

POIROT

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery



DEATH ON THE NILE

SOON TO BE A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE!

One

“Linnet Ridgeway!”

“That’s *her!*” said Mr. Burnaby, the landlord of the Three Crowns.

He nudged his companion.

The two men stared with round bucolic eyes and slightly open mouths.

A big scarlet Rolls-Royce had just stopped in front of the local post office.

A girl jumped out, a girl without a hat and wearing a frock that looked (but only *looked*) simple. A girl with golden hair and straight autocratic features—a girl with a lovely shape—a girl such as was seldom seen in Malton-under-Wode.

With a quick imperative step she passed into the post office.

“That’s *her!*” said Mr. Burnaby again. And he went on in a low awed voice: “Millions she’s got . . . Going to spend thousands on the place. Swimming pools there’s going to be, and Italian

gardens and a ballroom and half of the house pulled down and rebuilt. . . .”

“She’ll bring money into the town,” said his friend. He was a lean, seedy-looking man. His tone was envious and grudging.

Mr. Burnaby agreed.

“Yes, it’s a great thing for Malton-under-Wode. A great thing it is.”

Mr. Burnaby was complacent about it.

“Wake us all up proper,” he added.

“Bit of difference from Sir George,” said the other.

“Ah, it was the ’orses did for him,” said Mr. Burnaby indulgently. “Never ’ad no luck.”

“What did he get for the place?”

“A cool sixty thousand, so I’ve heard.”

The lean man whistled.

Mr. Burnaby went on triumphantly: “And they say she’ll have spent another sixty thousand before she’s finished!”

“Wicked!” said the lean man. “Where’d she *get* all that money from?”

“America, so I’ve heard. Her mother was the only daughter of one of those millionaire blokes. Quite like the pictures, isn’t it?”

The girl came out of the post office and climbed into the car.

As she drove off, the lean man followed her with his eyes. He muttered:

“It seems all wrong to me—her looking like that. Money *and* looks—it’s too much! If a girl’s as rich as that she’s no right to be a good-looker as well. And she *is* a good-looker . . . Got everything, that girl has. Doesn’t seem fair. . . .”

II

Extract from the Social column of the *Daily Blague*.

Among those supping at Chez Ma Tante I noticed beautiful Linnet Ridgeway. She was with the Hon. Joanna Southwood, Lord Windlesham and Mr. Toby Bryce. Miss Ridgeway, as everyone knows, is the daughter of Melhuish Ridgeway, who married Anna Hartz. She inherits from her grandfather, Leopold Hartz, an immense fortune. The lovely Linnet is the sensation of the moment and it is rumoured that an engagement may be announced shortly. Certainly Lord Windlesham seemed very épris!!

III

The Hon. Joanna Southwood said:

“Darling, I think it’s going to be all perfectly *marvellous!*”

She was sitting in Linnet Ridgeway’s bedroom at Wode Hall.

From the window the eye passed over the gardens to open country with blue shadows of woodlands.

“It’s rather perfect, isn’t it?” said Linnet.

She leaned her arms on the window sill. Her face was eager, alive, dynamic. Beside her, Joanna Southwood seemed, somehow, a little dim—a tall thin young woman of twenty-seven, with a long clever face and freakishly plucked eyebrows.

“And you’ve done so much in the time! Did you have lots of architects and things?”

“Three.”

“What are architects like? I don’t think I’ve ever seen any.”

"They were all right. I found them rather unpractical sometimes."

"Darling, you soon put *that* right! You are the *most* practical creature!"

Joanna picked up a string of pearls from the dressing table.

"I suppose these are real, aren't they, Linnet?"

"Of course."

"I know it's 'of course' to you, my sweet, but it wouldn't be to most people. Heavily cultured or even Woolworth! Darling, they really are *incredible*, so exquisitely matched. They must be worth the *most* fabulous sum!"

"Rather vulgar, you think?"

"No, not at all—just pure beauty. What *are* they worth?"

"About fifty thousand."

"What a lovely lot of money! Aren't you afraid of having them stolen?"

"No, I always wear them—and anyway they're insured."

"Let me wear them till dinnertime, will you, darling? It would give me such a thrill."

Linnet laughed.

"Of course, if you like."

"You know, Linnet, I really do envy you. You've simply got *everything*. Here you are at twenty, your own mistress, with any amount of money, looks, superb health. You've even got *brains*! When are you twenty-one?"

"Next June. I shall have a grand coming-of-age party in London."

"And then are you going to marry Charles Windlesham? All

the dreadful little gossip writers are getting so excited about it. And he really is frightfully devoted."

Linnet shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know. I don't really want to marry anyone yet."

"Darling, how right you are! It's never quite the same afterwards, is it?"

The telephone shrilled and Linnet went to it.

"Yes? Yes?"

