

# THE FIRST QUARTER



## CHAPTER 1

### *Poirot is Accused*

Hercule Poirot smiled to himself as his driver brought the motorcar to a stop with satisfying symmetry. As a lover of neatness and order, Poirot appreciated such perfect alignment with the entrance doors of Whitehaven Mansions where he lived. One could draw a straight line from the middle of the vehicle to the exact point where the doors met.

The luncheon from which he was returning had been *très bon divertissement*: the most excellent of food and company. He alighted, bestowed a warm thank-you upon his driver, and was about to go inside when he had a peculiar feeling that (this was how he put it to himself) something behind him was in need of his attention.

He expected, on turning, to observe nothing out of the ordinary. It was a mild day for February, but perhaps a light breeze had put a tremor in the air around him.

Poirot soon saw that the disturbance had not been caused by the weather, though the well-turned-out woman

approaching at a great pace did, in spite of her fashionable pale blue coat and hat, resemble a force of nature. ‘She is the whirlwind most fierce,’ Poirot murmured to himself.

He disliked the hat. He had seen women in town wearing similar ones: minimal, without ornament, fitted close to the scalp like bathing caps made of cloth. A hat ought to have a brim or some manner of embellishment, thought Poirot. At least, it should do something more than cover the head. No doubt he would soon get used to these modern hats—and then, once he had, the fashion would change as it always did.

The blue-clad woman’s lips twitched and curled, though no sound came from her. It was as if she was rehearsing what she would say when she finally reached Poirot’s side. There was no doubt that he was her target. She looked determined to do something unpleasant to him as soon as she was close enough. He took a step back as she marched towards him in what he could only think of as a stampede—one consisting of nothing and nobody but herself.

Her hair was dark brown and lustrous. When she came to an abrupt halt directly in front of him, Poirot saw that she was not as young as she had looked from a distance. No, this woman was more than fifty years old. She was perhaps sixty. A lady in her middle age, expert at concealing the lines on her face. Her eyes were a striking blue, neither light nor dark.

‘You are Hercule Poirot, are you not?’ she said in the loudest of whispers. Poirot noted that she wished to convey

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anger but without being overheard, though there was nobody nearby.

‘*Oui*, madame. I am he.’

‘How *dare* you? How *dare* you send me such a letter?’

‘Madame, pardon me, but I do not believe we know one another.’

‘Don’t act the part of the innocent with *me*! I am Sylvia Rule. As you know perfectly well.’

‘Now I know, because you have told me. A moment ago, I did not know. You referred to a letter—’

‘Will you force me to repeat your slander of me in a public place? Very well, then, I shall. I received a letter this morning—a most disgusting and objectionable letter, signed by *you*.’ She stabbed the air with a forefinger that would have poked Poirot in the chest had he not hopped to one side to avoid it.

‘*Non*, madame—’ he tried to protest, but his attempt at denial was swiftly demolished.

‘In this travesty of a letter, you accused me of murder. *Murder!* Me! Sylvia Rule! You claimed that you could prove my guilt, and you advised me to go at once to the police and confess to my crime. How *dare* you? You cannot prove anything against me, for the simple reason that I am innocent. I have not killed anybody. I am the least violently inclined person I have ever met. And I have never heard of a Barnabas Pandy!’

‘A Barnabas—’

‘It is monstrous that you accuse *me*, of all people! Simply monstrous. I shall not stand for it. I have a good mind to

go to my solicitor about this, except I don't want him to know I have been so defamed. Perhaps I shall go to the police. The slur I have suffered! The insult! A woman of my standing in the world!

Sylvia Rule went on in this manner for some time. There was a lot of hiss and fizz in her agitated whispering. She made Poirot think of the loud, turbulent waterfalls he had encountered on his travels: impressive to watch, but mainly alarming on account of their relentlessness. The flow never stopped.

As soon as he could make himself heard, he said, 'Madame, please accept my assurance that I have written no such letter. If you have received one, it was not sent by me. I too have never heard of Barnabas Pandy. That is the name of the man you are accused of murdering, by whoever wrote the letter?'

