

## Wasps Nest

*Agatha Christie*

Out of the house came John Harrison and stood a moment on the terrace looking out over the garden. John Harrison loved his garden, and it had never looked better than it did on this August evening.

A well known creaking sound made Harrison turn his head sharply. Who was coming in through the garden gate? In another minute, an expression of utter astonishment came over his face, for the dandified figure coming up the path was the last he expected to see in this part of the world.

‘By all that’s wonderful,’ cried Harrison. ‘Monsieur Poirot!’

It was, indeed, the famous Hercule Poirot whose renown as a detective had spread over the whole world

‘What brings you into this quiet spot?’ asked Harrison. ‘Pleasure?’

‘No, mon ami, murder.’

‘Who has been murdered?’

‘As yet,’ said Hercule Poirot, ‘nobody.’

‘What?’

‘I am investigating a crime that has not yet taken place.’

Later, when they were both seated comfortably, Poirot said, ‘I see, Monsieur Harrison, that you have a wasps’ nest there. You should destroy it.’

Harrison replied in a bewildered voice: ‘As a matter of fact, I’m going to. Or rather, young Langton is. You remember Claude Langton? He was at that same dinner where I met you. He’s coming over this evening to take the nest. Rather fancies himself at the job.’

‘Ah,’ said Poirot ‘And how is he going to do it?’

‘Petrol and the garden syringe. He’s bringing his own syringe over, it’s a more convenient size than mine.’

‘There is another way, is there not?’ asked Poirot. ‘With cyanide of potassium?’

Harrison looked a little surprised. ‘Yes, but that’s rather dangerous stuff. Always a risk having it about the place.’

Poirot nodded gravely. ‘Yes, it is deadly poison.’ He waited a minute and then repeated in a grave voice, ‘Deadly poison.’

‘Useful if you want to do away with your mother-in-law, eh?’ said Harrison with a laugh.

But Hercule Poirot remained grave ‘And you are quite sure, Monsieur Harrison, that it is with petrol that Monsieur Langton is going to destroy your wasps’ nest?’

‘Quite sure. Why?’

‘I wondered. I was at the chemist’s in Barchester this afternoon. For one of my purchases I had to sign the poison book. I saw the last entry. It was for cyanide of potassium and it was signed by Claude Langton.’

Harrison stared. ‘That’s odd,’ he said. ‘Langton told me the other day that he’d never dream of using the stuff; in fact, he said it oughtn’t to be sold for the purpose.’

Poirot looked out over the garden. His voice was very quiet as he asked a question. ‘Do you like Langton?’

And as the other did not answer, he went on. ‘I also wondered if he liked you?’

‘What are you getting at, Monsieur Poirot? There’s something in your mind I can’t fathom.’

‘I am going to be very frank. You are engaged to be married, Monsieur Harrison. I know Miss Molly Deane. She is a very charming, a very beautiful girl. Before she was engaged to you, she was engaged to Claude Langton. She threw him over for you.’

Harrison nodded. Poirot continued.

'I do not ask what her reasons were: she may have been justified. But I tell you this, it is not too much to suppose that Langton has not forgotten or forgiven.'

'You are warning me,' said Harrison in a low voice. 'I see it now. You are warming me against Claude Langton. You came here today to warn me.'

Poirot nodded. He laid a hand on his friend's shoulder, 'Rouse yourself, my friend, rouse yourself and look where I am pointing. There on the bank, close by that tree root. See you, the wasps returning home, placid at the end of the day? In a little hour, there will be destruction, and they know it not. There is no one to tell them. They have not, it seems, a Hercule Poirot. I tell you, Monsieur Harrison, I am down here on business. Murder is my business. And it is my business before it has happened as well as afterwards. At what time does Monsieur Langton come to take this wasps' nest?'

'At nine o'clock.'

Poirot waited no longer but rose and passed rapidly down the path and out through the gate that creaked. It was still some minutes off nine when Poirot approached the garden gate. His footsteps quickened ever so slightly. He was suddenly alarmed - and uncertain. He feared he knew not what.

And at that moment the garden opened and Claude Langton stepped quickly out into the road. He started when he saw Poirot.

'Oh-er-good evening.'

'Good evening, Monsieur Langton. You are early.'

Langton stared at him. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'You have taken the wasps' nest?'

'As a matter of fact, I didn't.'

'Oh,' said Poirot softly, 'So you did not take the wasps' nest. What did you do then?'

'Oh, just sat and yarned a bit with old Harrison. I really must hurry along now, Monsieur Poirot. I'd no idea you were remaining in this part of the world.'

'I had business here, you see.'

'Oh! Well, you'll find Harrison on the terrace. Sorry I can't stop.'

He hurried away. Poirot looked after him. A nervous young fellow, good-looking with a weak mouth!

