

CHAPTER 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 crookedly, 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.

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‘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. He 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?’ I asked.

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

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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?’ I 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—’

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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.

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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 tram full of people to seek for a dropped half-penny.’

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? Mr Renault wrote his letter. Without blotting it, he re-read it carefully. Then, not on impulse, but deliberately, he added those last words, and blotted the sheet.’

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‘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 re-read 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 Boulogne and Calais. It is rapidly becoming the fashion. Rich English people who wish to be quiet are taking it up. Mr 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 Argentine.’

‘Well, we shall hear all the 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 dispatched 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 Aires, 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 fingerprint 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 fingerprints 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 Hercule 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.

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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. Renault’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.’

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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.

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‘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, messieurs.’

‘But we wish to see Mr Renault,’ I cried. ‘We have an appointment. This is his Villa, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, monsieur, but—’

Poirot leaned forward.

‘But what?’

‘Monsieur Renault was murdered this morning.’