'*You* wrote it, and do not provoke me further by pretending you didn't. Eustace put you up to it, didn't he? You both know that I have killed nobody, that I am as blameless as it is possible for a person to be! You and Eustace have hatched a plan together to send me out of my wits! This is exactly the sort of thing he would do, and no doubt he will claim later that it was all a joke.'

'I know of no Eustace, madame.' Poirot continued to make his best effort, though it was plain that nothing he said made the slightest bit of difference to Sylvia Rule.

'He thinks he's so clever—quite the cleverest man in England!—with that disgusting smirk that never leaves his appalling face. How much did he pay you? I know it must

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have been his idea. And you did his dirty work. You, the famed Hercule Poirot, who are trusted by our loyal and hardworking police. You are a fraud! How *could* you? Slandering a woman of my good character! Eustace would do anything to defeat me. Anything! Whatever he has told you about me, it's a lie!

If she had been willing to listen, Poirot might have told her that he would be unlikely to cooperate with any man who considered himself to be the cleverest man in England for as long as he, Hercule Poirot, resided in London.

‘Please show me this letter you received, madame.’

‘Do you think I *kept* it? It made me ill to hold it in my hand! I tore it into a dozen pieces and tossed it on the fire. I should like to toss Eustace on a fire! What a pity such actions are against the law. All I can say is that whoever made that particular law must never have met Eustace. If you *ever* traduce me in this way again, I shall go straight to Scotland Yard—not to confess to anything, for I am entirely innocent, but to accuse *you*, M. Poirot!’

Before Poirot could formulate a suitable response, Sylvia Rule had turned and marched away.

He did not call her back. He stood for a few seconds, shaking his head slowly. As he mounted the steps to his building, he muttered to himself, ‘If she is the least violently inclined person, then I do not wish to meet the most.’

Inside his spacious and well-appointed flat, his valet awaited him. George’s rather wooden smile turned to an expression of consternation when he saw Poirot’s face.

‘Are you quite well, sir?’

‘*Non*. I am perplexed, Georges. Tell me, as one who knows much about the upper echelons of English society . . . do you know a Sylvia Rule?’

‘By reputation only, sir. She is the widow of the late Clarence Rule. Extremely well connected. I believe she sits on the boards of various charities.’

‘What about Barnabas Pandey?’

George shook his head. ‘That name is not familiar to me. London society is my area of special knowledge, sir. If Mr Pandey lives elsewhere—’

‘I do not know where he lives. I do not know *if* he lives, or if he was, perhaps, murdered. *Vraiment*, I could not know less about Barnabas Pandey than I do presently—that would be an impossibility! But do not try, Georges, to tell this to Sylvia Rule, who imagines that I know all about him! She believes I wrote a letter accusing her of his murder, a letter I now deny having written. I did not write the letter. I have sent no communication of any kind to Mrs Sylvia Rule.’

Poirot removed his hat and coat with less care than he usually took, and handed both to George. ‘It is not a pleasant thing, to be accused of something one has not done. One ought to be able to brush the untruths aside, but somehow they take hold of the mind and cause a spectral form of guilt—like a ghost in the head, or in the conscience! Someone is certain that you have done this terrible thing, and so you start to feel as if you have, even though you know you have not. I begin to understand, Georges, why people confess to crimes of which they are innocent.’

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George looked doubtful, as he frequently did. English discretion, Poirot had observed, had an outward appearance that suggested doubt. Many of the politest English men and women he had met over the years looked as if they had been ordered to disbelieve everything that was said to them.

‘Would you like a drink, sir? A *sirop de menthe*, if I might be permitted to make a suggestion?’

‘*Oui*. That is an excellent idea.’

‘I should also mention, sir, that you have a visitor waiting to see you. Am I to bring your drink immediately, and ask him to wait a little longer?’

‘A visitor?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘What is his name? Is it Eustace?’

‘No, sir. It’s a Mr John McCrodden.’

‘Ah! That is a relief. No Eustace. I can cherish the hope that the nightmare of Madame Rule and her Eustace has departed and will not return to Hercule Poirot! Did Monsieur McCrodden state the nature of his business?’

‘No, sir. Though I should warn you, he seemed . . . displeased.’