The butler's voice answered her:

"Miss de Bellefort is on the line. Shall I put her through?"

"Bellefort? Oh, of course, yes, put her through."

A click and a voice, an eager, soft, slightly breathless voice: "Hullo, is that Miss Ridgeway? *Linnet!*"

"*Jackie darling!* I haven't heard anything of you for ages and ages!"

"I know. It's awful. Linnet, I want to see you terribly."

"Darling, can't you come down here? My new toy. I'd love to show it to you."

"That's just what I want to do."

"Well, jump into a train or a car."

"Right, I will. A frightfully dilapidated two-seater. I bought it for fifteen pounds, and some days it goes beautifully. But it has moods. If I haven't arrived by teatime you'll know it's had a mood. So long, my sweet."

Linnet replaced the receiver. She crossed back to Joanna.

"That's my oldest friend, Jacqueline de Bellefort. We were together at a convent in Paris. She's had the most terrible bad luck. Her father was a French Count, her mother was American—a

Southerner. The father went off with some woman, and her mother lost all her money in the Wall Street crash. Jackie was left absolutely broke. I don't know how she's managed to get along the last two years."

Joanna was polishing her deep-blood-coloured nails with her friend's nail pad. She leant back with her head on one side scrutinizing the effect.

"Darling," she drawled, "won't that be rather *tiresome*? If any misfortunes happen to my friends I always drop them *at once*! It sounds heartless, but it saves such a lot of trouble later! They always want to borrow money off you, or else they start a dressmaking business and you have to get the most terrible clothes from them. Or they paint lampshades, or do batik scarves."

"So, if I lost all my money, you'd drop me tomorrow?"

"Yes, darling, I would. You can't say I'm not honest about it! I only like successful people. And you'll find that's true of nearly everybody—only most people won't admit it. They just say that really they can't put up with Mary or Emily or Pamela anymore! 'Her troubles have made her so *bitter* and peculiar, poor dear!'"

"How beastly you are, Joanna!"

"I'm only on the make, like everyone else."

"I'm not on the make!"

"For obvious reasons! You don't have to be sordid when good-looking, middle-aged American trustees pay you over a vast allowance every quarter."

"And you're wrong about Jacqueline," said Linnet. "She's not a sponge. I've wanted to help her, but she won't let me. She's as proud as the devil."

"What's she in such a hurry to see you for? I'll bet she wants something! You just wait and see."

"She sounded excited about something," admitted Linnet. "Jackie always did get frightfully worked up over things. She once stuck a penknife into someone!"

"Darling, how thrilling!"

"A boy was teasing a dog. Jackie tried to get him to stop. He wouldn't. She pulled him and shook him, but he was much stronger than she was, and at last she whipped out a penknife and plunged it right into him. There was the *most* awful row!"

"I should think so. It sounds most uncomfortable!"

Linnet's maid entered the room. With a murmured word of apology, she took down a dress from the wardrobe and went out of the room with it.

"What's the matter with Marie?" asked Joanna.

"She's been crying."

"Poor thing! You know I told you she wanted to marry a man who has a job in Egypt. She didn't know much about him, so I thought I'd better make sure he was all right. It turned out that he had a wife already—and three children."

"What a lot of enemies you must make, Linnet."

"Enemies?" Linnet looked surprised.

Joanna nodded and helped herself to a cigarette.

"Enemies, my sweet. You're so devastatingly efficient. And you're so frightfully good at doing the right thing."

Linnet laughed.

"Why, I haven't got an enemy in the world."

IV

Lord Windlesham sat under the cedar tree. His eyes rested on the graceful proportions of Wode Hall. There was nothing to mar its old-world beauty; the new buildings and additions were out of sight round the corner. It was a fair and peaceful sight bathed in the autumn sunshine. Nevertheless, as he gazed, it was no longer Wode Hall that Charles Windlesham saw. Instead, he seemed to see a more imposing Elizabethan mansion, a long sweep of park, a more bleak background . . . It was his own family seat, Charltonbury, and in the foreground stood a figure—a girl's figure, with bright golden hair and an eager confident face . . . Linnet as mistress of Charltonbury!

He felt very hopeful. That refusal of hers had not been at all a definite refusal. It had been little more than a plea for time. Well, he could afford to wait a little. . . .

How amazingly suitable the whole thing was! It was certainly advisable that he should marry money, but not such a matter of necessity that he could regard himself as forced to put his own feelings on one side. And he loved Linnet. He would have wanted to marry her even if she had been practically penniless, instead of one of the richest girls in England. Only, fortunately, she *was* one of the richest girls in England. . . .

His mind played with attractive plans for the future. The Mastership of the Roxdale perhaps, the restoration of the west wing, no need to let the Scotch shooting. . . .

Charles Windlesham dreamed in the sun.

