

(The HEAD WAITER approaches POIROT.)

HEAD WAITER. *Pardon, monsieur.* The concierge said to tell you there are no more first class tickets for the Express tonight. It is sold out.

POIROT. *Ah non!*

BOUC. *Attends.* It is my train and it is never sold out at this time of year. That is ridiculous.

HEAD WAITER. It must be a party, or a convention, perhaps.

BOUC. Well, you tell the concierge to find a berth for *Monsieur Poirot*. He is my personal friend.

HEAD WAITER. But *monsieur* -

BOUC. The number seven is always available. It is held in reserve. Now go tell him!

HEAD WAITER. Right away, *monsieur*.

(He exits.)

POIROT. *Merci.*

BOUC. It is nothing. A gesture. Now you see this menu? Throw it away. Tonight we shall sit on the train together, just like old times, and we will dine like kings.

POIROT. The food on the train, it is edible?

BOUC. *Monsieur Poirot!* You stab me in the heart! I am writhing on the ground at your feet! It is not a mere train that will carry you tonight, it is a legend. It runs like no other vehicle on the earth. The fittings are from Paris, the paneling Venice, the plates are from Rome, and the taps from New York. The best food, the best beds, the best pillows, the best feathers inside the pillows. It is poetry on wheels, and Lord Byron himself could not write it better. *Monsieur*, prepare yourself. In one hour, I will meet you on the platform of the Orient Express.

(Suddenly we hear the "Vorwärts Drängend" passage from Mahler's Symphony No. 1. The dining room disappears, the scene changes, and the ominous, powerful music takes us into the train station at Istanbul.)

Scene Four

(We are now in the Art Deco dining car of the first class coach of the Orient Express. The car gleams with elegance and romance. The fittings are gold, the cushions are made of red plush, and the bar in the dining car is fashioned of inlaid wood with an Art Deco depiction of an elegant woman lying across an ottoman. It is worthy, in its way, of the great mosaics in Ravenna. The train is breathtaking.)

(A number of PASSENGERS come through with their luggage.)

MRS. HUBBARD. Well, ain't this the bee's knees. Maybe I'll just move in for good.

MICHEL. This way, please, and watch your step.

MRS. HUBBARD. Holy cow. Is it snowing out there?

MICHEL. We get a lot of it this time of year, I'm afraid. Last year we got stuck in the snow for seven days.

MRS. HUBBARD. *Seven days!* Was there liquor on board?

MICHEL. There is always plenty.

MRS. HUBBARD. Well, now I can breathe again. Don't get me wrong, I also eat solid food as long as it's cooked in bourbon. As they say in the movies, lead on, MacDuff!

(They exit as the PRINCESS and GRETA enter.)

PRINCESS. Greta, you must keep up, keep up! We have to get settled in before the train starts moving!

GRETA. I have to confess to you, princess, that I am not liking trains since I am little girl. They are feeling very tight to me, like clothing that is made wrong size and is squeezing my bosom, may God forgive me.

PRINCESS. Oh, don't be silly. Trains are wonderful.

GRETA. I am also not liking the strangers and der clickety-clackety. But ve vill be sitting next to each other, ja? That part iss good. In Africa once I am on a train and

there is noise and crying and animals and oh! And I look up from my book and sitting there next to me, right on the seat, iss a very old goat. Haha. Is true. *Old goat!* He is like my companion. And on this trip that we are taking together right now, I think it will not be so different, *ja?*

(GRETA exits. The PRINCESS reacts and follows her off as POIROT enters, followed by RATCHETT, who is trying to catch up with him.)

RATCHETT. Mr. Poirot, slow up! Now I'd like to discuss that proposition I mentioned.

POIROT. *Non, non*, I'm afraid it is not a good time.

RATCHETT. Oh sure it is. Sit down. I'll be quick, I promise.

POIROT. I am afraid –

RATCHETT. Sit down.

POIROT. ... *Eh bien*. Proceed.

RATCHETT. Now I want you to take on a job for me.

POIROT. I take on few new cases.

RATCHETT. You'll take this one on, I guarantee it.

POIROT. And why is that?

RATCHETT. Because I'm talkin' big money here. Mr. Poirot, I have an enemy.

POIROT. I would guess that you have several enemies.

RATCHETT. Now what is *that* supposed to mean?

POIROT. You are successful, *n'est-ce pas?* Successful people have many enemies.

RATCHETT. Right. That's it exactly! You see I've been getting some threatening letters lately and I want an extra pair of eyes to do some snoopin' around. And that's what you do, am I right? Snoopin'? Of course, I can take care of myself.

(He flashes the gun under his coat.)

But I'll pay you five thousand dollars. How does that sound?

POIROT. *Non*.

Scene Six

(And now we see MICHEL at the end of the sleeping corridor. He is trying to work with the train's two-way radio, a clunky old-fashioned piece of machinery subject to problems.)