Poirot allowed a small sigh to escape his lips. After his more than satisfactory luncheon, the afternoon was taking a disappointing turn. Still, John McCrodden was unlikely to be as vexatious as Sylvia Rule.

‘I shall postpone the pleasure of *sirop de menthe* and see Monsieur McCrodden first,’ Poirot told George. ‘His name is familiar.’

‘You might be thinking of the solicitor Rowland McCrodden, sir?’

‘*Mais oui, bien sûr.* Rowland Rope, that dear friend of the hangman—though you are too polite, Georges, to call him by the *soubriquet* that suits him so well. The gallows, they are not allowed by Rowland Rope to have a moment’s rest.’

‘He has been instrumental in bringing several criminals to justice, sir,’ agreed George, with his customary tact.

‘Perhaps John McCrodden is a relation,’ said Poirot. ‘Allow me to settle myself and then you may bring him in.’

As it transpired, George was prevented from bringing in John McCrodden by McCrodden’s determination to stride into the room without help or introduction. He overtook the valet and positioned himself in the middle of the carpet where he stopped as if frozen in the manner of one sent to play the part of a statue.

‘Please, monsieur, you may sit down,’ Poirot said with a smile.

‘No, thank you,’ said McCrodden. His tone was one of contemptuous detachment.

He was forty years old or thereabouts, Poirot guessed. He had the kind of handsome face that one rarely encountered apart from in works of art. His features might have been chiselled by a master craftsman. Poirot found it difficult to reconcile the face with the clothes, which were shabby and showed patches of dirt. Was he in the habit of sleeping on park benches? Did he have recourse to the usual domestic amenities? Poirot wondered if McCrodden had sought to

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cancel out the advantages that nature had bestowed upon him—the large green eyes and the golden hair—by making himself look as repellent as possible.

McCrodden glared down at Poirot. ‘I received your letter,’ he said. ‘It arrived this morning.’

‘I’m afraid I must contradict you, monsieur. I have sent you no letter.’

There was a long, uneasy silence. Poirot did not wish to leap to any hasty conclusions, but he feared he knew the direction the conversation was about to take. But it could not be! *How* could it be? Only in his dreams had he encountered this sensation before: the doom-laden knowledge that one is trapped in a predicament that makes no sense and will never make sense, no matter what one does.

‘What did it say, this letter that you received?’ he asked.

‘You ought to know, since you wrote it,’ said John McCrodden. ‘You accused me of murdering a man named Barnabas Pandy.’

## CHAPTER 2

### *Intolerable Provocation*

‘I must say, I was rather disappointed,’ McCrodden went on. ‘The famous Hercule Poirot, allowing himself to be used for such frivolities.’

Poirot waited a few moments before answering. Was it his particular choice of words that had proved so ineffective in persuading Sylvia Rule to listen to him? Then, for John McCrodden, he would make an effort to be clearer and more persuasive. ‘Monsieur, *s’il vous plait*. I believe that somebody sent you a letter and that, in it, you were accused of murder. The murder of Barnabas Pandy. This part of your story I do not dispute. But—’

‘You are in no position to dispute it,’ said McCrodden.

‘Monsieur, please believe me when I tell you that *I was not the writer of the letter you received*. To Hercule Poirot, there is nothing frivolous about murder. I would—’

‘Oh, there won’t have been any murder,’ McCrodden interrupted again with a bitter laugh. ‘Or, if there has, the police will already have caught the person responsible. This

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is one of my father's childish games.' He frowned, as if something disturbing had occurred to him. 'Unless the old gargoyle is more sadistic than I thought and would actually risk my neck in a real and unsolved case of murder. I suppose it's possible. With his ruthless determination . . . ' McCrodden broke off, then muttered, 'Yes. It *is* possible. I should have thought of that.'

'Your father is the solicitor Rowland McCrodden?' asked Poirot.

'You know he is.' John McCrodden had already declared himself disappointed, and that was how he sounded—as if Poirot was sinking lower in his estimation with each word he spoke.

'I know your father by reputation only. I have not personally made his acquaintance, nor have I ever spoken to him.'

