

URDER ON THE LINKS by Agatha Christie. Chapter 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 editors of editors, began his story with the exclamation "Hell!" "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 jizzes from morning to night, smokes like a chimney, and uses language which would make a Billingsgate fishwoman blush! I looked up, 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 un ladylike, 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." "I could tell! Now we're friends!" declared the minx. "Say you're sorry about my sister —" "I am desolated!" "That's a good by!" "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 everyone 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 in a bad mood?" 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." "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 when 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. I've been on the boards since I was a kid of six — tumbling." "I beg your pardon," I said, puzzled. "Haven't you ever seen child acrobats?" "Oh, I understand!" "I'm American born, but I've spent most of my life in England. We've 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 the man every time. There's going 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 wholehearted determination to "make good." 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 would be once, and after the Somme they invalided me out altogether. I'm sort of private secretary now to an MP." "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 chuckled deviously. The girl listened spellbound. In fact, we were so absorbed that the train drew into Calais station before we realized it. I secured a couple of porters, and we alighted on the platform. My companion held out her hand. "Goodbye, 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? Aren't you even going to tell me your name?" "I cried out as she turned away. She looked over her shoulder. "Cinderella," she said, and laughed. But little did I think when and how I should see Cinderella again. 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 say 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 disorder in one's attire, was torture to the little man until he could ease his feelings by remedying the defect. "Order" and "Method" were his gods. He had a certain disdain for the ignoble evidence, such as footprints and cigarette ash, and would maintain that, taken by themselves, they would never enable a detective to solve a problem. When 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." "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." 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 his mail, he read 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." Poirot continued to read his correspondence placidly. "A suggestion that I should give a lecture to our local Boy Scouts. The Countess of Foranock will be obliged if I will call and see her. Another lapdog 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: "I am 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 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 en route for a considerable period of time, as it may be necessary for you to go out at night. I have a hastily scrawled line, almost illegible: "For God's sake, come!" I nodded. He was thinking deeply. Finally he seemed to make up his mind, and he said: "I can allow ten minutes for discussion. You accompany me, West-case pas?" "M. Renaud. By the way, I seem to know the name?" "There's a well-known American actor; but we progress finely! You remarked the postscript? How words." "But my friend shook his head energetically. "You are in error. See your letter. Without blotting it, he reread it carefully. Then, not on impulse, he said: "I reread the letter and was dissatisfied. It was not strong enough! I do not believe the urgency is very great, and we must reach him as soon as possible." "I suppose?" "Yes, in Rutland Gate, as far as I remember. Also a broadcast 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 suitcase each, and then a taxi to Victoria. "Eleven o'clock saw our departure from Victoria on our way to Dover. Before starting Poirot had dismounted. "I observed maliciously, as I recalled our conversation, that you are not only a man of practice it always. One balances oneself, if you remember, turner Buenos Aires, or wherever it is your land." "Quelle idée! You'd do your work is done from within — here —" he tapped his forehead with a earnest and conviction of a murderer." "And has, without doubt, details — all these are of vital importance?" "But certainly. I had thought of the crime, its logical deduction, the proper sequence an is hunting of the fox, you need the dogs, no?" "Hounds," I corrected. I laughed immoderately. Poirot nodded in a satisfied manner. "I shall study hypothetical footprints, and should scoop up a trail, I, without having moved from my apartments, was able to tell the technical. And the result? What we all knew in the first place. The? I answered that question, mon ami, and answered it correctly." "The sea as smooth as the proverbial millpond, so I was hardly surprised when a telegram having been delayed in transit. "We will hire a car," he said cheerfully. "And a few minutes later my little friend was observing me gravely. "You are what the Scotch people call 'fey,' Hastings. I was so gravely that I was impressed in spite of myself. "I have a feeling," he said slyly. "And we slowed up to inquire the way to the Villa Genevieve. "Straight ahead. A fork in the road brought us to a second halt. A peasant was ed, the gate of it swung open and a girl came out. The peasant's auferer thanked him, and started the car again. My eyes adness, her uncovered golden head gleaming in the sunlight, raised his eyebrows. "Ça commence!" he murmured. "I 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 sergeant