THE MURDER 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 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, 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." "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 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 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." "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. 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 them 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 was wounded once, and after the Somme they invalided me out altogether. I'm a 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 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. 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, as she turned a way. 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 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." "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 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." 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 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: Villa Genevieve, Merlinville-s[illegible]ur-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 abil[illegible]ity, 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 tim[illegible]e in crossing to France, I will send a c[illegible]ar 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 sh[illegible] all probably need your services for a considerable period of t[illegible]ime, 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[illegible]. T. Renauld. Below the signature was a hastily scrawled line, almost illegible[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,[illegible]" I continued. Poirot nodded. He was thinking deeply. Finally he seemed to make up his m[illegible]ind, 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[illegible] of time. We can allow ten minutes for discussion. You accompany me, n'est-ce pas?" "Well —" "[illegible] 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[illegible]. Renauld. By the way, I seem to know the name?" "There's a well-known South American millionaire fellow[illegible]. 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; b[illegible]ut we progress finely! You remarked the postscript? How did it strike you?" I considered. "Clearly he wrote the le[illegible]tter 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 he[illegible]ad energetically. "You are in error. See you not that while the ink of the signature is nearly black, that of the postscript[illegible] is quite pale?" "Well?" I said, puzzled. "Mon Dieu, mon ami, but use your little grey cells. Is it not obvious? Mr. Renauld wrote his letter. Without blotting it, he reread it careful[illegible]ly. Then, not on impulse, but deliberately, he added those last words, and blotted the sheet." "But why?" "Parbleu! so that it[illegible] 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 e[illegible]nough!" He paused, and then added softly, his eyes shining with that green light that always betokened inward excitement: "And[illegible] 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." "Me[illegible]rlinville," I murmured thoughtfully. "I've heard of it, I think." Poirot nodded. "It is a quiet little place — but chic! It lies about midway be[illegible]tween Boulogne and Calais. 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, some[illegible] where 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 in[illegible]terests 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.[illegible] 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[illegible] 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 rem[illegible]edy, Poirot," I observed maliciously, as I recalled our conversation at breakfast. My friend, who was anxiously scanning the weather, turned a repr[illegible]oachful 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[illegible] 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[illegible] of balancing yourself and counting six by the time you get to Santiago, Buenos Aires, or wherever it is you land." "Quelle idée! You do not figure[illegible] 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,[illegible] making journeys, and agitating myself. My work is done from within — here —" he tapped his forehead significantly. As usual, this remark roused[illegible] 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. "Bu[illegible]t 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 th[illegible]e 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,[illegible] 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 sm[illegible]elling 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 dog — hounds to the hounds. Yet you demand that I, Hercule Poirot, should make myself ridiculous by lying down (possibly on damp grass)[illegible] 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[illegible] 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? When at 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[illegible] solitude. The weather was gorgeous, and the sea as smooth as the proverbial millpond, so I was hardly surprised 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 be[illegible]en delayed in transit. "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, but my little friend was observing me gravely. "You are[illegible] 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[illegible] know." 