

## CHAPTER 1

### *Midnight Gathering*

It is not midnight when this tale begins, but ten minutes before two on the afternoon of 22nd February 1931. That was when the strangeness started, as M. Hercule Poirot and Inspector Edward Catchpool (his friend, and the teller of this story) stood with thirty strangers in a dispersed huddle—no one too close to anybody else, but all of us easily identifiable as an assembly—on London’s Buckingham Palace Road.

Our group of men and women and one child (an infant carried by his mother in a bundle arrangement that presented a rather mummified appearance) were soon to be travellers on a journey that felt peculiar and puzzling to me long before I knew quite how extraordinary it would become.

We were congregated by the side of the motor-coach that was to take us from London to the famed Kingfisher Hill country estate near Haslemere in Surrey, a place of outstanding natural beauty according to many. Despite all

*Sophie Hannah*

of us passengers being present well in advance of the coach's scheduled departure time, we had not yet been permitted to board. Instead we shivered in the damp February chill, stamped our feet and blew on our gloved hands to warm ourselves as best we could.

It was not midnight, but it was the sort of winter day that is light-starved at dawn and remains so deprived for its duration.

There were seats for thirty passengers on the coach, and thirty-two of us in all who would be travelling: the driver, the swaddled infant in his mother's firm grip, and the rest of us occupying the passenger seats on either side of the central aisle, including a representative of the coach company.

It struck me, as I shivered by Poirot's side, that I had more in common with the babe in arms than with any other members of our group. Thirty of our band of thirty-two knew why they were going wherever they were going on that day. Poirot was one in that lucky position. The coach's driver, also, knew his reason for being there: it put food on his table—a compelling motive if ever there was one.

The baby and I were the only people present who had not the faintest notion of why we were about to board the garishly-painted motor-coach, and of the two of us, only one perceived his ignorant state as a problem. All I knew was the coach's destination: Kingfisher Hill, a private country estate of some nine hundred acres, with a golf club, two tennis courts and a swimming pool designed and built

## *The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

by celebrated architect Sir Victor Marklew that boasted warm water all year round.

A country home within the quiet and leafy confines of the Kingfisher Hill Estate was out of the reach of all but the wealthiest of people, but that did not prevent Londoners of all denominations from talking about it endlessly. I might have been eager to enter those blessed gates for the first time had Poirot not been so determined to withhold from me the reason for our visit. As it was, the sense that I was being kept even more in the dark than usual proved too great an irritant. Was I, perhaps, on my way to meet a future Queen? It was sometimes said at Scotland Yard that the inhabitants of Kingfisher Hill were mostly royal personages and aristocrats, and anything seemed possible on a journey of Poirot's devising.

The coach departed promptly at two o'clock, and I cannot think that the events which took place before the driver called out his cheery 'Away we sally, ladies and gents!' occupied as much as a quarter of an hour. I can therefore confidently locate at ten minutes before two the moment that I noticed her: the unhappy woman with the unfinished face.

I might as well tell you that my first title for this chapter was 'An Unfinished Face'. Poirot preferred the original and protested when I told him I had changed it.

'Catchpool, you have in you the tendency of unreasoning contrariness.' He glared at me. 'Why give this most important chapter a name that will create confusion? Nothing significant occurred at midnight, on that day or any other!

*Sophie Hannah*

It was the broad light of the day when we waited in the cold, nearly freezing to blocks of ice and receiving no explanation of why the doors of that char-a-banc could not be opened to us.' Poirot stopped and frowned. I waited while he disentangled two separate sources of annoyance that he had unintentionally woven together in his invective. 'It was decidedly *not* midnight.'

'I do say that in my—'

'Yes, you do say so. It is your duty, *n'est-ce pas?* You have invented, from no necessity, the requirement to state *immédiatement* that a particular condition did not pertain. It is illogical, *non?*'

I merely nodded. It would have sounded pompous to offer the answer that was in my mind. Poirot is the finest detective at work anywhere in the world, but he is not an experienced teller of stories in written form, and he is, very occasionally, wrong. Broad daylight was an unfair description of that particular afternoon, as I have already said, and midnight—not the hour but the word—has everything to do with the matter at hand. If the words 'Midnight Gathering' on the cover of a book had not caught my eye before we set off on our travels that day, it is possible that no one would ever have known who was responsible for the killings at Kingfisher Hill.