V

It was four o'clock when the dilapidated little two-seater stopped with a sound of crunching gravel. A girl got out of it—a small slender creature with a mop of dark hair. She ran up the steps and tugged at the bell.

A few minutes later she was being ushered into the long stately drawing room, and an ecclesiastical butler was saying with the proper mournful intonation: "Miss de Bellefort."

"Linnet!"

"Jackie!"

Windlesham stood a little aside, watching sympathetically as this fiery little creature flung herself open-armed upon Linnet.

"Lord Windlesham—Miss de Bellefort—my best friend."

A pretty child, he thought—not really pretty but decidedly attractive, with her dark curly hair and her enormous eyes. He murmured a few tactful nothings and then managed unobtrusively to leave the two friends together.

Jacqueline pounced—in a fashion that Linnet remembered as being characteristic of her.

"Windlesham? Windlesham? *That's* the man the papers always say you're going to marry! Are you, Linnet? *Are* you?"

Linnet murmured: "Perhaps."

"Darling—I'm so glad! He looks nice."

"Oh, don't make up your mind about it—I haven't made up my own mind yet."

"Of course not! Queens always proceed with due deliberation to the choosing of a consort!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Jackie."

"But you *are* a queen, Linnet! You always were. *Sa Majesté, la*

reine Linette. Linette la blonde! And I—I'm the Queen's confidante! The trusted Maid of Honour."

"What nonsense you talk, Jackie darling! Where have you been all this time? You just disappear. And you never write."

"I hate writing letters. Where have I been? Oh, about three parts submerged, darling. In JOBS, you know. Grim jobs with grim women!"

"Darling, I wish you'd—"

"Take the Queen's bounty? Well, frankly, darling, that's what I'm here for. No, not to borrow money. It's not got to that yet! But I've come to ask a great big important favour!"

"Go on."

"If you're going to marry the Windlesham man, you'll understand, perhaps."

Linnet looked puzzled for a minute; then her face cleared.

"Jackie, do you mean—?"

"Yes, darling, *I'm engaged!*"

"So that's it! I thought you were looking particularly alive somehow. You always do, of course, but even more than usual."

"That's just what I feel like."

"Tell me all about him."

"His name's Simon Doyle. He's big and square and incredibly simple and boyish and utterly adorable! He's poor—got no money. He's what you call 'county' all right—but very impoverished county—a younger son and all that. His people come from Devonshire. He loves the country and country things. And for the last five years he's been in the City in a stuffy office. And now they're cutting down and he's out of a job. Linnet, I shall *die* if I can't marry him! I shall die! I shall die! I shall *die*. . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jackie."

"I shall die, I tell you! I'm crazy about him. He's crazy about me. We can't live without each other."

"Darling, you *have* got it badly!"

"I know. It's awful, isn't it? This love business gets hold of you and you can't do anything about it."

She paused for a minute. Her dark eyes dilated, looked suddenly tragic. She gave a little shiver.

"It's—even frightening sometimes! Simon and I were made for each other. I shall never care for anyone else. And *you've* got to help us, Linnet. I heard you'd bought this place and it put an idea into my head. Listen, you'll have to have a land agent—perhaps two. I want you to give the job to Simon."

"Oh!" Linnet was startled.

Jacqueline rushed on: "He's got all that sort of thing at his fingertips. He knows all about estates—was brought up on one. And he's got his business training too. Oh, Linnet, you will give him a job, won't you, for love of me? If he doesn't make good, sack him. But he will. And we can live in a little house, and I shall see lots of you, and everything in the garden will be too, too divine."

She got up.

"Say you will, Linnet. Say you will. Beautiful Linnet! Tall golden Linnet! My own very special Linnet! Say you will!"

"Jackie—"

"You will?"

Linnet burst out laughing.

"Ridiculous Jackie! Bring along your young man and let me have a look at him and we'll talk it over."

Jackie darted at her, kissing her exuberantly.

"*Darling Linnet*—you're a real friend! I knew you were. You wouldn't let me down—ever. You're just the loveliest thing in the world. Good-bye."

"But, Jackie, you're *staying*."

"Me? No, I'm not. I'm going back to London, and tomorrow I'll come back and bring Simon and we'll settle it all up. You'll adore him. He really is a *pet*."

"But can't you wait and just have tea?"

"No, I can't wait, Linnet. I'm too excited. I must get back and tell Simon. I know I'm mad, darling, but I can't help it. Marriage will cure me, I expect. It always seems to have a very sobering effect on people."

She turned at the door, stood a moment, then rushed back for a last quick birdlike embrace.

"Dear Linnet—there's no one like you."

VI

M. Gaston Blondin, the proprietor of that modish little restaurant *Chez Ma Tante*, was not a man who delighted to honour many of his clientèle. The rich, the beautiful, the notorious, and the well-born might wait in vain to be singled out and paid special attention. Only in the rarest cases did M. Blondin, with gracious condescension, greet a guest, accompany him to a privileged table, and exchange with him suitable and apposite remarks.