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[illegible] ng the town behind. A fork in the road brought us to a second[illegible] aited, the gate of it swung open and a girl came out. The pe[illegible] You could see it if it were not for the curve." The chauffeur[illegible] ome up to us in order to ask the way again. There was a t[illegible]iny villa standing right by the road, but it was too small and dilapidated to be the one we wanted. As we w[illegible] uld have passed without remark. Very tall, with the proporti[illegible] and asked for direction. "[illegible] The Villa Geneviève? Just a few steps up this road to the right, monsieur. [illegible]er. "By Jove, Poirot," I exclaimed, "did you see that young g[illegible] girl who still s[illegible]tood, with one hand on the gate, watching us. I[illegible] am an admirer of beauty, and here was one whom nobody co[illegible]rely see the same thing. You, for instance, saw a goddess. [illegible] unlight, I swore to myself that she was one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen. As we swung[illegible] up the rough road, I turned my head to look after h[illegible]lle. He held up his hand to bar our way. "You cannot pass, "Already you have seen a goddess!" "But, hang it all, wasn't she?" "Possibly, I did not remark the fact." "Surely[illegible] you noticed her?" "Mon ami, two people ra[illegible]e Villa Geneviève In a moment Poirot had leapt from the car, irot gravely. But at that moment we drew up at a big green gate, and, simultaneously, we both uttered an exclamation. Be[illegible]fore it stood an imposing sergent de vi[illegible] of Police, he is without doubt within?" "Yes, monsieur." Po messieurs." "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?" "Monsieur Renauld was murdered[illegible] this morning." Chapter 3 — At th[illegible]rade joined him, and was handed Poirot's message. There his eyes blazing with excitement. "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 fo[illegible]r a minute. "The Commissary[illegible]ur arrival is most opportune." Poirot's face had lighted up. "irot 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, whistle[illegible]d. In a few seconds a com[illegible]"Mon vieux, I have not seen you since 1909, that time in Ost 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 Monsieur Poirot," cried the newcomer, "I am de[illegible]lighted to see you. Yo[illegible]ortunately he sent for me too late." "Sacré tonnerre!" ejacu Monsieur Bex! This is indeed a pleasure." He turned to me. "This is an English friend of mine, Captain Hastings — Monsieur Lucien Bex." The commissary and I bowed to each other ceremoniously, and M. Bex turned on[illegible]ce more to Poirot. [illegible]se. M. Bex continued to talk: "The examining magistrate, M[illegible] end. You have information to give which may assist us?" "Possibly[illegible] you know it already. You were aware that I had been sent for?" "No. By whom?" "The dead man. It seems that he knew an attempt was going to be mad[illegible]e on his life. Unf[illegible]y was discovered this morning about nine o'clock. Madame ated the Frenchman. "So he foresaw his ow[illegible]n murder. That upsets our theories considerably! But come inside." He held the gate open, and we commenced walking to[illegible]wards the hou[illegible] hall another sergent de ville was sitting. He rose at sight of t[illegible]onsieur Hautet, must hear of this at[illegible] once. He has just finished examining th[illegible]e scene of the crime and is about to begin his interrogations." "When was the crime committed?" asked Poiro[illegible]t. "The bod[illegible]d table. They looked up as we entered. The commissary intr[illegible] Renauld's evidence and that o[illegible]f the doctors goes to show that death must have occurred about 2[illegible]a.m. But enter, I pray of you." We had arrived at the steps which led up to the front door of the vill[illegible]a. In the[illegible] mantelpiece was an elderly man, with slightly stooping sho[illegible] he commissary. "Where[illegible] is