de ville. He held up his hand to bar our way. "You cannot pass, isn't it?" "Yes, monsieur, but —" Poirot leaned forward. "But what?" "Monsieur Renaud was murdered this morning. "What is that you say? Murdered? When? How?" The sergeant de ville d not reflected for a minute. "The Commissary of Police, he is without doubt within?" "Yes, monsieur, to see that this card is sent in to the commissary at once?" The man took it and, turning his age. There was a wait of some minutes, and then a short, stout man with a huge moustache cried the newcomer, "I am delighted to see you. Your arrival is most opportune." Poi mine, Captain Hastings — Monsieur Lucien Bex. The commissary and I bowed to e, that time in Ostend. You have information to give which may assist us?" "Possibly man. It seems that he knew an attempt was going to be made on his life. Unfortunately murder. That upsets our theories considerably! But come inside." He held agistrate, Monsieur Hautet, must hear of this at once. He has just finished examining Poirot. "The body was discovered this morning about nine o'clock. Madam nter, I pray of you." We had arrived at the steps which led up to the front door inquired the latter. "In the salon, monsieur." M. Bex opened a door to the left o introduced us, and explained our presence. M. Hautet, the Juge d'instruction, he talked. Standing by the mantelpiece was an elderly man, with slightly stooped M. Hautet as the commissary finished speaking. "You have the letter here, mon ks of a secret. What a pity he was not more explicit. We are much indebted to you ns. Or are you obliged to return to London?" "Monsieur le juge, I propose to re honour to discover the assassin." The magistrate bowed. "These sentiments do e. We are expecting M. Giraud from the Sûreté in Paris any moment, and I am yo ur invest igation. In the meantime, I hope that you will do me the honour to assistance you require it is at your disposal." "I thank you, monsieur, I know nothing whatever." M. Hautet nodded to the commissary, a se, on descending to start her work, found the front door ajar. Feeling om, but seeing the silver was safe she thought no more about it, co for a stroll." "Pardon, monsieur, for interrupting, but was that a co the common idea as regards the English — that they are mad, and li o call her mistress as usual, a young maid, Léonie, was horrified to d osts was brought that Monsieur Renaud's body had been discovered, ed extraordinary features of the case. Monsieur Poirot, the body was reshly dug — just a few yards outside the boundary of the villa ground ine d the body this morning at ten o'clock. Death must have taken place at l t and 3 a.m." "Exactly," and Mrs. Renaud's evidence places it at after 2 a ould not have been self-inflicted." Poirot nodded, and the commissary re van ts. She was in a terrible condition of weakness, almost unconscious from t d a n bound her, while forcibly abducting her husband. This we know at seco a n alarming state of agitation. On arrival, Dr. Durand immediately prescribed out b t she will awake more calm, and be equal to bearing the strain of the interrog old Françoise, the housekeeper, she lived for many years with the former owners o is in Merlinville, and they come of most respectable parents. Then there is the cha er are Madame Renaud and her son, Monsieur Jack Renaud. He, too, is away from oman Françoise." The man saluted, and disappeared. In a moment or two he return e in service at the Villa Genevieve?" "Eleven years with Madame la Vicomtesse. The strate cut her short. "Without doubt, without doubt. Now, Françoise, in this matter of t "I fastened it as usual." "You are sure of that?" "I swear it by the blessed saints, mon they gone up to bed?" "Madame had retired some time before. Denise and Léonie went ven been Monsieur Renaud himself?" Françoise shrugged her broad shoulders. "What sh was not an imbecile. It is not as though he had had to let the lady out —" The magistrate ee him. "Had a lady been to see him that evening?" "But yes, monsieur — and many other pread over the woman's face. "How should I know if it was?" she grumbled. "I did not let hand down with a bang on the table." "You would trifle with the police, would you? I demand t Renaud in the evenings." "The police — the police," grumbled Françoise. "Never did I think as it was Madame Daubreuil." The commissary uttered an exclamation, and leaned forward as t st down the road?" "That is what I said, monsieur. Oh, she is a pretty one." The old woman tossed ble." "Volla," grumbled Françoise. "That is all you get for telling the truth." "Not at all," said the exa en, and Monsieur Renaud, they were —" He paused delicately. "Eh? It was that without doubt?" "H and Madame Daubreuil, she was poor, that one — and tres chic, for all that she lives so quietly with t I who speak to you have seen the men's heads turn after her as she goes down the street. Besides lat t an end." And Françoise shook her head with an air of unalterable certainty. M. Hautet stroked his bear Françoise shrugged her shoulders. "She was always most amiable — most polite. One would say that sh had Madame grow paler and thinner. She was not the same woman who arrived here a month ago. Monsieur erves. And who could wonder, with an affair conducted in such a fashion? No reticence, no discretion. Style a stions, undistracted by side issues. "You say that Monsieur Renaud had not to let Madame Daubreuil out? Had n shd the door after her." "What time was that?" "About twenty-five minutes after ten, monsieur." "Do you know ne hears everyone who goes up and down." "And that is all? You heard no sound of disturbance during the night?" "N e door swinging open." "What about the other downstairs windows, were they all fastened?" "Every one of them. There wa threshold she looked back. "I will tell you one thing, monsieur. That Madame Daubreuil she is a bad one! Oh, yes, one woman k