

The mystery of Hunter's Lodge (Poirot Story) Agatha Christie

'After all Hastings,' murmured Poirot. 'It is possible that I shall not die this time.'

Coming from a convalescent influenza patient, I hailed the remark as showing optimism. Poirot was now sitting up in bed, propped up with pillows.

'Yes, yes,' Poirot continued. 'Once more shall I be myself again, the great Hercule Poirot, the terror of evil-doers!'

I laughed.

'Good for you Poirot. And fortunately you haven't missed anything of particular interest during this time of illness.'

Our landlady stuck her head in at the door.

'There's a gentleman downstairs. Says he must see Monsieur Poirot. I brought up his card.'

She handed me a bit of pasteboard. 'Mr Roger Havering,' I read.

Poirot motioned with his head towards the *Who's Who* on the bookcase and I obediently gave it to him.

'Second son of fifth Baron Windsor. Married 1913 Zoe, fourth daughter of William Crabb.'

'H'm!' I said. 'I rather fancy that's the girl who used to act at the Frivolity – only she called herself Zoe Carrisbrook. I remembered she married some young man about town.'

'Would it interest you, Hastings, to go down and hear what our visitor's trouble is?'

Roger Havering was a man of about forty, well set and of smart appearance. His face, however, was haggard and he was evidently labouring under great agitation.

'Captain Hastings, I understand. It is imperative that Monsieur Poirot come with me to Derbyshire today. You see, my uncle, the best friend I have in the world, was foully murdered last night at our lodge in Derbyshire. I was in town and received a telegram from my wife. Immediately upon its receipt I determined to come round and beg Monsieur Poirot to undertake the case.'

'I'm afraid Poirot is ill in bed – influenza,' I replied.

His face fell and I was struck by a sudden idea.

'If you will excuse me a minute,' I said and rushed upstairs. In a few brief words I acquainted Poirot with the situation. He took any further words out of my mouth.

'I see. I see. You want to go yourself, is it not so? Well, why not? You should know my methods by now. All I ask is that you should report to me fully everyday, and follow implicitly any instruction I may wire you.'

To this I willingly agreed.

An hour later I was sitting opposite Mr Havering in a first-class carriage on the Midland Railway.

'To being with Captain Hastings, you must understand that my uncle, Mr Harrington Pace, has, for the last three years, made his home with us. He never got on well with my father, and I suspect that my being somewhat of a prodigal son myself rather increased than diminished his affection towards me. Two days ago, my uncle suggested we should run down to Derbyshire for a day or two to his hunting lodge. But yesterday evening I was forced to return to town. This morning I received this telegram,' He handed over to me:

‘Come at once uncle Harrington murdered last night bring good detective if you can but do come —Zoe.’

It was about three ‘o’ clock when we arrived at the little station of Elmer’s Dale. From there a five-mile drive brought us to a small grey stone building in the midst of the rugged moors.

‘If it is possible,’ I said ‘I would like to talk to Mrs Havering this evening, while last night’s events are still fresh in her mind.’

‘Of course,’ said Havering.

It was dark inside and as I took off my coat, a middle-aged woman in black approached. It was the housekeeper, Mrs Middleton.

‘The mistress said to say she’s gone down to the village,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ said Havering, ‘Well perhaps you could talk to Mrs Middleton whilst you’re waiting.’

Havering left us and we went into a dimly-lighted room. ‘It was after dinner that the man came,’ said the housekeeper when I asked her, ‘He asked to see Mr Pace, sir, and seeing that he spoke with an American accent I thought he was a friend of his. I showed him into the gun-room and then went to tell Mr Pace who went straight to see him. I went back to the kitchen, and after a while I heard quarelling, and I came out into the hall. At the same time, the mistress comes out too, and just then there was a shot and then a dreadful silence. When we got to the gun-room Mr Pace was lying there, all shot and bleeding. The man must of got away through the window.’

‘And what was this man like who called to see Mr Pace?’

The housekeeper reflected.

‘He had a black beard, sir, and was middle aged with a light overcoat. Beyond that I didn’t notice much about him.’

There was the sound of the frontdoor opening and steps going up the stairs.

‘That must be the mistress,’ said the housekeeper, ‘Shall I go and get her?’

‘If you please.’

Mrs Havering did not keep me waiting long. In a few minutes I heard a light step and into the room came a very handsome young woman. She wore a flame coloured jumper and on her dark head was a little hat of the same colour. I introduced myself and she nodded in quick comprehension.

‘It must have been just before nine ‘o’ clock when the man arrived,’ she said ‘We had just finished dinner.’

‘Your husband had already left for London?’

‘Yes, he went up by the 6.15.’

‘And can you describe this visitor at all?’

‘I’m afraid not. I didn’t see him. Mrs Middleton showed him straight into the gun-room and then came to tell my uncle who went off at once.... It was about five minutes later that I heard the sound of raised voices. I ran out into the hall and almost collided with Mrs Middleton. Then we heard the shot, but by the time we got to the gun-room the murderer had been able to get away out of the window. Mr poor uncle – her voice faltered – ‘had been shot through the head.’

I looked down at my notebook and said ‘Have you any idea as to the weapon?’

‘Well, I can make a guess at it, Captain Hastings. A pair of revolvers of my husband’s were mounted upon the wall. One of them is missing and the police took the other one away with them. When they have extracted the bullet, I suppose they will know for certain.’