Monsieur Hautet now?" inquired the latter. "In the salon, monsieur." M. Bex opened a do[illegible]or to the left of the hall, and we passed in. M. Hautet and his clerk were sitting at a b[illegible]ig roun[illegible]d it. "H'm! He speaks of a secret. What a pity he was not mo[illegible] oduced us, and explai[illegible]ned our presence. M. Hautet, the Juge d'instruction, was a tall gaunt man, with piercing dark eyes, and a neat[illegible]y cut grey beard, which he had a habit of caressing as he talked. Standing by the[illegible] ulders, who was in[illegible]troduced to us as Dr. Durand. "Most extraordinary," remarked M. Hautet as the commissary finished speaking. "You have the l[illegible]etter here, monsieur?" Poirot handed it to him, and the magistrate re[illegible]d it. B[illegible]y girl, w[illegible] re explicit. We ar[illegible]e much indebted to you, Monsieur Poirot. I hope you will do us the honour of assisting us in our investigations. Or are you obliged to return to[illegible] London?" "Monsieur le juge, I propose to remain. I did n[illegible]ot arrive in time to prevent my client's death, but I feel myself[illegible]d it, I[illegible]ençoise[illegible] bound in hono[illegible]ur to discover the assassin." The magistrate bowed. "These sentiments do you honour. Also, without doubt, Madame Renauld will wish to retain your services.[illegible] We are expecting M. Giraud from the Sûreté in Paris any moment, and I am sure that you and he will be able[illegible]t I he[illegible]last[illegible] to give each o[illegible]ther 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[illegible] any assistance you require it is at your disposal." "I thank you, monsieur. You will comprehend t[illegible]aud' [illegible]ubre[illegible] hat 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 sta[illegible]rt 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[illegible] 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 young maid, Léonie, was horrified to discover her gagged and[illegible] bound, and almost at the same moment news was brought that Monsieur Renauld's body had been discovered, stone dead, stabbed in the back." "Where?" "That is one of the most extraordinary features of the case. Monsieur Poirot, the body was lying face downwards, in an open grave." "What?" "Y[illegible]es. The pit was freshly dug — just a few yards outside the boundary of the villa grounds." "And it 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[illegible] it at between midnight and 3 a.m." "Exactly, and Mrs. Renauld's evidence places it at after 2 a.m., which narrows the field still farther. Death must have been instantaneous, and naturally could not have been self-inflicted." Poirot nodded, and the commissary resumed: "Madame Renauld was hastily free[illegible]d 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, while forcibly abducting her husband. This we know at second hand fro[illegible]m 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." Th[illegible]e 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 most resp[illegible]ectable parents. Then there is the chauffeur whom Monsieur Renauld brought over from England with him, but he is away on a holiday. Finally there are Madame Renauld and her son, Monsieur Jack Renauld. He, too, is away from home at present." Poirot bowed his head. M. Hautet spoke: "Marchaud!" Th[illegible]e sergent de ville appeared. "Bring in the woman Françoise." The man saluted, and disappeared. In a moment or two he returned, escorting the frightened Fran[illegible]çoise. "Your name is Françoise Arrichet?" "Yes, monsieur." "You have been a long time in service at the Villa[illegible] Geneviève?" "Eleven years with Madame la Vicomtesse. Then when she sold the Villa this spring, I consented to remain on with the English[illegible]milor'. Never did I imagine —" The magistrate cut her short. "Without doubt, without doubt. No[illegible]w, Françoise, in this matter of the front door, whose business was it to fasten it at night?" "Mine, monsieur. Always I saw to it mys[illegible]elf." "And last night?" "I fastened it as usual." "You are sure of that?" "I swear it by the[illegible] blessed saints, monsieur." "What time would that be?" "The same time as usual, half past ten, monsieur." "What about t[illegible]he rest of the household, had they gone up to bed?" "Madame had retired some ti[illegible]me before. Denise and Léonie went up with me. Monsieur was still in his study." "Then, if anyone unfastened the d[illegible]oor afterwards, it must have been Monsieur Renauld himself?" Françoise shrug[illegible]ged her broad shoulders. "What should he do that for? With robbers and assassins passing every minute![illegible] A