On this particular night, M. Blondin had exercised his royal prerogative three times—once for a Duchess, once for a famous racing peer, and once for a little man of comical appearance with immense black moustaches, who, a casual onlooker would have

thought, could bestow no favour on Chez Ma Tante by his presence there.

M. Blondin, however, was positively fulsome in his attentions. Though clients had been told for the last half hour that a table was not to be had, one now mysteriously appeared, placed in a most favourable position. M. Blondin conducted the client to it with every appearance of *empressement*.

"But naturally, for *you* there is *always* a table, Monsieur Poirot! How I wish that you would honour us oftener!"

Hercule Poirot smiled, remembering that past incident wherein a dead body, a waiter, M. Blondin, and a very lovely lady had played a part.

"You are too amiable, Monsieur Blondin," he said.

"And you are alone, Monsieur Poirot?"

"Yes, I am alone."

"Oh, well, Jules here will compose for you a little meal that will be a poem—positively a poem! Women, however charming, have this disadvantage: They distract the mind from food! You will enjoy your dinner, Monsieur Poirot; I promise you that. Now as to wine—"

A technical conversation ensued, Jules, the *maître d'hotel*, assisting.

Before departing, M. Blondin lingered a moment, lowering his voice confidentially.

"You have grave affairs on hand?"

Poirot shook his head.

"I am, alas, a man of leisure," he said softly. "I have made the economies in my time and I have now the means to enjoy the life of idleness."

"I envy you."

"No, no, you would be unwise to do so. I can assure you, it is not so gay as it sounds." He sighed. "How true is the saying that man was forced to invent work in order to escape the strain of having to think."

M. Blondin threw up his hands.

"But there is so much! There is travel!"

"Yes, there is travel. Already I have not done so badly. This winter I shall visit Egypt, I think. The climate, they say, is superb! One will escape from the fogs, the greyness, the monotony of the constantly falling rain."

"Ah! Egypt," breathed M. Blondin.

"One can even voyage there now, I believe, by train, escaping all sea travel except the Channel."

"Ah, the sea, it does not agree with you?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head and shuddered slightly.

"I, too," said M. Blondin with sympathy. "Curious the effect it has upon the stomach."

"But only upon certain stomachs! There are people on whom the motion makes no impression whatever. They actually *enjoy* it!"

"An unfairness of the good God," said M. Blondin.

He shook his head sadly, and, brooding on the impious thought, withdrew.

Smooth-footed, deft-handed waiters ministered to the table. Toast Melba, butter, an ice pail, all the adjuncts to a meal of quality.

The Negro orchestra broke into an ecstasy of strange discordant noises. London danced.

Hercule Poirot looked on, registered impressions in his neat orderly mind.

How bored and weary most of the faces were! Some of those stout men, however, were enjoying themselves . . . whereas a patient endurance seemed to be the sentiment exhibited on their partners' faces. The fat woman in purple was looking radiant . . . Undoubtedly the fat had certain compensations in life . . . a zest—a gusto—denied to those of more fashionable contours.

A good sprinkling of young people—some vacant-looking—some bored—some definitely unhappy. How absurd to call youth the time of happiness—youth, the time of greatest vulnerability!

His glance softened as it rested on one particular couple. A well-matched pair—tall broad-shouldered man, slender delicate girl. Two bodies that moved in perfect rhythm of happiness. Happiness in the place, the hour, and in each other.

The dance stopped abruptly. Hands clapped and it started again. After a second *encore* the couple returned to their table close by Poirot. The girl was flushed, laughing. As she sat, he could study her face, lifted laughing to her companion.

There was something else beside laughter in her eyes. Hercule Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

"She cares too much, that little one," he said to himself. It is not safe. No, it is not safe."

And then a word caught his ear, "Egypt."

Their voices came to him clearly—the girl's young, fresh, arrogant, with just a trace of soft-sounding foreign R's, and the man's pleasant, low-toned, well-bred English.

"I'm *not* counting my chickens before they're hatched, Simon. I tell you Linnet won't let us down!"

"I might let *her* down."

"Nonsense—it's just the right job for you."

"As a matter of fact I think it is . . . I haven't really any doubts as to my capability. And I mean to make good—for *your* sake!"

The girl laughed softly, a laugh of pure happiness.

"We'll wait three months—to make sure you don't get the sack—and then—"

"And then I'll endow thee with my worldly goods—that's the hang of it, isn't it?"

"And, as I say, we'll go to Egypt for our honeymoon. Damn the expense! I've always wanted to go to Egypt all my life. The Nile and the Pyramids and the sand. . . ."

He said, his voice slightly indistinct: "We'll see it together, Jackie . . . together. Won't it be marvellous?"

"I wonder. Will it be as marvellous to you as it is to me? Do you really care—as much as I do?"