'You have to maintain the pretence, of course,' said John McCrodden. 'I'm sure he's paid you a handsome sum to keep his name out of it.' He looked around the room he was standing in, seeming to notice it for the first time. Then he nodded as if confirming something to himself, and said, 'The rich who need money least—like you, like my father—will stop at nothing to get their hands on more of it. That's why I've never trusted it. I was right not to. Money is corrosive to character once you're accustomed to it, and you, M. Poirot, are the living proof.'

Poirot could not recall when someone had last said something so unpleasant to him, so unfair or so personally wounding. He said quietly, 'I have spent my life working for the greater good and the protection of the innocent

and—yes!—the wrongly accused. That group includes you, monsieur. Also, today, it includes Hercule Poirot. I too am wrongly accused. I am as innocent of writing and sending the letter you received as you are of murder. I too know no Barnabas Pandey. Not a dead Barnabas Pandey and not an alive Barnabas Pandey do I know! But here—ah! Here is where the similarities between us end, for when you insist you are innocent, I listen. I think, “This man might be telling the truth.” Whereas when I—’

‘Spare me the fancy words,’ McCrodden cut in again. ‘If you imagine I’m likely to trust dazzling rhetoric any more than I trust money, reputation or any of the other things my father holds in high regard, you’re grievously mistaken. Now, since Rowland Rope will doubtless require you to relay to him my response to his sordid little scheme, please tell him this: I’m not playing. I have never heard of a Barnabas Pandey, I have killed nobody, therefore I have nothing to fear. I have enough confidence in the law of the land to trust that I won’t hang for a crime I didn’t commit.’

‘Do you believe your father wants that to happen?’

‘I don’t know. It’s possible. I have always thought that if Father ever runs out of guilty people to send to the gallows, he’ll turn his attentions to the innocent and pretend they’re guilty—both in court and in his own mind. Anything to feed his lust for the blood of his fellow human beings.’

‘That is a remarkable accusation, monsieur, and not the first one you have made since you arrived.’ McCrodden’s brisk, business-as-usual way of speaking chilled Poirot. It

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lent an air of objectivity to his words, as if he was merely conveying the plain and uncontroversial facts.

The Rowland Rope about whom Poirot had heard so much over the years was not the man his son was describing. He was a strong advocate of death as a punishment for the guilty—a little too strong for Poirot's taste, for there were circumstances that called for discretion—but Poirot suspected McCrodden Senior would be as horrified as he himself would be at the prospect of an innocent man or woman being sent to the gallows. And if the man in question was his own son . . .

'Monsieur, I have not, in all my years, met a father who sought to have his son condemned to death for a murder he did not commit.'

'Ah, but you have,' John McCrodden responded swiftly. 'Despite your protests to the contrary, I know you must have met my father, or at least you have conversed with him, and the two of you have conspired to accuse me. Well, you can tell Dear Father that I no longer hate him. Now that I see how low he is willing to stoop, I pity him. He's no better than a murderer. Neither are you, M. Poirot. The same is true of anyone in favour of choking wrongdoers at the end of a rope, the way our brutal system does.'

'Is that your opinion, monsieur?'

'All my life I've been a source of embarrassment and frustration to Father: refusing to bow down, to do what he wants, think what he thinks, work in *his* chosen profession. He wants me to take up the law. He's never forgiven me for not wanting to be him.'

‘May I ask what is your profession?’

‘Profession?’ McCrodden sneered. ‘I work for a living. Nothing fancy. Nothing grand that involves playing with other people’s lives. I’ve worked in a mine, on farms, in factories. I’ve made trinkets for ladies and sold them. I’m good at selling. At the moment I’ve got a market stall. It keeps a roof over my head, but none of that’s good enough for my father. And, being Rowland McCrodden, he won’t admit defeat. Never.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I hoped he had given up on me. Now I see that he never will. He knows a man accused of murder will need to defend himself. It’s rather clever of him, actually. He’s trying to provoke me, and harbouring all sorts of fantasies, I imagine, of me insisting on defending myself against the charge of murder at the Old Bailey. To do that, I would have to take an interest in the law, wouldn’t I?’

It was evident that Rowland McCrodden was to John McCrodden what Eustace was to Sylvia Rule.