nice[illegible] idea! Monsieur was not an imbecile. It is not as though he had had to let th[illegible]e lady out —" The magistrate interrupted sharply: "The lady? What lady do you mean?" "Why, the l[illegible]ady who came to see him[illegible]." "Had a lady been to see him that evening?" "But yes, monsieur — and[illegible] many other evenings as well." "Who was she? Did you know her?" A rather cunning look sprea[illegible]d over the woman's face. "How sh[illegible]ould I know who it was?" she grumbled. "I did not let her in last night." "[illegible] Aha!" roared the examining magistrate, bringing his hand down with a bang on the table. "[illegible] You would trifle with the police, would yo[illegible]u? I demand that you tell me at once the name of this woman who cam[illegible]e to visit Monsieur Renauld in the evenings." "The police — the police," grumbled Franç[illegible]oise. "Never did I think that I should be mixed-[illegible] up with the police. But I know well enough who she was. It was Madam[illegible]e Daubreuil." The commissary uttered an exclamation, and leaned forward as though i[illegible]n utter astonishment. "Madame Daubreuil — fro[illegible]m the Villa Marguerite just down the road?" "That is what I said, mons[illegible]ieur. Oh, she is a pretty one." The old woman tossed her head scornfully. "Madame D[illegible]aubr[illegible]euil," murmured the co[illegible]mmissary. "Impossible." "Voilà," grumbled Françoise. "That is all you get for telling the truth." "Not at all," said the examining magistrate soothingly. "W[illegible]e were surprised, th[illegible]at is all. Madame Daubreuil then, and Monsieur Renauld, they were —?" He paused delicately. "Eh? It was that without doubt?" "How should I kn[illegible]ow? But what will y[illegible]ou? Monsieur, he wa[illegible]s milord anglais — très riche — and Madame Daubreuil, she was poor, that one — and très chic, for all that she lives so qui[illegible]etly with her dau[illegible]ghter. Not a doubt[illegible] of it, she has had her history! She[illegible] is no longer young, but ma foi! I who speak to you have seen the men's hea[illegible]ds turn after her as she goes down the stre[illegible]et[illegible]. Besides lately[illegible] ore money to spend — all the town kn[illegible]ows it. The little economies, they are at an end." And Françoise shook her head with an air of unalterable certainty. M. H[illegible]autet st[illegible]roked his beard. "She was always most amiable — m[illegible]ost polite.[illegible] One would s[illegible]ly. "And Madame Renauld?" he asked at length. "How did she take this — friendship?" Françoise shrugged her shoulders. "She was never. She was not the same woman who[illegible] arrived here[illegible] a month ag[illegible]othing. But all the same, is it not so, the hea[illegible]rt suffers, monsieur? Day by day, I have watched Madame grow paler and thi[illegible]nner. She was not the same woman who[illegible] arrived here[illegible] a month ag[illegible]d. He also has had his worries. One could see t[illegible]hat he was on the brink of a crisis of the nerves. And who could wonder, with an affair conducted in such a fashion? N[illegible]o retice[illegible]nce[illegible], no discre[illegible]t!" I bounded i[illegible]ndignantly in my seat, but the examining magistrate was continuing his questions, undistracted by side issues. "You say that Monsieur Renauld[illegible] had no[illegible]t to[illegible] let Mada[illegible]ft, then[illegible]?" "Yes, monsie[illegible]ur. I heard them come out of the study and go to the door. Monsieur said good-night, and shut the door after her." "Wh at time[illegible]w[illegible] as that?"[illegible] minutes after t[illegible]en, monsieur." "Do you know when Monsieur Renauld went to bed?" "I heard him come up about ten minutes after we did. Th[illegible]e stair creak[illegible]ars everyone who goes up and down." "And that is all? You heard no sound of disturbance during the night?" "Nothing what[illegible]ever, m[illegible]onsi[illegible]that one he[illegible]rvants came down the first in the morning?" "I did, monsieur. At once I saw the door swinging open." "What about the other[illegible] downst[illegible]air[illegible]." "Every one of them. There was nothing suspicious or out of place anywhere[illegible] of the se[illegible]?" "Good. Françoise, you can go." The old wo[illegible]man shu[illegible]mmissary. "Impossible." "Voilà," grumbled Françoise. "That is all you get for telling the truth." "Not at all," said the examining magistrate soothingly. "W[illegible]windows, were they all f[illegible]astened[illegible]at is all. Madame Daubreuil then, and Monsieur Renauld, they were —?" He paused delicately. "Eh? It was that without doubt?" "How should I kn[illegible]led[illegible] towards th[illegible]e door.