of us easily identifiable as an assembly—on London's Buckingham Palace Road.

Our group of men and women and one child (an infant carried by his mother in a bundle arrangement that presented a rather mummified appearance) were soon to be travellers on a journey that felt peculiar and puzzling to me long before I knew quite how extraordinary it would become.

We were congregated by the side of the motor-coach that was to take us from London to the famed Kingfisher Hill country estate near Haslemere in Surrey, a place of outstanding natural beauty according to many. Despite all of us passengers being present well in advance of the coach's scheduled departure time, we had not yet been permitted to board. Instead we shivered in the damp

February chill, stamped our feet and blew on our gloved hands to warm ourselves as best we could.

It was not midnight, but it was the sort of winter day that is light-starved at dawn and remains so deprived for its duration.

There were seats for thirty passengers on the coach, and thirty-two of us in all who would be travelling: the driver, the swaddled infant in his mother's firm grip, and the rest of us occupying the passenger seats on either side of the central aisle, including a representative of the coach company.

It struck me, as I shivered by Poirot's side, that I had more in common with the babe in arms than with any other members of our group. Thirty of our band of thirty-two knew why they were going wherever they were going on that day. Poirot was one in that lucky position. The coach's driver, also, knew his reason for being there: it put food on his table—a compelling motive if ever there was one.

The baby and I were the only people present who had not the faintest notion of why we were about to board the garishly-painted motor-coach, and of the two of us, only one perceived his ignorant state as a problem. All I knew was the coach's destination: Kingfisher Hill, a private country estate of some nine hundred acres, with a golf club, two tennis courts and a swimming pool designed and built by celebrated architect Sir Victor Marklew that boasted warm water all year round.

A country home within the quiet and leafy confines of the Kingfisher Hill Estate was out of the reach

of all but the wealthiest of people, but that did not prevent Londoners of all denominations from talking about it endlessly. I might have been eager to enter those blessed gates for the first time had Poirot not been so determined to withhold from me the reason for our visit. As it was, the sense that I was being kept even more in the dark than usual proved too great an irritant. Was I, perhaps, on my way to meet a future Queen? It was sometimes said at Scotland Yard that the inhabitants of Kingfisher Hill were mostly royal person-ages and aristocrats, and anything seemed possible on a journey of Poirot's devising.

The coach departed promptly at two o'clock, and I cannot think that the events which took place before the driver called out his cheery 'Away we sally, ladies and gents!' occupied as much as a quarter of an hour. I can therefore confidently locate at ten minutes before two the moment that I noticed her: the unhappy woman with the unfinished face.

I might as well tell you that my first title for this chapter was 'An Unfinished Face'. Poirot preferred the original and protested when I told him I had changed it.

'Catchpool, you have in you the tendency of unreasoning contrariness.' He glared at me. 'Why give this most important chapter a name that will create confusion? Nothing significant occurred at midnight, on that day or any other!

It was the broad light of the day when we waited in the cold, nearly freezing to blocks of ice

and receiving no explanation of why the doors of that char-a-banc could not be opened to us.' Poirot stopped and frowned. I waited while he disentangled two separate sources of annoyance that he had unintentionally woven together in his invective. 'It was decidedly *not* midnight.'

'I do say that in my—'

'Yes, you do say so. It is your duty, *n'est-ce pas*? You have invented, from no necessity, the requirement to state *immediatement* that a particular condition did not pertain. It is illogical, *non*?'

I merely nodded. It would have sounded pompous to offer the answer that was in my mind. Poirot is the finest detective at work anywhere in the world, but he is not an experienced teller of stories in written form, and he is, very occasionally, wrong. Broad daylight was an unfair description of that particular afternoon, as I have already said, and midnight—not the hour but the word—has everything to do with the matter at hand. If the words 'Midnight Gathering' on the cover of a book had not caught my eye before we set off on our travels that day, it is possible that no one would ever have known who was responsible for the killings at Kingfisher Hill.

But I am getting ahead of myself and must return us all to the cold outdoors. I understood why we were being made to wait in the relentless headwind, even if Poirot did not. Vanity, as so often where people are concerned, was the explanation—specifically, the vanity of Alfred Bixby Esquire. Bixby was the owner of the newly minted Kingfisher Coach

Company and wished us all to observe the beauty of the vehicle that was about to transport us. Since Poirot and I had arrived, Bixby had been attached to our side as if by a gravitational force. So tickled pink was he to have the great Hercule Poirot among his patrons, he was prepared to ignore everybody else. This was a circumstance of which I could not count myself among the beneficiaries; my proximity to my friend ensured that every word addressed to him was also endured by me.