Her voice was suddenly sharp—her eyes dilated—almost with fear.

The man's answer came quickly crisp: "Don't be absurd, Jackie."

But the girl repeated: "I wonder. . . ."

Then she shrugged her shoulders. "Let's dance."

Hercule Poirot murmured to himself:

"*Une qui aime et un qui se laisse aimer.* Yes, I wonder too."

VII

Joanna Southwood said: "And suppose he's a terrible tough?"

Linnet shook her head. "Oh, he won't be. I can trust Jacqueline's taste."

Joanna murmured: "Ah, but people don't run true to form in love affairs."

Linnet shook her head impatiently. Then she changed the subject.

"I must go and see Mr. Pierce about those plans."

"Plans?"

"Yes, some dreadful insanitary old cottages. I'm having them pulled down and the people moved."

"How sanitary and public-spirited of you, darling!"

"They'd have had to go anyway. Those cottages would have overlooked my new swimming pool."

"Do the people who live in them like going?"

"Most of them are delighted. One or two are being rather stupid about it—really tiresome in fact. They don't seem to realize how vastly improved their living conditions will be!"

"But you're being quite high-handed about it, I presume."

"My dear Joanna, it's to their advantage really."

"Yes, dear. I'm sure it is. Compulsory benefit."

Linnet frowned. Joanna laughed.

"Come now, you *are* a tyrant, admit it. A beneficent tyrant if you like!"

"I'm not the least bit of a tyrant."

"But you like your own way!"

"Not especially."

"Linnet Ridgeway, can you look me in the face and tell me of *any one occasion* on which you've failed to do exactly as you wanted?"

"Heaps of times."

"Oh, yes, 'heaps of times'—just like that—but no concrete ex-

ample. And you simply can't think up one, darling, however hard you try! The triumphal progress of Linnet Ridgeway in her golden car."

Linnet said sharply: "You think I'm selfish?"

"No—just irresistible. The combined effect of money and charm. Everything goes down before you. What you can't buy with cash you buy with a smile. Result: Linnet Ridgeway, the Girl Who Has Everything."

"Don't be ridiculous, Joanna!"

"Well, haven't you got everything?"

"I suppose I have . . . It sounds rather disgusting, somehow!"

"Of course it's disgusting, darling! You'll probably get terribly bored and blasé by and by. In the meantime, enjoy the triumphal progress in the golden car. Only I wonder, I really do wonder, what will happen when you want to go down a street which has a board saying 'No Thoroughfare.' "

"Don't be idiotic, Joanna." As Lord Windlesham joined them, Linnet said, turning to him: "Joanna is saying the nastiest things to me."

"All spite, darling, all spite," said Joanna vaguely as she got up from her seat.

She made no apology for leaving them. She had caught the glint in Windlesham's eye.

He was silent for a minute or two. Then he went straight to the point.

"Have you come to a decision, Linnet?"

Linnet said slowly: "Am I being a brute? I suppose, if I'm not sure, I ought to say 'No'—"

He interrupted her:

"Don't say it. You shall have time—as much time as you want. But I think, you know, we should be happy together."

"You see," Linnet's tone was apologetic, almost childish, "I'm enjoying myself so much—especially with all this." She waved a hand. "I wanted to make Wode Hall into my real ideal of a country house, and I do think I've got it nice, don't you?"

"It's beautiful. Beautifully planned. Everything perfect. You're very clever, Linnet."

He paused a minute and went on: "And you like Charltonbury, don't you? Of course it wants modernizing and all that—but you're so clever at that sort of thing. You enjoy it."

"Why, of course, Charltonbury's divine."

She spoke with ready enthusiasm, but inwardly she was conscious of a sudden chill. An alien note had sounded, disturbing her complete satisfaction with life. She did not analyse the feeling at the moment, but later, when Windlesham had left her, she tried to probe the recesses of her mind.

Charltonbury—yes, that was it—she had resented the mention of Charltonbury. But why? Charltonbury was modestly famous. Windlesham's ancestors had held it since the time of Elizabeth. To be mistress of Charltonbury was a position unsurpassed in society. Windlesham was one of the most desirable peers in England.

Naturally he couldn't take Wode seriously . . . It was not in any way to be compared with Charltonbury.

Ah, but Wode was *hers!* She had seen it, acquired it, rebuilt and redressed it, lavished money on it. It was her own possession—her kingdom.

But in a sense it wouldn't count if she married Windlesham.

What would they want with two country places? And of the two, naturally Wode Hall would be the one to be given up.

She, Linnet Ridgeway, wouldn't exist any longer. She would be Countess of Windlesham, bringing a fine dowry to Charltonbury and its master. She would be queen consort, not queen any longer.

"I'm being ridiculous," said Linnet to herself.

But it was curious how she did hate the idea of abandoning Wode. . . .