‘You can tell him from me that his plan has failed. I will never be the person my father wants me to be. And I would rather he didn’t attempt to communicate with me again—directly, or using you or any of his other toadies as a conduit.’

Poirot rose from his chair. ‘Please wait here for a few moments,’ he said. He left the room, taking care to leave the door wide open.

When Poirot returned to the room, he was accompanied by his valet. He smiled at John McCrodden and said, ‘You

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have already met Georges. You will, I hope, have heard me explain to him that I would like him to join us for a short while. I raised my voice so that you would hear everything I said to him.

‘Yes, I heard,’ said McCrodden in a bored voice.

‘If I had said anything else to Georges, you would have heard it too. I did not. Therefore, what he is about to tell you will, I hope, convince you that I am not your enemy. Please, Georges—speak!’

George looked astonished. He was not accustomed to receiving such vague instructions. ‘About what, sir?’

Poirot turned to John McCrodden. ‘You see? He does not know. I have not prepared him for this. Georges, when I returned from luncheon today, I told you about something that had just happened to me, did I not?’

‘You did, sir.’

‘Please repeat the story that I told you.’

‘Very well, sir. You were accosted by a lady who introduced herself as Mrs Sylvia Rule. Mrs Rule mistakenly believed that you had written a letter to her in which you had accused her of murder.’

‘*Merci*, Georges. Tell me, who was the supposed victim of this murder?’

‘A Mr Barnabas Pandy, sir.’

‘And what else did I tell you?’

‘That you were not acquainted with a man of that name, sir. If there is such a gentleman, you do not know if he is alive or dead, or if he has been murdered. When you tried to explain this to Mrs Rule, she refused to listen.’

Poirot turned to John McCrodden in triumph. ‘Monsieur, perhaps your father wishes also for Sylvia Rule to defend herself at the Old Bailey? Or are you finally willing to concede that you have misjudged and most unfairly maligned Hercule Poirot? It might interest to you to know that Madame Rule also accused me of conspiring with one of her enemies to cause her distress—a man named Eustace.’

‘I still say my father is behind it all,’ John McCrodden said after a short interval. He sounded markedly less certain than he had before. ‘He enjoys nothing more than the challenge of an elaborate puzzle. I’m supposed to work out why Mrs Rule received the same letter I did.’

‘When one has a driving preoccupation—yours with your father, or Sylvia Rule’s obsession with her Eustace—it colours the way one sees the world,’ said Poirot with a sigh. ‘I don’t suppose you have brought the letter with you?’

‘No. I tore it up and sent the pieces to my father with a note telling him what I think of him, and now I’m telling you, M. Poirot. I won’t stand for it. Even the great Hercule Poirot cannot accuse innocent people of murder and expect to get away with it.’

It was a considerable relief when John McCrodden finally removed himself from the room. Poirot stood by the window in order to watch his visitor’s departure from the building.

‘Are you ready for your *sirop de menthe* now, sir?’ George asked.

‘*Mon ami*, I am ready for all the *sirop de menthe* in the world.’ Seeing that he might have caused confusion, he clarified. ‘One glass please, Georges. Only one.’

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Poirot returned to his chair in a state of agitation. What hope was there for justice or peace to prevail in the world when three people who might have made common cause—three wrongly accused people: Sylvia Rule, John McCrodden and Hercule Poirot—could not sit together and have a calm, rational discussion that might have helped them all to understand what had happened? Instead there had been anger, an almost fanatical refusal to entertain a point of view other than one's own, and the ceaseless hurling of insults. Not from Hercule Poirot, however; he had behaved impeccably in the face of intolerable provocation.

When George brought him his *siróp*, he said, 'Tell me—is there anybody else waiting to see me?'

'No, sir.'

'Nobody has telephoned to request an appointment?'

'No, sir. Are you expecting someone?'

'*Oui*. I am expecting an angry stranger, or perhaps several.'

'I'm not sure what you mean, sir.'

Just then the telephone started to ring. Poirot permitted himself a small smile. When there was no other pleasure to be taken from a situation, one might as well enjoy being correct, he thought. 'There he is, Georges—or there *she* is. The third person. Third of who knows how many? Three, four, five? It could be any number.'