But I am getting ahead of myself and must return us all to the cold outdoors. I understood why we were being made to wait in the relentless headwind, even if Poirot did not. Vanity, as so often where people are concerned, was the explanation—specifically, the vanity of Alfred Bixby

## *The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

Esquire. Bixby was the owner of the newly minted Kingfisher Coach Company and wished us all to observe the beauty of the vehicle that was about to transport us. Since Poirot and I had arrived, Bixby had been attached to our side as if by a gravitational force. So tickled pink was he to have the great Hercule Poirot among his patrons, he was prepared to ignore everybody else. This was a circumstance of which I could not count myself among the beneficiaries; my proximity to my friend ensured that every word addressed to him was also endured by me.

‘Doesn’t she look splendid? Blue and orange like the kingfisher bird! Bright as a button! Look at the shape of her! Beautiful, I’d say. Wouldn’t you agree, M. Poirot? Nothing like her on the road. The last word in luxury, truly she is! Look at those doors! Fit together perfectly. A spectacular feat of design and engineering. Look at them!’

‘Very fine indeed,’ I told him, knowing we would only be allowed to board once we had admired the vehicle sufficiently. Poirot made a gruff noise in his throat, unwilling to feign approval.

Bixby was a thin, angular man with bulbous staring eyes. Spotting two women wrapped in hats and coats walking on the other side of the road, he drew our attention to them and declared, ‘Those ladies are too late! Ho-ha! They should have reserved their seats in advance. If you want to travel with the Kingfisher Coach Company, you can’t afford to leave it to chance, or there’ll be no room for you. Ha! Sorry, ladies!’ he bellowed suddenly.

*Sophie Hannah*

The two women must have heard him, but paid no attention as they walked purposefully onwards. They would barely have noticed our presence had Bixby not called out to them. They had no interest in the Kingfisher Coach Company, nor in this four-wheeled blue and orange representative thereof. Bixby's frankly desperate and undignified behaviour made me wonder if his firm was as successful as he kept telling us all that it was.

'Did you hear that? Mr Bixby just had to turn away two ladies,' a man near me said to his companion, who replied, 'Quite right too, if they weren't expected. He said we're all here, didn't he, after he'd marked us off on his list? I don't know why people don't plan ahead.' Irritable as I was that day, it irked me that Bixby's inelegant deception had fooled at least two people.

I nodded along and made appreciative noises at what I hoped were the correct moments as he explained how his firm had come into being: something about most people not taking the initiative and not being able to imagine something that didn't already exist . . . something about owning property at Kingfisher Hill himself, profits from a previous venture, the inconvenience of getting to London despite it being relatively close geographically . . . something about not letting fear stop him, even with the national and global economies being in their present catastrophic state . . .

I remember thinking, 'Well, if Alfred Bixby owns a house at Kingfisher Hill then it can't be all royalty and aristocrats,' seconds before I saw a woman standing alone at

*The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

the outer edge of our group and noticed her expression of horror, at which point all other considerations left my mind.

‘An unfinished face,’ I muttered. No one heard me. Alfred Bixby was busy inflicting upon Poirot a list of the many failures of Ramsay MacDonald and his ‘Russia-favouring government of knaves and reprobates’ and his words smothered mine.

I estimated that the woman was around twenty years old. She was wearing a smart green hat and coat over a faded, almost colourless dress that looked as if it must have been washed more than a hundred times. There were scuffs on her shoes.

She was not entirely unattractive, but her skin looked dull and bloodless, and her features all had the same look to them: as if someone had stopped short of adding the final touches that would have given her a more conventional visual appeal. Her lips were thin, pale and recessive, and her eyes brought to mind two dark holes in the ground. In general, her face seemed to yearn to have more detail and shape added; elements needed to be brought out that were sunken in.

All of this is incidental, however. What fascinated and alarmed me was that she looked frightened, disgusted and unhappy to her core, all at once. It was as if she had suffered, only moments ago, the most dreadful and distressing shock. Her eyes were fixed on the motor-coach—a wide-eyed, maniacal stare that no amount of disapproval of those particular shades of blue and orange

*Sophie Hannah*

in such close association could explain. If the vehicle had not been inanimate, I might have suspected that, while the rest of us were distracted, this woman had witnessed it committing a crime of unparalleled barbarism.