[illegible] On the[illegible]threshold she looked back. "I will tell you one thing, monsieur. That Madame Daubreuil is a bad one! Oh, yes, one wom[illegible]an knows[illegible] about another. She is[illegible]a ba[illegible]d one, remember that." And, shaking her head sagely, Françoise left the room. "Léonie Oulard," called the magistrate. Lé[illegible]onie appear[illegible]ed diss[illegible]olved i[illegible]n te[illegible]ars, and inclined to be hysterical. M. Hautet dealt with her adroitly. Her evidence was mainly concerned with the discover[illegible]y of her mis[illegible]tress[illegible]g[illegible]agged and bound, of which she gave rather an exaggerated account. She, like Françoise, had heard nothing during th[illegible]e night. Her s[illegible]ister[illegible], Denise, succeeded her. She agreed that her master had changed greatly of late. "Every day he became more and mor[illegible]e moro[illegible]se. H[illegible]e ate les[illegible]s. He was always depressed." But Denise had her own theory. "Without doubt it was the Mafia he had on his[illegible] track! Two[illegible] masked[illegible]men — who else could it be? A terrible society that!" "It is, of course, possible," said the magistrate smooth[illegible]ly. "No[illegible]w, m[illegible]y girl, w[illegible] as if you who admitted Madame Daubreuil to the house last night?" "t?" "Not last night, monsieur, the night before[illegible]." "But[illegible] Fra[illegible]çoise[illegible] has just told us that Madame Daubreuil was here last night?" "No, monsieur. A lady did come to see Monsieu[illegible]r Ren[illegible]auld[illegible] last[illegible] night, but it was not Madame Daubreuil." Surprised, the magistrate insisted, but the girl held firm. She knew Ma[illegible]da[illegible]me D[illegible]ubre[illegible]uil perfectly by sight. This lady was dark also, but shorter, and much younger. Nothing could shake her stateme[illegible]nt. "Ha[illegible] you[illegible] ever seen this lady before?" "Never, monsieur." And then the girl added diffidently: "But I think she was English.[illegible] " "Engli[illegible]?" "[illegible] Yes, monsieur. She asked for Monsieur Renauld in quite good French, but the accent — however slight one can a[illegible]lways[illegible] it. Besides, when they came out of the study they were speaking in English." "Did you hear what they said? Could you[illegible] unde[illegible]d it, I[illegible] mean?" "Me, I speak the English very well," said Denise with pride. "The lady was speaking too fast for me to catc[illegible]h wh[illegible]t I he[illegible]ard Monsieur's last words as he opened the door for her." She paused ed, and then repeated carefully and laboriously: "'Ye[illegible]s saike go nauw!'" "Yes, yes, but for God's sake go now!" repeated the magistrate. He dismissed Denise and, after a[illegible] mo[illegible]alled Françoise. To her he propounded the question as to whether she had not made a mistake in fixing the night of M[illegible]ada[illegible], rec[illegible]ved unexpectedly obstinate. It was last night that Madame Daubreuil had come. Without doubt it was she. Denise wishe[illegible]d to[illegible] cooked up this fine tale about a strange lady. Airing her knowledge of English, too! Probably Monsieur had never spoken[illegible] that[illegible] he had, it proved nothing, for Madame Daubreuil spoke English perfectly, and generally used that language when talking to M[illegible]onsieu[illegible] You see, Monsieur Jack, the son of Monsieur, was usually here, and he spoke the French very badly." The magistrate did not insist. Ins[illegible]ired about the chauffeur, and learned that only yesterday Monsieur Renauld had declared that he was not likely to use the car, and that[illegible] just as well take a holiday. A perplexed frown was beginning to gather between[illegible] a question: "Pardon, Monsieur Bex, but without doubt Monsieur Renauld could dr[illegible]ive the car himself?" The commissary looked over at Françoi[illegible]y: "No. Monsieur did not drive himself." Poirot's frown deepened. "I wish you would tell me what is worrying you," I said impatiently. "See you n[illegible]ending the car for me to Calais." "Perhaps he meant a hired car," I suggested. "Doubtless, that is so. But why hire a car when you have one of yo[illegible]ur own[illegible]? Why choose yesterday to send away the chauffeur on a holiday — suddenly, at a moment's notice? Was it that for some reason he wanted him out of the way before we arrived?" Chapter 4 — T[illegible]he Letter Signed "Bella" Françoise had left the room. The magistra[illegible]te was drumming thoughtfully on the table. "Monsieur Bex," he said at length, "here we have directly