‘Doesn’t she look splendid? Blue and orange like the kingfisher bird! Bright as a button! Look at the shape of her! Beautiful, I’d say. Wouldn’t you agree, M. Poirot? Nothing like her on the road. The last word in luxury, truly she is! Look at those doors! Fit together perfectly. A spectacular feat of design and engineering. Look at them!’

‘Very fine indeed,’ I told him, knowing we would only be allowed to board once we had admired the vehicle sufficiently. Poirot made a gruff noise in his throat, unwilling to feign approval.

Bixby was a thin, angular man with bulbous staring eyes. Spotting two women wrapped in hats and coats walking on the other side of the road, he drew our attention to them and declared, ‘Those ladies are too late! Ho-ha! They should have reserved their seats in advance. If you want to travel with the Kingfisher Coach Company, you can’t afford to leave it to chance, or there’ll be no room for you. Ha! Sorry, ladies!’ he bellowed suddenly.

The two women must have heard him, but paid no

attention as they walked purposefully onwards. They would barely have noticed our presence had Bixby not called out to them. They had no interest in the Kingfisher Coach Company, nor in this four-wheeled blue and orange representative thereof. Bixby's frankly desperate and undignified behaviour made me wonder if his firm was as successful as he kept telling us all that it was.

'Did you hear that? Mr Bixby just had to turn away two ladies,' a man near me said to his companion, who replied, 'Quite right too, if they weren't expected. He said we're all here, didn't he, after he'd marked us off on his list? I don't know why people don't plan ahead.' Irritable as I was that day, it irked me that Bixby's inelegant deception had fooled at least two people.

I nodded along and made appreciative noises at what I hoped were the correct moments as he explained how his firm had come into being: something about most people not taking the initiative and not being able to imagine something that didn't already exist . . . something about owning property at Kingfisher Hill himself, profits from a previous venture, the inconvenience of getting to London despite it being relatively close geographically . . . something about not letting fear stop him, even with the national and global economies being in their present catastrophic state . . .

I remember thinking, 'Well, if Alfred Bixby owns a house at Kingfisher Hill then it can't be all royalty and aristocrats,' seconds before I saw a woman standing

alone at the outer edge of our group and noticed her expression of horror, at which point all other considerations left my mind.

'An unfinished face,' I muttered. No one heard me. Alfred Bixby was busy inflicting upon Poirot a list of the many failures of Ramsay MacDonald and his 'Russia-favouring government of knaves and reprobates' and his words smothered mine.

I estimated that the woman was around twenty years old. She was wearing a smart green hat and coat over a faded, almost colourless dress that looked as if it must have been washed more than a hundred times. There were scuffs on her shoes.

She was not entirely unattractive, but her skin looked dull and bloodless, and her features all had the same look to them: as if someone had stopped short of adding the final touches that would have given her a more conventional visual appeal. Her lips were thin, pale and recessive, and her eyes brought to mind two dark holes in the ground. In general, her face seemed to yearn to have more detail and shape added; elements needed to be brought out that were sunken in.

All of this is incidental, however. What fascinated and alarmed me was that she looked frightened, disgusted and unhappy to her core, all at once. It was as if she had suffered, only moments ago, the most dreadful and distressing shock. Her eyes were fixed on the motor-coach—a wide-eyed, maniacal stare that no amount of disapproval of those particular shades of blue and orange in

such close association could explain. If the vehicle had not been inanimate, I might have suspected that, while the rest of us were distracted, this woman had witnessed it committing a crime of unparalleled barbarism.

She appeared to be alone, standing at the outer edge of our little crowd. I did not hesitate in approaching her.

'Excuse me. Forgive me for intruding, but you look as if you've had a nasty shock. Can I be of assistance?' So extreme was the horror on her face that I did not stop to wonder if I had imagined a problem that did not exist.

'No, thank you.' She sounded vague and seemed distracted.

'Are you quite certain?'

'Yes. I . . . Yes. Thank you.' She took four or five steps away from me and closer to the coach.

I could hardly insist on helping her if she was determined to forbid it, so I returned to Poirot and Alfred Bixby, but kept an eye on her movements, which soon grew more agitated. She started to walk round and round in little circles, her mouth moving silently. At no point did the terrible expression leave her face, not for a second.

I was about to interrupt Bixby's monologue and draw Poirot's attention to the object of my concern when I heard a loud, disdainful female voice to the left of me say, 'Do you see that young woman over there? What on earth is wrong with her? Perhaps her mother dropped her hard on her head when she was a baby.'

The mother of the bundled infant gasped and held her child closer to her body. 'There's no need to be insulting, miss,' said an old man, which remark inspired a general murmur of agreement. The only people who seemed not to notice all of this activity were the woman with the unfinished face and Alfred Bixby, who was still talking to Poirot, though Poirot was no longer listening.