She appeared to be alone, standing at the outer edge of our little crowd. I did not hesitate in approaching her.

‘Excuse me. Forgive me for intruding, but you look as if you’ve had a nasty shock. Can I be of assistance?’ So extreme was the horror on her face that I did not stop to wonder if I had imagined a problem that did not exist.

‘No, thank you.’ She sounded vague and seemed distracted.

‘Are you quite certain?’

‘Yes. I . . . Yes. Thank you.’ She took four or five steps away from me and closer to the coach.

I could hardly insist on helping her if she was determined to forbid it, so I returned to Poirot and Alfred Bixby, but kept an eye on her movements, which soon grew more agitated. She started to walk round and round in little circles, her mouth moving silently. At no point did the terrible expression leave her face, not for a second.

I was about to interrupt Bixby’s monologue and draw Poirot’s attention to the object of my concern when I heard a loud, disdainful female voice to the left of me say, ‘Do you see that young woman over there? What on earth is wrong with her? Perhaps her mother dropped her hard on her head when she was a baby.’

The mother of the bundled infant gasped and held her child closer to her body. ‘There’s no need to be insulting,

*The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

miss,’ said an old man, which remark inspired a general murmur of agreement. The only people who seemed not to notice all of this activity were the woman with the unfinished face and Alfred Bixby, who was still talking to Poirot, though Poirot was no longer listening.

‘She does appear to be disturbed,’ someone said. ‘We ought to check that her name is on the passenger manifest.’

This provoked a chorus of observations:

‘Mr Bixby said we’re all here.’

‘Then what’s keeping him from opening the doors? Driver! You’re the driver, aren’t you? May we board now?’

‘I suppose if her name is on the list then she cannot be an escaped lunatic from a nearby asylum, though her behaviour indicates otherwise,’ said the loud, rude woman. She too was young—around the same age as the woman with the unfinished face. Her voice was severely at odds with the viciousness of her words. It was a strikingly musical and feminine voice—light, bright, almost sparkling. *If a diamond could speak, it would sound like her*, I thought.

‘That gentleman was speaking to her a few seconds ago.’ An elderly lady gestured in my direction, then turned to face me. ‘What did you say to her? Do you know her?’

‘Not at all,’ I replied. ‘I simply noticed that she looked . . . disturbed and asked if she needed help. “No, thank you,” she said.’

‘Now, then, ladies and gentlemen,’ said Alfred Bixby, eager to redirect our attention to his pride and joy. ‘Is it

time to reveal the luxurious interior of this brand new beauty? Why, I believe it is!’

As several people rushed forward in their eagerness to climb on board and escape the cold, I stood to one side and watched as the woman with the unfinished face backed away from the coach’s open doors as though afraid they might swallow her up. I heard Poirot’s voice behind me. ‘Let us proceed, Catchpool. I have taken enough of your English fresh air for one day. Oh—you observe *la pauvre mademoiselle*.’

‘What the devil is the matter with her, Poirot?’

‘I do not know, my friend. It is likely that her mental faculties are impaired.’

‘I don’t think so,’ I told him. ‘When I spoke to her, she appeared sane and lucid.’

‘In that case, she has since deteriorated.’

I walked over to her once more and said, ‘I’m terribly sorry to intrude again, but . . . I am quite certain that you are in need of help. My name is Edward Catchpool. I’m a police inspector with Scotland Yard, and . . .’

‘No!’ Her mouth contorted around the word. ‘You *cannot* be. It’s impossible!’ She backed away from me, knocking into the woman with the baby. She seemed aware of nothing and no one but me. The first time I had spoken to her, she had been too preoccupied by her own fears and torments to notice me. Now she seemed entirely fixated on me to the exclusion of all else. ‘Who *are* you?’ she demanded to know. ‘Who are you, really?’

\*

*The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

Poirot came quickly to my defence. ‘Mademoiselle, I can assure you that it is true. Inspector Catchpool and I, we travel together. I am M. Hercule Poirot.’

His words had a visible effect. All at once, her demeanour changed. She looked around. She seemed to notice for the first time that her behaviour had attracted many avid spectators. Then she hung her head and whispered, ‘Forgive me, Inspector. Of course you are who you say you are. I don’t know what came over me.’

‘What’s the matter with you?’ I asked her bluntly.

‘Nothing. I’m perfectly all right.’

‘I find that difficult to believe.’