And wasn't there something else nagging at her?

Jackie's voice with that queer blurred note in it saying: "I shall die if I can't marry him! I shall die. I shall die. . . ."

So positive, so earnest. Did she, Linnet, feel like that about Windlesham? Assuredly she didn't. Perhaps she could never feel like that about anyone. It must be—rather wonderful—to feel like that. . . .

The sound of a car came through the open window.

Linnet shook herself impatiently. That must be Jackie and her young man. She'd go out and meet them.

She was standing in the open doorway as Jacqueline and Simon Doyle got out of the car.

"Linnet!" Jackie ran to her. "This is Simon. Simon, here's Linnet. She's just the most wonderful person in the world."

Linnet saw a tall, broad-shouldered young man, with very dark blue eyes, crisply curling brown hair, a square chin, and a boyish, appealing, simple smile. . . .

She stretched out a hand. The hand that clasped hers was firm and warm. . . . She liked the way he looked at her, the naïve genuine admiration.

Jackie had told him she was wonderful, and he clearly thought that she was wonderful. . . .

A warm sweet feeling of intoxication ran through her veins.

"Isn't this all lovely?" she said. "Come in, Simon, and let me welcome my new land agent properly."

And as she turned to lead the way she thought: "I'm frightfully—frightfully happy. I like Jackie's young man . . . I like him enormously. . . ."

And then a sudden pang: "Lucky Jackie. . . ."

VIII

Tim Allerton leant back in his wicker chair and yawned as he looked out over the sea. He shot a quick sidelong glance at his mother.

Mrs. Allerton was a good-looking, white-haired woman of fifty. By imparting an expression of pinched severity to her mouth every time she looked at her son, she sought to disguise the fact of her intense affection for him. Even total strangers were seldom deceived by this device and Tim himself saw through it perfectly.

He said: "Do you really like Majorca, Mother?"

"Well," Mrs. Allerton considered, "it's cheap."

"And cold," said Tim with a slight shiver.

He was a tall, thin young man, with dark hair and a rather narrow chest. His mouth had a very sweet expression: His eyes were sad and his chin was indecisive. He had long delicate hands.

Threatened by consumption some years ago, he had never displayed a really robust physique. He was popularly supposed "to write," but it was understood among his friends that inquiries as to literary output were not encouraged.

"What are you thinking of, Tim?"

Mrs. Allerton was alert. Her bright, dark-brown eyes looked suspicious.

Tim Allerton grinned at her:

"I was thinking of Egypt."

"Egypt?" Mrs. Allerton sounded doubtful.

"Real warmth, darling. Lazy golden sands. The Nile. I'd like to go up the Nile, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, I'd *like* it." Her tone was dry. "But Egypt's expensive, my dear. Not for those who have to count the pennies."

Tim laughed. He rose, stretched himself. Suddenly he looked alive and eager. There was an excited note in his voice.

"The expense will be my affair. Yes, darling. A little flutter on the Stock Exchange. With thoroughly satisfactory results. I heard this morning."

"This morning?" said Mrs. Allerton sharply. "You only had one letter and that—"

She stopped and bit her lip.

Tim looked momentarily undecided whether to be amused or annoyed. Amusement gained the day.

"And that was from Joanna," he finished coolly. "Quite right, Mother. What a queen of detectives you'd make! The famous Hercule Poirot would have to look to his laurels if you were about."

Mrs. Allerton looked rather cross.

"I just happened to see the handwriting—"

"And knew it wasn't that of a stockbroker? Quite right. As a matter of fact it was yesterday I heard from them. Poor Joanna's handwriting is rather noticeable—sprawls about all over the envelope like an inebriated spider."

“What does Joanna say? Any news?”

Mrs. Allerton strove to make her voice sound casual and ordinary. The friendship between her son and his second cousin, Joanna Southwood, always irritated her. Not, as she put it to herself, that there was “anything in it.” She was quite sure there wasn’t. Tim had never manifested a sentimental interest in Joanna, nor she in him. Their mutual attraction seemed to be founded on gossip and the possession of a large number of friends and acquaintances in common. They both liked people and discussing people. Joanna had an amusing if caustic tongue.

It was not because Mrs. Allerton feared that Tim might fall in love with Joanna that she found herself always becoming a little stiff in manner if Joanna were present or when letters from her arrived.

It was some other feeling hard to define—perhaps an unacknowledged jealousy in the unfeigned pleasure Tim always seemed to take in Joanna’s society. He and his mother were such perfect companions that the sight of him absorbed and interested in another woman always startled Mrs. Allerton slightly. She fancied, too, that her own presence on these occasions set some barrier between the two members of the younger generation. Often she had come upon them eagerly absorbed in some conversation and, at sight of her, their talk had wavered, had seemed to include her rather too purposefully and as if duty bound. Quite definitely, Mrs. Allerton did not like Joanna Southwood. She thought her insincere, affected, and essentially superficial. She found it very hard to prevent herself saying so in unmeasured tones.