'Number of what, sir?'

'People who have received a letter accusing them of the murder of Barnabas Pandy—signed, fraudulently, in the name of Hercule Poirot!'

## CHAPTER 3

### *The Third Person*

At three o'clock the next day, Poirot was visited at Whitehaven Mansions by a Miss Annabel Treadway. As he waited for George to show her in, he found himself looking forward to the encounter. For those of a different temperament, it might have been tedious to field the same accusation time after time from a succession of strangers united in their determination not to listen to a word that was said to them; not so for Hercule Poirot. This third time, he resolved, he would succeed in making his point. He would convince Miss Annabel Treadway that he was telling the truth. Perhaps then progress might be made and some more interesting questions asked.

The puzzle of why most people, even intelligent people, were so illogical and pig-headed was one to which Poirot had devoted quite enough consideration while lying awake the previous night; he was eager to turn his attention to Barnabas Pandy himself. Of course, that was assuming that Barnabas Pandy had a self. It was possible that he did not

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exist, had never existed, and was no more than a figment of the letter-writer's imagination.

The door opened and George ushered in a thin woman of average height, with fair hair and dark eyes and clothes. Poirot was alarmed by his reaction to the sight of her. He felt as if he ought to bow his head and say, 'My condolences, mademoiselle.' Having no reason to believe that she had suffered a loss, he restrained himself. A letter accusing her of murder might provoke anger or fear, but it could hardly be considered a tragedy; it would not, Poirot thought, make a person sad.

As surely as John McCrodden had filled Poirot's room with cold contempt, Annabel Treadway had brought sorrow in with her. 'The aching heart,' Poirot thought. He felt it as keenly as if it were his own.

'Thank you, Georges,' he said. 'Please, sit down, mademoiselle.'

She hurried to the nearest chair and sat in a manner that cannot have been comfortable for her. Poirot observed that her most striking facial feature was a deep vertical groove that started between her eyebrows: a pronounced crease that seemed to divide her forehead into two neat halves. Poirot resolved not to look at it again, lest she should notice.

'Thank you for allowing me to come here today,' she said quietly. 'I expected you to refuse.' She looked at Poirot five or six times as she spoke, turning away quickly on each occasion as if she didn't want him to catch her in the act of observing him.

‘From where have you come, mademoiselle?’

‘Oh, you won’t have heard of it. Nobody has. It’s in the country.’

‘Why did you expect me to refuse to see you?’

‘Most people would go to any lengths to prevent someone they believed to be a murderer from entering their home,’ she said. ‘M. Poirot, what I came here to tell you is . . . Well, you might not believe me, but I am innocent. I could not murder another living soul. Never! You cannot know . . .’ She broke off with a ragged gasp.

‘Please continue,’ said Poirot gently. ‘What is it that I cannot know?’

‘I have never caused pain or injury to anybody, and nor could I. I have *saved* lives!’

‘Mademoiselle—’

Annabel Treadway had produced a handkerchief from her pocket and was dabbing at her eyes. ‘Please forgive me if I sounded boastful. I did not mean to exaggerate my own goodness or my achievements, but it is true that I have saved a life. Many years ago.’

‘A life? You said “lives”.’

‘I only meant that if I had the opportunity to do so again, I should save every life that I could save, even if I had to place myself in danger to do so.’ Her voice trembled.

‘Is that because you are especially heroic or because you think other people matter more than you do?’ Poirot asked her.

‘I . . . I’m not sure what you mean. We must all put

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others before ourselves. I don't pretend to be more selfless than most, and I'm far from brave. I'm a terrible coward, in fact. Coming here to talk to you took all my courage. My sister Lenore—she's the brave one. I'm sure you are brave, M. Poirot. Wouldn't you save every life that you could, every single one?'

Poirot frowned. It was a peculiar question. The conversation so far had been unusual—even for what Poirot was calling in his mind 'the new age of Barnabas Pandey'.

'I have heard of your work and I admire you greatly,' said Annabel Treadway. 'That is why your letter pained me so. M. Poirot, you are quite wrong in your suspicions. You say you have proof against me, but I don't see how that is possible. I have committed no crime.'