‘If I needed help, I’d ask for it, Inspector, sir. Please, you mustn’t trouble yourself on my account.’

‘Very well,’ I said, dissatisfied. ‘Shall we?’ I gestured towards the motor-coach, curious to see if she would behave sensibly henceforth. In spite of her erratic behaviour, I was convinced of the soundness of her faculties. She was not afflicted by any mental infirmity. The problem was an emotional one.

‘I . . . you . . .’ she stammered.

‘Let *us* take our seats, Catchpool,’ said Poirot firmly. ‘You and me. This young lady wishes to be left alone.’

At this, the woman with the unfinished face looked distinctly relieved and, with her and Poirot united against me, I admitted defeat. As we climbed on board, having left our valises with all the others, she retreated. Perhaps her name was not on Alfred Bixby’s manifest and she was not and never had been bound for Kingfisher Hill. Now that I

came to think of it, she did not seem to have any suitcases with her and was carrying no bag or purse. She might have put herself among us to hide from somebody. I decided that, since I would never know, there was no point in speculating further.

Once inside, I saw that most of the coach's seats were empty. There was a simple explanation for this: many people had dropped back, eager to overhear my questioning of the woman with the unfinished face. Now that was concluded, everybody had remembered how cold they were. There was a build up of impatient bodies in the aisle behind me. 'Forward march,' someone muttered.

'Yes, do hurry, Catchpool,' said Poirot.

I followed his instruction and walked on along the aisle, only to come to a sharp halt a few moments later. In my peripheral vision, I had glimpsed a book that was sitting open on one of the coach's seats, with its cover facing upwards and its title clearly visible. Could it be . . . ? No, how could it possibly?

Exclamations of impatience erupted, not least from Poirot, as I stepped backwards, forcing those behind me to do the same, in order to get a closer look at the book's cover. I had indeed made a mistake. The title of the book was *Midnight Gathering*. I blinked and looked again. Yes, definitely *Midnight Gathering*. Yet I had been left with the powerful impression that I had seen two quite different words.

'What's that bunny up to?' I heard an American voice call out from the logjam that I had created in the aisle. 'We're all waiting here!'

*The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

‘*Alors, on y va, Catchpool,*’ said Poirot behind me.

A woman’s hand reached out and snatched the book from the seat. Her swift action broke my trance, and I looked up. It was the rude woman with the diamond voice. She clutched the book close to her body and glared at me, as if by merely looking at it I might have tarnished it beyond repair.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to . . .’ I mumbled. She glared more fiercely. Her face had much in common with her voice. With the addition of kindness and compassion to either or both, the effect would have been charming. I felt a jolt of recognition: this young lady, with her exquisitely sculpted cheekbones, delicate features, blue eyes and fine golden hair, was in every way my mother’s favourite type—in a physical sense at least. All of the women she insisted I ought to want to marry looked more or less like this one, minus the furious grimace.

On the third finger of her left hand, the owner of *Midnight Gathering* wore a ring: a large ruby. *Sorry, Mother, too late,* I thought to myself. *She’s already promised to another chap. I hope he’s not the sensitive sort or he’ll never survive the ordeal.*

I turned away from her and was about to advance along the coach’s aisle when she did the most peculiar, petty thing. She moved as if it was her intention to replace the book in its former position, and then she very pointedly stopped just before doing so. She allowed the hand in which she held it to hover in mid-air above the seat between us. Her meaning was unambiguous, and she aimed a spiteful smile

at me, knowing that I knew it. What an unpleasant woman! She was thoroughly enjoying her silent persecution of me. Her smile said, *I don't mind anybody else seeing the book—only you.* It was my punishment for having been a nosy nuisance. Well, there she perhaps made a fair point. I had probably peered rather intrusively.

Once Poirot and I were seated side by side towards the back of the coach, he said, 'Tell me, Catchpool, what did you see that was so interesting to you that you felt compelled to keep us all trapped in the aisle for so long?'

'It was nothing. I made a mistake. And it wasn't long—the whole thing was over in seconds.'

'What mistake?'

'Did you see the book that woman was reading?'

'The beautiful, angry woman?'

'Yes.'

'I saw a book, yes. She held it very tightly.'

'I think she feared I might tear it away from her,' I told him. 'That was what I wanted to get a second look at—her book. It was called *Midnight Gathering*. When I first saw it, I was certain I saw the words "Michael Gathercole" as the title. It must have been the M and the G.'