In answer to her question, Tim pulled the letter out of his pocket and glanced through it. It was quite a long letter, his mother noted.

"Nothing much," he said. "The Devenishes are getting a divorce. Old Monty's been had up for being drunk in charge of a car. Windlesham's gone to Canada. Seems he was pretty badly hit when Linnet Ridgeway turned him down. She's definitely going to marry this land agent person."

"How extraordinary! Is he very dreadful?"

"No, no, not at all. He's one of the Devonshire Doyles. No money, of course—and he was actually engaged to one of Linnet's best friends. Pretty thick, that."

"I don't think it's at all nice," said Mrs. Allerton, flushing.

Tim flashed her a quick affectionate glance.

"I know, darling. You don't approve of snaffling other people's husbands and all that sort of thing."

"In my day we had our standards," said Mrs. Allerton. "And a very good thing too! Nowadays young people seem to think they can just go about doing anything they choose."

Tim smiled. "They don't only think it. They do it.

Vide Linnet Ridgeway!"

"Well, I think it's horrid!"

Tim twinkled at her.

"Cheer up, you old die-hard! Perhaps I agree with you. Anyway, I haven't helped myself to anyone's wife or fiancée yet."

"I'm sure you'd never do such a thing," said Mrs. Allerton. She added with spirit, "I've brought you up properly."

"So the credit is yours, not mine."

He smiled teasingly at her as he folded the letter and put it away again. Mrs. Allerton let the thought just flash across her mind: "Most letters he shows to me. He only reads me snippets from Joanna's."

But she put the unworthy thought away from her, and decided, as ever, to behave like a gentlewoman.

"Is Joanna enjoying life?" she asked.

"So so. Says she thinks of opening a delicatessen shop in May-fair."

"She always talks about being hard up," said Mrs. Allerton with a tinge of spite, "but she goes about everywhere and her clothes must cost her a lot. She's always beautifully dressed."

"Ah, well," said Tim, "she probably doesn't pay for them. No, mother, I don't mean what your Edwardian mind suggests to you. I just mean quite literally that she leaves her bills unpaid."

Mrs. Allerton sighed.

"I never know how people manage to do that."

"It's a kind of special gift," said Tim. "If only you have sufficiently extravagant tastes, and absolutely no sense of money values, people will give you any amount of credit."

"Yes, but you come to the Bankruptcy Court in the end like poor Sir George Wode."

"You have a soft spot for that old horse coper—probably because he called you a rosebud in eighteen seventy-nine at a dance."

"I wasn't born in eighteen seventy-nine," Mrs. Allerton retorted with spirit. "Sir George has charming manners, and I won't have you calling him a horse coper."

"I've heard funny stories about him from people that know."

"You and Joanna don't mind what you say about people; anything will do so long as it's sufficiently ill-natured."

Tim raised his eyebrows.

"My dear, you're quite heated. I didn't know old Wode was such a favourite of yours."

"You don't realize how hard it was for him, having to sell Wode Hall. He cared terribly about that place."

Tim suppressed the easy retort. After all, who was he to judge? Instead he said thoughtfully:

"You know, I think you're not far wrong there. Linnet asked him to come down and see what she'd done to the place, and he refused quite rudely."

"Of course. She ought to have known better than to ask him."

"And I believe he's quite venomous about her—mutters things under his breath whenever he sees her. Can't forgive her for having given him an absolutely top price for the worm-eaten family estate."

"And you can't understand that?" Mrs. Allerton spoke sharply.

"Frankly," said Tim calmly, "I can't. Why live in the past? Why cling on to things that have been?"

"What are you going to put in their place?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Excitement, perhaps. Novelty. The joy of never knowing what may turn up from day to day. Instead of inheriting a useless tract of land, the pleasure of making money for yourself—by your own brains and skill."

"A successful deal on the Stock Exchange, in fact!"

He laughed. "Why not?"

"And what about an equal loss on the Stock Exchange?"

"That, dear, is rather tactless. And quite inappropriate today . . . What about this Egypt plan?"

"Well—"

He cut in smiling at her: "That's settled. We've both always wanted to see Egypt."

"When do you suggest?"

"Oh, next month. January's about the best time there. We'll enjoy the delightful society in this hotel a few weeks longer."

"Tim," said Mrs. Allerton reproachfully. Then she added guiltily: "I'm afraid I promised Mrs. Leech that you'd go with her to the police station. She doesn't understand any Spanish."

Tim made a grimace.

"About her ring? The blood-red ruby of the horse-leech's daughter? Does she still persist in thinking it's been stolen? I'll go if you like, but it's a waste of time. She'll only get some wretched chambermaid into trouble. I distinctly saw it on her finger when she went into the sea that day. It came off in the water and she never noticed."