'So I shall find Harrison on the terrace,' murmured Poirot.

'I wonder.' He went in through the garden and up the path. Harrison was sitting in a chair by the table. He sat motionless and did not even turn his head as Poirot came up to him.

'Alit Mon mid,' said Poirot. 'You are all right, eh?'

There was a long pause and then Harrison said in a queer, dazed voice, 'What did you say?'

'I said - are you all right?'

'All right? Yes, I'm all right. Why not?'

'You feel no ill effects? That is good.'

'Ill effects? From what?'

'Washing soda.'

Harrison roused himself suddenly. 'Washing soda? What do you mean?'

Poirot made an apologetic gesture. 'I infinitely regret the necessity, but I put some in your pocket.'

'You put some in my pocket? What on earth for?'

Harrison stared at him. Poirot spoke quietly and impersonally like a lecturer coming down to the level of small child.

'And so I can pick a man's pocket. I lay one hand on his shoulder and he feels nothing. But all the same I have managed to transfer what is in his pocket to my pocket and leave washing soda in its place.'

'You see,' continued Poirot dreamily, 'if a man wants to get at some poison quickly to put in a glass, unobserved, he positively must keep it in his right-hand coat pocket, there is nowhere else. I

knew it would be there.'

He dropped his band into his pocket and brought out a few white, lumpy crystals. 'Exceedingly dangerous,' he murmured, 'to carry it like that - loose.'

Calmly and without hurrying himself, he took from another pocket a wide-mouthed bottle. He slipped in the crystals, stepped up to the table and filled up the bottle with water. Then carefully corking it, he shook it until all the crystals were dissolved. Harrison watched him as though fascinated.

Satisfied with his solution, Poirot stepped across to the nest. He uncorked the bottle, turned his head aside, and poured the solution into the wasps' nest, then stood back a pace or two watching.

Some wasps that were returning alighted, quivered a little and then lay still. Other wasps crawled out of the hole only to die. Poirot watched for a minute or two and then nodded his head and came back to the veranda.

'A quick death,' he said. 'A very quick death.'

Harrison found his voice. 'How much do you know?'

Poirot looked straight ahead. 'As I told you, I saw Claude Langton's name in the book. What I did not tell you was that almost immediately afterwards, I happened to meet him. He told me he had been buying cyanide of potassium at your request - to take a wasps' nest. That struck me as a little odd, my friend, because I remember that at that dinner of which you spoke, you held forth on the superior merits of petrol and denounced the buying of cyanide as dangerous and unnecessary.'

'Go on.'

'I knew something else. I had seen Claude Langton and Molly Deane together when they thought no one saw them. I do not know what lovers' quarrel it was that originally parted them and drove her into your arms, but I realized their misunderstandings were over and that Miss Deane was drifting back to her love.'

'Go on.'

'I knew something more, my friend. I was in Harley Street the other day, and I saw you come out of a certain doctors house. I know the doctor and for what disease one consults him, and I read the expression on your face. I have seen it only once or twice in my lifetime, but it is not easily mistaken. It was face of a man under sentence of death, I am right, am I not?'

'Quite right. He gave me two months.'

'You did not see me, my friend, for you had other things to think about. I saw something else on your face. I saw hate there, my friend. You did not trouble to conceal it, because you thought there were none to observe.'

'Go on,' said Harrison.

'There is not much more to say. I came down here, saw Langton's name by accident in the poison book as I tell you, met him, and came here to you. I laid traps for you. You denied having asked Langton to get cyanide, or rather you expressed surprise at his having done so. You were taken aback at first at my appearance, but presently you saw how well it would fit in and you encouraged my suspicions. I knew from Langton himself that he was coming at half past eight. You told me nine o'clock, thinking I should come and find everything over. And so I knew everything.'

'Why did you come?' cried Harrison. 'If only you hadn't come!'

Poirot drew himself up. 'I told you,' he said, 'murder is my business'

'Murder? Suicide, you mean.'

'No,' Poirot's voice rang out sharply and clearly. 'I mean murder. Your death was to be quick and easy, but the death you planned for Langton was the worst death any man can die. He bought the poison; he comes to see you, and he is alone with you. You die suddenly, and the cyanide is found in your glass, and Claude Langton hangs. That was your plan.'

Again Harrison moaned.

'Why did you come? Why did you come?'

'I have told you, but there is another reason. I liked you. Listen, mon ami, you are a dying man;

4

you have lost the girl you loved, but there is one thing that you are not; you are not a murderer. Tell me now: are you glad or sorry that I came?’

There was a moment’s pause and Harrison drew himself up. There was a new dignity in his face—the look of a man who conquered his own baser self. He stretched out his hand across the table.

‘Thank goodness you came,’ he cried. ‘Oh, thank goodness you came.’