conflicting testimony. Which are we to believ[illegible]e, Françoise or Denise?" "Denise," said the[illegible] commissary decidedly. "It was she who let the visitor in. Françoise is old and obstinate, and has evidently taken a dislike to Madame Daubreuil. Besides, our own knowl[illegible]edge tends to show that Renauld was e[illegible]ntangled with another woman." "Tiens!" cried M. Hautet. "We have forgotten to inform Monsieur Poirot of that." He searched among the papers on the table, and finally hand[illegible]ed the one he was in search of to[illegible] my friend. "This letter, Mo[illegible]nsieur Poirot, we found in the pocket of the dead man's overcoat." Poirot took it and unfolded it. It was somewhat worn and crumpled, and was written in E[illegible]nglish in a rather unformed hand: My Dearest One, Why have you not written for so long? You do love me still, don't you? Your letters lately have been so different, cold, and strange, and now this long silence. It makes me afraid. If y[illegible]ou were to stop loving me! But that's impossible — what a silly kid I am — always imagining things! But if you did stop loving me, I don't know what I should do — kill myself perhaps! I couldn't live without you. Sometimes I fancy another woman is coming between us. Let her look out, that's all — and you too! I'd as soon kill you as let her have you! I me[illegible]d I love you — yes, love you, l[illegible]ove you, love you! Your own adoring Bella. There was no address or date. Poirot handed it an it. But there, I'm writing high-flown nonsense. You love me, an[illegible]g magistrate shrugged his shoulders. "Obviously Monsieur Renauld was entangled with this Englishwoman — Bella[illegible]igue with her. H[illegible] e cools off to the other, and she instantly suspects something. This letter contains a distinct t[illegible]. Je[illegible]alousy! The fact that Monsieur Renauld was stabbed in the back seemed to point distinctly to it back with a grave face. "And the assumption is —?" The examinin[illegible] — but not the grave! That was laborious work, hard work — no woman dug that grave, Monsieur. a! He comes over here, meets Madame Daubreuil, and starts an intr[illegible]es, you are right. We did not think of that." "As I said," continued M. Hautet, "at first sight the case threat. Monsieur Poirot, at first sight the case seemed simplicity itself[illegible]nsieur Renauld, complicate matters. Here we seem to have an entirely different set of circumstances being a woman's crime." Poirot nodded. "The stab in the back, yes[illegible]self, do you think it is possible that it referred in any way to this 'Bella' and her threats?" Poirot shook That was a man's doing." The commissary exclaimed excitedly: "Yes, y[illegible]s life in out-of-the- way places, would not be likely to ask for protection against a woman." The examin seemed simple, but the masked men, and the letter you received from Mo[illegible]ok for the explanation of the letter —" "In Santiago," finished the commissary. "I shall cable without del s, with no relationship between the two. As regards the letter written to your[illegible]ay to the police in that city, requesting full details of the murdered man's life out the k his head. "Hardly. A man like Monsieur Renauld, who had led an adventurous[illegible]re, his love affairs, his business transactions, his friendships, and any enmities he may have incurred. ing magistrate nodded his head emphatically. "My view exactly. Then we must lo[illegible]will be strange if, after that, we do not hold a clue to his mysterious murder." The comm[illegible]issary looked around for approval. "Excellent!" said Poirot appreciatively. "You have found no other letters from this Bella among Monsieur Renauld's effects?" asked Poirot. "No. Of course one of o[illegible]ur first proceedings was to search through his private papers in the study. We found nothing of interest, however. All seemed square and aboveboard. The only thing at all out of the ordinary was his will.[illegible] Here it is." Poirot ran through the document. "So. A legacy of a thousand pounds to Mr. Stonor — who is he, by the way?" "Monsieur Renauld's secretary. He remained in England, but was over here once or tw[illegible]ice for a weekend." "And everything else left unconditionally to his beloved wife, Eloise. Simply drawn up, but perfectly legal. Witnessed by the two servants, Denise and Françoise. Nothing so very unusual about t[illegible]hat." He handed it back. "Perhaps," began Bex, "you did not notice —" "The date?" twinkled Poirot. "But, yes, I noticed it. A fortnight ago. Possibly it marks his first intimation of danger. Many rich men die intestate thro[illegible]ugh never considering the likelihood of their