That evening I sat down and wrote a lengthy account to Poirot. I was able to add further items that I gleaned from the local police before I wrote the letter.

The bullet had been extracted and was proved to have been fired from a revolver identical with the one from the gun-room. Furthermore, Mr Havering's movements on the night in question had been checked and verified. And, thirdly a sensational development had occurred. A city gentleman, living in Ealing, had found a brown paper parcel stuck between the railings, which contained a revolver. It was proved to be the one we were in search of and one bullet had been fired from it.

The following morning a wire arrived from Poirot.

'Wire me description of housekeeper and what clothes she wore this morning same of Mrs Havering'

His request appeared to me ridiculous but I carried it out. At eleven a reply wire came from Poirot:

'Advise police to arrest housekeeper before it is too late.'

Dumbfounded I went to Hunter's lodge. But it was too late. Mrs Middleton who had appeared so respectable had vanished into thin air.

From Mrs Havering I elicited all the facts I could:

'I engaged her about three weeks ago when our former housekeeper left. She came to me from Mrs Selbourne's Agency in Mount Street. I get all my servants there. I engaged Mrs Middleton on the spot and notified the Agency of the fact. I can't believe there was anything wrong with her. She was such a nice quiet woman.'

The thing certainly was a mystery. The woman could not have committed the crime since she was with Mrs Havering at the time, but she must have some connection with the murder, or why should she suddenly take to her heels and bolt?

I wired the latest development to Poirot and suggested returning to London and making inquiries at Selbourne's Agency.

Poirot's reply was prompt:

'Useless to inquire at agency they will never have heard of her.'

I could not see Poirot's line of reasoning and, thinking that it must be the product of some influenza-induced delirium, I decided to inquire at the agency regardless. But when I did my questions bore out Poirot's prognostication. No such woman as 'Mrs Middleton' had ever been on their books. They had received the Hon. Mrs Havering's application for a housekeeper, and had sent various applicants. When Mrs Havering sent the engagement fee, she omitted to mention which woman she had selected.

Somewhat crestfallen, I returned to Poirot and found him established in an armchair by the fire in a garish, silk dressing gown..

'Mon ami Hastings' he said 'But how glad I am to see you. And you have enjoyed yourself? You have interrogated and investigated to your heart's content?'

'Poirot,' I cried, 'the thing's a dark mystery! It will never be solved.'

'It is true that we are not likely to cover ourselves with glory over it.'

'No, indeed. It's a hard nut to crack.'

'Oh, as far as that goes, I am very good at cracking the nuts! A veritable

squirrel! I know well enough who killed Mr Harrington Pace.'

'You know? How did you find out?'

'Your illuminating answers to my wires supplied me with the truth. See here, Hastings let us examine the facts methodically. Point No. 1. Mr Harrington Pace is a man with a considerable fortune which at his death will doubtless pass to his nephew. Point No. 2. His nephew is known to be desperately hard up. Point No. 3. His nephew is also known to be shall we say a man of rather loose moral fibre?'

'But Roger Havering is proved to have journeyed straight up to London.'

'Precisement – and therefore, as Mr Havering left Elmer's Dale at 6.15, and since Mr Pace cannot have been killed before he left, we conclude quite rightly, that Mr Havering did not shoot his uncle. But there is a Mrs Havering, Hastings.'

'Impossible! The housekeeper was with her when the shot was fired.'

'Ah yes, the housekeeper. But she has disappeared and I doubt she will be found.'

'I suppose she played her part and then got out in the nick of time.'

'And what was her part?'

'Well, presumably to admit the murderer.'

'Oh no! That was not her part! Her part was to provide an alibi for Mrs Havering at the moment the shot was fired. And no one will ever find her, mon ami, because she does not exist!'

'But what do you mean Poirot?'

'I mean that Zoe Havering was an actress before her marriage, that you only saw the housekeeper in a dark hall, and finally that neither you nor the local police ever saw Mrs Middleton and her mistress at one and the same time. It was child's play for that clever and daring woman. On the pretext of summoning her mistress, she runs upstairs, slips on a bright jumper and a hat, removes her make-up and the brilliant Zoe Havering arrives. Nobody looks particularly at the housekeeper. Why should they? There is nothing to connect her to the crime. She, too, has an alibi.'

'But the revolver was found at Ealing? Mrs Havering could not have placed it there.'

'No, that was Roger Havering's job. Of course the revolver found at Ealing was not the one with which Mr Pace was shot. Roger Havering discharged one shot from it, brought it up to London, went straight to his club to establish his alibi, then placed the gun where it was found. That charming creature, his wife, quietly shoots Mr Pace after dinner, reloads the other revolver and puts it back in its place, and then starts off with her desperate little comedy.'

'It's incredible,' I muttered, 'and yet-'

'And yet it is true. But to bring that pair to justice, that is another matter. I have written to the police in full but I very much fear that we shall be obliged to leave them to Fate, or le bon Dieu, whichever you prefer.'

Poirot's forebodings were confirmed. The police were unable to get together the necessary evidence to ensure a conviction and Mr Pace's huge fortune passed into the hands of his murderers.

Nevertheless, Nemesis did overtake them, and when I read in the paper that the Hon. Roger and Mrs Havering were amongst those killed in the crashing of the Air Mail to Paris I knew that Justice was satisfied.