'Michael Gathercole.' Poirot sounded interested. 'The solicitor Michael Gathercole? That is curious.' He and I had become acquainted with Gathercole the previous year during an eventful stay in Clonakilty in the Irish Free State. 'Why would the name of Michael Gathercole, an unremarkable practitioner of the law, be the title of a book, Catchpool?'

*The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

‘Well, it wouldn’t. And it wasn’t. I was mistaken. We needn’t discuss it further.’

‘It is more likely for Gathercole to have written a book and for his name to be on its cover as the author,’ said Poirot.

‘Gathercole has nothing to do with anything. Some other person wrote a book called *Midnight Gathering*.’ Please, I thought, *let this be the end of it*.

‘I think I comprehend why you saw a name that was not there, Catchpool—and why it was this name in particular.’

I waited.

‘You are preoccupied with the unhappy woman who accuses you of impersonating Inspector Edward Catchpool of Scotland Yard. She tells us that she is not in need of help, but you disagree, and so you are alert to danger. To harm. *Alors*, in the part of your mind that does not perceive its own workings, you make a connection between this incident today and the events of last year in Clonakilty, where danger was present and terrible harm was done.’

‘You’re probably right. She hasn’t got on yet, has she?’

‘I cannot tell you, *mon ami*. I have not been keeping watch. Now, we have important matters to attend to.’ He produced a small, folded piece of paper from his coat pocket. ‘Read this before the coach departs. It is unwise to read while in motion. It makes for the bilious stomach.’

I took the paper from his hand, hoping that whatever was written on it would tell me why we were going to Kingfisher Hill. Instead, I found myself looking at an

excessive number of the tiniest words I had ever seen on a page. ‘What is this?’ I asked. ‘A set of instructions? For what?’

‘Turn it over, Catchpool.’

I did so.

‘Now do you see? Yes, instructions. Rules. The rules of a game played with a board and a number of round discs with eyes on them—the game of Peepers!’

‘Eyes? Human eyes, or the letter “I”?’

‘Eyes, Catchpool.’ Poirot fluttered his own open and closed. He looked absurd, and I would have laughed had I not felt so frustrated.

‘What’s this about, Poirot? Why do you have the rules for a board game in your pocket?’

‘I do not.’ His green eyes glittered. ‘You have them in your hand.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘I have brought with me more than the rules of Peepers. I have too the game itself—it is in a box inside my suitcase!’ He made this announcement triumphantly. ‘I tell you to read the rules now because, as soon as possible, you and I will play Peepers together. We become the great experts and enthusiasts of Peepers! You will note that it says two players is the minimum number.’

‘Please explain,’ I said. ‘I don’t like board games. I detest them, in fact. And what does this Peepers game have to do with your determination to take me with you to the Kingfisher Hill Estate? Don’t tell me the two are unconnected. I shan’t believe you.’

*The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

‘You do not detest Peepers, Catchpool. It is impossible, for you have never played it. Keep the open mind, I beg of you. Peepers is not like chess.’

‘Is it like the Landlord’s Game? I cannot abide that one.’

‘You refer to the Monopoly game, *n’est-ce pas?*’

‘Yes, I’ve heard it called that as well. Appalling waste of any intelligent person’s time.’

‘Ah! *Pourrait-il être plus parfait?*’ Poirot had never looked more delighted. ‘Those are the very words you must say when we arrive at the home of *la famille* Devonport!’

‘Who are the Devonport family?’ I asked.

‘You must say it so that everybody hears it: that you *detest* the Monopoly game.’

‘What are you talking about, Poirot? I’m not in the mood for’—I had been about to say ‘games’—‘your usual antics.’

‘I do not have any antics, *mon ami*. Now, read the rules, please. Do not delay. Soon we will be moving.’

Sighing, I started to read. Or rather, I looked at the minuscule words and did my best to concentrate on them, but, hard as I tried, I could not take them in. I was about to say so when I heard Alfred Bixby’s indignant voice rise above the general murmurs of conversation around me. ‘I’m afraid this is your last chance, miss,’ he said. I was in an aisle seat and so was he and I saw him as he leaned forward; he was sitting in one of the front seats immediately behind the driver and level with the doors, and was addressing his remarks to someone outside. ‘No Kingfisher

Coach Company coach has ever been as much as a minute late in departing, and that's a tradition I intend to keep up! You're not the only pebble on the beach, young lady! I've got twenty-nine other passengers to think of who don't want to be late—one with an infant! So, are you joining us for the journey or not?'