"She says she is quite sure she took it off and left it on her dressing table."

"Well, she didn't. I saw it with my own eyes. The woman's a fool. Any woman's a fool who goes prancing into the sea in December, pretending the water's quite warm just because the sun happens to be shining rather brightly at the moment. Stout women oughtn't to be allowed to bathe anyway; they look so revolting in bathing dresses."

Mrs. Allerton murmured, "I really feel I ought to give up bathing."

Tim gave a shout of laughter.

"You? You can give most of the young things points and to spare."

Mrs. Allerton sighed and said, "I wish there were a few more young people for you here."

Tim Allerton shook his head decidedly.

"I don't. You and I get along rather comfortably without outside distractions."

"You'd like it if Joanna were here."

"I wouldn't." His tone was unexpectedly resolute. "You're all wrong there. Joanna amuses me, but I don't really like her, and to have her around much gets on my nerves. I'm thankful she isn't here. I should be quite resigned if I were never to see Joanna again."

He added, almost below his breath, "There's only one woman in the world I've got a real respect and admiration for, and I think, Mrs. Allerton, you know very well who that woman is."

His mother blushed and looked quite confused.

Tim said gravely: "There aren't very many really nice women in the world. You happen to be one of them."

IX

In an apartment overlooking Central Park in New York Mrs. Robson exclaimed: "If that isn't just too lovely! You really are the luckiest girl, Cornelia."

Cornelia Robson flushed responsively. She was a big clumsy looking girl with brown doglike eyes.

"Oh, it will be wonderful!" she gasped.

Old Miss Van Schuyler inclined her head in a satisfied fashion at this correct attitude on the part of poor relations. "I've always dreamed of a trip to Europe," sighed Cornelia, "but I just didn't feel I'd ever get there."

"Miss Bowers will come with me as usual, of course," said Miss Van Schuyler, "but as a social companion I find her limited—very limited. There are many little things that Cornelia can do for me."

"I'd just love to, Cousin Marie," said Cornelia eagerly.

"Well, well, then that's settled," said Miss Van Schuyler. "Just run and find Miss Bowers, my dear. It's time for my eggnog."

Cornelia departed. Her mother said: "My dear Marie, I'm really *most* grateful to you! You know I think Cornelia suffers a lot from not being a social success. It makes her feel kind of mortified. If I could afford to take her to places—but you know how it's been since Ned died."

"I'm very glad to take her," said Miss Van Schuyler. "Cornelia has always been a nice handy girl, willing to run errands, and not so selfish as some of these young people nowadays."

Mrs. Robson rose and kissed her rich relative's wrinkled and slightly yellow face.

"I'm just ever so grateful," she declared.

On the stairs she met a tall capable-looking woman who was carrying a glass containing a yellow foamy liquid.

"Well, Miss Bowers, so you're off to Europe?"

"Why, yes, Mrs. Robson."

"What a lovely trip!"

"Why, yes, I should think it would be very enjoyable."

"But you've been abroad before?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Robson. I went over to Paris with Miss Van Schuyler last fall. But I've never been to Egypt before."

Mrs. Robson hesitated.

"I do hope—there won't be any—trouble."

She had lowered her voice. Miss Bowers, however, replied in her usual tone:

"Oh, *no*, Mrs. Robson; I shall take good care of *that*. I keep a very sharp look out always."

But there was still a faint shadow on Mrs. Robson's face as she slowly continued down the stairs.

X

In his office downtown Mr. Andrew Pennington was opening his personal mail. Suddenly his fist clenched itself and came down on his desk with a bang; his face crimsoned and two big veins stood out on his forehead. He pressed a buzzer on his desk and a smart-looking stenographer appeared with commendable promptitude.

"Tell Mr. Rockford to step in here."

"Yes, Mr. Pennington."

A few minutes later, Sterndale Rockford, Pennington's partner, entered the office. The two men were not unlike—both tall, spare, with greying hair and clean-shaven, clever faces.

"What's up, Pennington?"

Pennington looked up from the letter he was rereading. He said. "Linnet's married. . . ."

"What?"

"You heard what I said! Linnet Ridgeway's *married!*"

"How? When? Why didn't we hear about it?"

Pennington glanced at the calendar on his desk.

"She wasn't married when she wrote this letter, but she's married now. Morning of the fourth. That's today."

Rockford dropped into a chair.

"Whew! No warning! Nothing? Who's the man?"

Pennington referred again to the letter.

"Doyle. Simon Doyle."

"What sort of a fellow is he? Ever heard of him?"

DEATH ON THE NILE

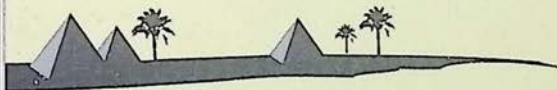
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