'And I have sent you no letter,' Poirot told her. 'I did not accuse you—I *do* not accuse you—of the murder of Barnabas Pandey.'

Annabel Treadway blinked at Poirot in astonishment. 'But . . . I don't understand.'

'The letter you received was not written by the true Hercule Poirot. I too am innocent! An impersonator has sent these accusations, each one with my name signed at the bottom.'

'Each . . . each one? Do you mean—?'

'*Oui*. You are the third person in two days to say this very thing to me: that I have written to you and accused you of murdering a Barnabas Pandey. Yesterday it was Madame Sylvia Rule and Monsieur John McCrodden. Today it is you.' Poirot watched her closely to see if the

names of her fellow accusees had any noticeable effect. There was none that he could see.

‘So you didn’t . . .’ Her mouth moved for a while after she stopped speaking. Eventually she said, ‘So you don’t think I’m a killer?’

‘That is correct. At the present moment, I have no reason to believe you have murdered anybody. Now, if you were the only person to come to me as you have and talk about this letter of accusation, I might wonder . . .’ Deciding against sharing any more of his thoughts, Poirot smiled and said, ‘It is a cruel joke that this trickster, whomever he is, has played upon us both, mademoiselle. The names Sylvia Rule and John McCrodden are not known to you?’

‘I have never heard of either of them,’ said Annabel Treadway. ‘And jokes are supposed to be funny. This is not funny. It’s appalling. Who would do it? I’m not important, but to do such a thing to a person of your reputation is shocking, M. Poirot.’

‘To me you are extremely important,’ he told her. ‘You alone, of the three people to receive this letter, have listened. You alone believe Hercule Poirot when he says that he wrote and sent no such accusation. You do not make me feel I must be going mad, as the other two did. For that I am profoundly grateful.’

An oppressive air of sorrow still lingered in the room. If Poirot could only bring a smile to Annabel Treadway’s face . . . Ah, but that was a dangerous way to think. Allow a person to affect your emotions and your judgement suffered, always. Reminding himself that Miss Treadway

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might, despite seeming forlorn, nevertheless have murdered a man named Barnabas Pandy, Poirot continued with less effusiveness: ‘Madame Rule and Monsieur McCrodden, they did not believe Poirot. They did not listen.’

‘They surely didn’t accuse you of lying?’

‘Unfortunately, they did.’

‘But you’re Hercule Poirot!’

‘An undeniable truth,’ Poirot agreed. ‘May I ask, have you brought the letter with you?’

‘No. I destroyed it at once, I’m afraid. I . . . I couldn’t bear for it to exist.’

‘*Dommage*. I should have liked to see it. *Eh bien*, mademoiselle, let us take the next step in our investigation. Who should want to make mischief in this particular way—for you, for me, and for Madame Rule and Monsieur McCrodden? Four people who do not know this Barnabas Pandy, if he exists at all, which, for all we know—’

‘Oh!’ Annabel Treadway gasped.

‘What is the matter?’ Poirot asked her. ‘Tell me. Do not be afraid.’

She looked terrified. ‘It’s not true,’ she whispered.

‘What is not true?’

‘He does exist.’

‘Monsieur Pandy? Barnabas Pandy?’

‘Yes. Well, he *did* exist. He’s dead, you see. Not murdered, though. He fell asleep and . . . I thought . . . it was not my intention to deceive you, M. Poirot. I should have made it clear straight away . . . I simply thought . . .’ Her eyes moved quickly from one part of the room

to another. There was, Poirot sensed, great chaos in her mind at that moment.

‘You have not deceived me,’ he assured her. ‘Madame Rule and Monsieur McCrodden were adamant that they knew no one by the name of Barnabas Pandy, and neither do I. I made the assumption that the same must be true of you. Now, please tell me all that you know about Monsieur Pandy. He is dead, you say?’

‘Yes. He died in December of last year. Three months ago.’

‘And you say it was not murder—which means you know how he died?’

‘Of course I do. I was there. We lived together in the same house.’

‘You . . . you lived together?’ This Poirot had not been expecting.