'It's her,' I muttered as, a moment later, the woman with the unfinished face appeared in the aisle. She cowered there as if afraid Bixby might rise from his seat and give her a walloping. For his part, he looked as if he wished to do that very thing. 'Driver, close the doors,' he said. The driver did as instructed and started up the engine.

The woman, whose face showed traces of tears, stood immobile at the front of the coach. 'Take your seat, miss, please,' Bixby said to her. 'There's only one left. It's not as if there are dozens to choose between!' He rose to his feet and pointed. 'There—seventh row.'

'I think that perhaps you were right, Catchpool,' said Poirot. 'The behaviour of *la pauvre* begins to interest me. See how she thinks most intensively. There is a puzzle in her mind. Until she solves it, she cannot know . . .'

'Know what?'

'If she wishes to accompany us or not. Her indecision causes her great distress.'

As the disapproving noises of the other passengers started to rise in volume, the unhappy woman hurried forward and sat down. Seconds later, we set off, and it wasn't long before Bixby was on his feet again. He walked up and down the aisle, intent on telling every single one of us how

*The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

deeply he regretted that we had very nearly had to experience a delay to what would undoubtedly turn out to be the most comfortable and blissful journey of our lives. I missed the odd word thanks to the excessively loud growl of the engine. Bixby made no mention of this unfortunate circumstance—no apology or explanation—and I deduced from his silence on the matter that the din would accompany us all the way to Kingfisher Hill.

He had taken his little speech almost to the back of the coach, and we had been travelling for no more than ten minutes, when I heard a loud squeal of distress. It had come from several rows in front of me. Immediately after the noise, the woman with the unfinished face appeared in the aisle again. ‘Stop, please!’ she called out to Bixby. Then she turned and addressed the driver, ‘Stop this coach. I must . . . Please, open the doors. I cannot stay here, sitting there.’ She pointed at her seat. ‘I . . . unless someone will take my seat in exchange for theirs, you must let me get out.’

Bixby shook his head. His upper lip curled. ‘Now, you listen to me, miss,’ he said as he walked slowly towards her.

Poirot rose to his feet and put himself in the aisle between the woman and Bixby. ‘Monsieur, if you will allow me to intervene?’ he said with a bow.

Bixby looked uncertain, but he nodded. ‘As long as it doesn’t lead to a delay, M. Poirot. I’m sure you understand. These good people have homes and families waiting for them.’

*Sophie Hannah*

‘*Bien sûr.*’ Poirot turned to face the woman. ‘Mademoiselle, you wish to sit in a different seat?’

‘Yes. I must. It’s . . . it’s important. I would not ask otherwise.’

A sharp, bright voice that I recognized only too well said, ‘M. Poirot, please be kind enough to grant her wish and give her your seat. I should much rather sit beside a world-renowned detective than a gibbering fool. She’s done nothing but gasp and shudder for the last fifteen minutes. It’s fatiguing in the extreme.’

So *la pauvre mademoiselle*, as Poirot had called her, had been sitting beside the owner of that wretched book all this while! No wonder she didn’t want to stay there any longer. She had probably made the mistake of glancing at the book’s cover and received a thorough savaging.

‘What is wrong with your seat?’ Poirot asked. ‘Why do you wish to move?’

She shook her head wildly. Then she cried out, ‘You won’t believe me, but . . . I will die if I sit there. Someone will kill me!’

‘Please explain to me what you mean,’ said Poirot. ‘Who will kill you?’

‘I don’t know!’ the woman sobbed. ‘But I know that it’s *this seat*. Next to the aisle, seven rows back, on the right. Only this seat, and none of the others. That’s what he said. Nothing will happen to me if I sit anywhere else. Please, sir, let me take your place and you take mine?’

‘Who said this to you?’

‘The man! A man. I . . . I don’t know who he was.’

*The Killings at Kingfisher Hill*

‘And if you sit in this particular seat, what did the man say would happen?’ asked Poirot.

‘Haven’t I just told you?’ the woman wailed. ‘He said I’d be murdered! “Mark my words,” he said. ““You heed this warning, or you won’t get off that coach alive.”’