'She does appear to be disturbed,' someone said. 'We ought to check that her name is on the passenger manifest.'

This provoked a chorus of observations:

'Mr Bixby said we're all here.'

'Then what's keeping him from opening the doors? Driver! You're the driver, aren't you? May we board now?'

'I suppose if her name is on the list then she cannot be an escaped lunatic from a nearby asylum, though her behaviour indicates otherwise,' said the loud, rude woman. She too was young—around the same age as the woman with the unfinished face. Her voice was severely at odds with the viciousness of her words. It was a strikingly musical and feminine voice—light, bright, almost sparkling. *If a diamond could speak, it would sound like her*, I thought.

'That gentleman was speaking to her a few seconds ago.' An elderly lady gestured in my direction, then turned to face me. 'What did you say to her? Do you know her?'

'Not at all,' I replied. 'I simply noticed that she looked . . . disturbed and asked if she needed help.'

"No, thank you," she said.'

'Now, then, ladies and gentlemen,' said Alfred Bixby, eager to redirect our attention to his pride and joy. 'Is it time to reveal the luxurious interior of this brand new beauty? Why, I believe it is!'

As several people rushed forward in their eagerness to climb on board and escape the cold, I stood to one side and watched as the woman with the unfinished face backed away from the coach's open doors as though afraid they might swallow her up. I heard Poirot's voice behind me. 'Let us proceed, Catchpool. I have taken enough of your English fresh air for one day. Oh—you observe *la pauvre mademoiselle*.'

'What the devil is the matter with her, Poirot?'

'I do not know, my friend. It is likely that her mental faculties are impaired.'

'I don't think so,' I told him. 'When I spoke to her, she appeared sane and lucid.'

'In that case, she has since deteriorated.'

I walked over to her once more and said, 'I'm terribly sorry to intrude again, but . . . I am quite certain that you are in need of help. My name is Edward Catchpool. I'm a police inspector with Scotland Yard, and . . .'

'No!' Her mouth contorted around the word. 'You *cannot* be. It's impossible!' She backed away from me, knocking into the woman with the baby. She seemed aware of nothing and no one but me. The first time I had spoken to her, she had been too preoccupied by her own fears and torments

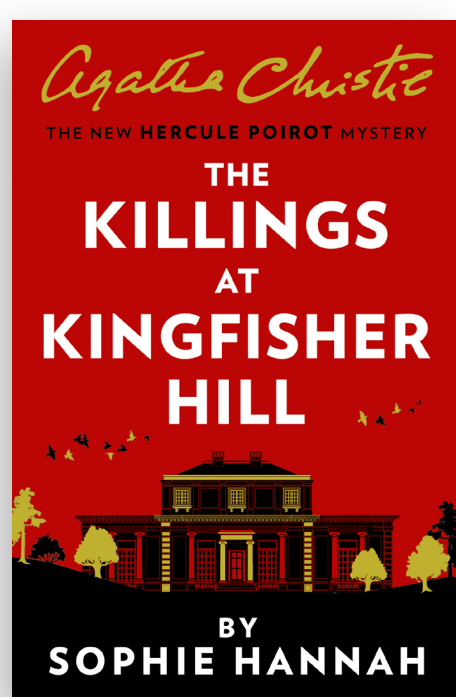
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to notice me. Now she seemed entirely fixated on me to the exclusion of all else. 'Who are you?' she demanded to know. 'Who are you, really?'

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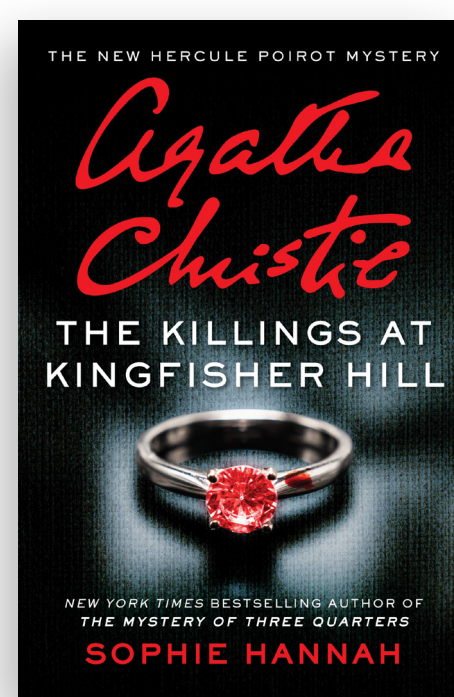
Poirot came quickly to my defence. 'Mademoiselle, I can assure you that it is true. Inspector Catchpool and I, we travel together. I am M. Hercule Poirot.'

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