‘Yes, since I was seven years old,’ she said. ‘Barnabas Pandy was my grandfather.’

‘He was more like a parent to me than a grandparent,’ Annabel Treadway told Poirot, once he had succeeded in convincing her that he was not angry with her for misleading him. ‘My mother and father died when I was seven, and Grandy—that’s what I called him—took us in, Lenore and me. Lenore has also been like a parent to me, in a way. I don’t know what I’d do without her. Grandy was terribly old. It’s sad when they leave us, of course, but old people do die, don’t they? Naturally, when it’s their time.’

The contrast between her matter-of-fact tone and the air

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of sadness that seemed to cling to her led Poirot to conclude that, whatever was making her unhappy, it was not her grandfather's death.

Then her manner changed. There was a flash of something in her eyes as she said fiercely, 'People mind so much less when old people die, which is dreadfully unfair! "He had a good innings," they say, as if that makes it tolerable, whereas when a child dies everyone knows it's the worst kind of tragedy. I believe every death is a tragedy! Don't *you* think it's unfair, M. Poirot?'

The word 'tragedy' seemed to echo in the air. If Poirot had been ordered to pick one word to describe the essence of the woman before him, he would have chosen that one. It was almost a relief to hear it spoken aloud.

When he didn't immediately answer her question, Annabel Treadway blushed and said, 'When I spoke of old people dying and nobody caring as much as . . . well, I didn't mean . . . I was talking about really *very* old people. Grandy was ninety-four, which I'm sure is *much* older than . . . I hope I have caused no offence.'

Thus, reflected Poirot, did some reassurances cause greater alarm than the original remark upon which they sought to improve. Somewhat dishonestly, he told Annabel Treadway that he was not offended. 'How did you destroy the letter?' he asked her.

She looked down at her knees.

'You would prefer not to tell me?'

'Being accused of murder—not by you, but definitely by somebody—makes one a little nervous of revealing anything.'

‘I understand. All the same, I should like to know how you disposed of it.’

She frowned. ‘*Alors!*’ thought Poirot to himself as the crease between her eyebrows deepened. That was one mystery solved at least. Frowning was a habit of hers and had been for many years. The groove in her forehead was the proof.

‘You’ll think me silly and superstitious if I tell you,’ she said, raising her handkerchief to just below her nose. She was not crying, but perhaps expected to be soon. ‘I took a pen and scored thick black lines through every word, so that nothing of what was written remained visible. I did it to your name too, M. Poirot. Every single word! Then I tore it up and burned the pieces.’

‘Three distinct methods of obliteration.’ Poirot smiled. ‘I am impressed. Madame Rule and Monsieur McCrodden, they were less thorough than you, mademoiselle. There is something else I should like to ask you. I sense you are unhappy, and perhaps afraid?’

‘I have nothing to be afraid of,’ she said quickly. ‘I’ve told you, I’m innocent. Oh, if only it were Lenore or Ivy accusing me, I would know how to convince them. I would simply say, “I swear on Hoppy’s life,” and they would know I was telling the truth. They already know, of course, that I did not kill Grandy.’

‘Who is Hoppy?’ asked Poirot.

‘Hopscotch. My dog. He’s the most darling creature. I would never swear on his life and then lie. You would love him, M. Poirot. It’s impossible not to love him.’ For the

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first time since arriving, Annabel Treadway smiled, and the thick layer of sadness in the room's atmosphere lifted a little. 'I must get back to him. You'll think me foolish, but I miss him dreadfully. And I'm not afraid—truly. If the person who sent the letter wasn't willing to put his name to it, then it's not a serious accusation, is it? It's a silly trick, that's all it is, and I'm very glad to be able to see you and straighten it out. Now, I must go.'

'Please, mademoiselle, do not leave yet. I would like to ask you more questions.'

'But I must get back to Hoppy,' Annabel Treadway insisted, rising to her feet. 'He needs . . . and none of them can . . . When I'm not there, he . . . I'm so sorry. I hope whoever sent those letters causes you no further trouble. Thank you for seeing me. Good day, M. Poirot.'

'Good day, mademoiselle,' Poirot said to a room that was suddenly empty apart from himself and a lingering feeling of desolation.