(First we hear the whining screech of the radio trying to find a signal - Owweeee, Owweeee! - then the crackle of the static when the signal is found.)

MICHEL. Orient Express to Belgrade Station. Orient Express to Belgrade Station. Emergency call number 867. Alert Code Blue. This is important. Do you read me? Hello? Are you there, Belgrade?

RADIO. *(With much static.)* We read you, Express. Pray continue.

MICHEL. We've just left Sofia and the snow is becoming heavier by the minute. I am getting concerned as we head into the mountains. Please prepare your rescue equipment in case of stoppage. Hello? Do you read me?

(Owweeeeeeeee!)

Belgrade?

(Owweeeeeeeee!)

Belgrade, can you hear me?!

(She pulls RATCHETT's eyelids up and examines his eyes.)

COUNTESS. He was clearly drugged, which is why -

POIROT & COUNTESS. He did not fight back.

POIROT. Puh, puh. What is this in his pocket? *Voilà.*

(He pulls a pocket watch from RATCHETT's pajama pocket.)

BOUC. It is a watch, and the face is smashed!

COUNTESS. It is stopped at 1:15.

BOUC. Haha! At last! We have something important, yes?!

It is the time of death, and the countess said between midnight and two! So there it is! It could not be clearer! 1:15 is the time of death, it is obvious.

POIROT. It is possible.

BOUC. What do you mean it is possible? What is wrong with it?

POIROT. I do not know yet what is wrong and what is right because *I am still investigating!* Here is a pipe cleaner, and here is a match, and here is another match of a different shape. There are dozens of clues in this room and it makes me suspicious!

BOUC. Look at this, on the floor.

COUNTESS. *(Picking it up.)* It is a lady's handkerchief with the letter H on it.

POIROT. Yet another clue. And who is H? Eh? As in *Hamlet* -

COUNTESS. "That is the question." There is Mrs. Hubbard, and I believe that her first name is Helen.

POIROT. And the princess?

BOUC. Her name is Natalya Dragomiroff. And there is Mary Debenham and Greta Ohlsson and James Arbuthnot and Hector MacQueen and I am Constantine Bouc, and such a thing like this has never happened in the history of the Wagon-Lit and it will ruin my company and *I want you to solve it immediately!*

PRINCESS. Yes, many times.

GRETA. I have not been to America but I must go some day to raise money for my babies in Africa.

POIROT. You are very religious.

GRETA. *Ja*, since I was little girl and Jaysus came to visit me in my garden. He spoke vith me, und told me I must verk hard to help little babies in Africa.

POIROT. And I'm sure you have done it beautifully, *mademoiselle*. Just one more question for both of you ladies. Are you aware of the identity of the man who was killed last night?

GRETA. His name was Ratchett.

(*Sob.*)

And I pray for his soul.

PRINCESS. No, my dear, his name was Bruno Cassetti, the countess told me, and what I pray is that his soul is damned and that he burns in hell for all eternity.

GRETA. Princess!

PRINCESS. He murdered a girl named Daisy Armstrong and her grandmother is my dearest friend. You would know her as the actress Linda Arden.

BOUC. She was very great.

PRINCESS. Not *was*, *monsieur*. She *is* very great. She is very much alive and remains the greatest actress of the American stage. And when her five year old granddaughter was murdered by this *monster* Cassetti, it took her years to recover, indeed she has not *yet* recovered!

POIROT. There were four who died?

PRINCESS. No, *five*, *monsieur*! *Five* people died! Little Daisy, and then her mother, who was pregnant, died in childbirth, and the baby died, too. And the little girl's father, Colonel Armstrong, could not live with what happened and ended his life! And a housemaid as well! Five human souls were extinguished. So please forgive me, Greta, if I take the view that there is no forgiveness

in a case such as this and that Mr. Cassetti should have been *flogged to death and his remains cut up and thrown onto a rubbish heap!!*

GRETA. (*Crying out.*) Ahh!

(*GRETA runs from the room. The PRINCESS runs after her and bumps into MACQUEEN, who is just entering.*)

PRINCESS. Greta, please! Greta!

MACQUEEN. I'm-I'm-I'm so sorry.

(*The PRINCESS is gone.*)

POIROT. *Monsieur* MacQueen, please sit down.

MACQUEEN. Of-of-of course. Are they all right?

POIROT. They will be fine, I assure you. Now tell me, please, what exactly were your duties as secretary to your employer?

MACQUEEN. Well I-I wrote his letters and did his errands and things.

POIROT. And you knew him only as Samuel Ratchett.

MACQUEEN. How else would I know him?

POIROT. His real name was Bruno Cassetti.

MACQUEEN. Holy God. Are you sure of that?

BOUC. Then you know about the Armstrong case?

MACQUEEN. You bet I do. My father was the district attorney for the state of New York and he brought the case against that...son of a bitch. I'm sorry, but you have no idea what he did to that family. And they were so kind to me!

POIROT. Can you tell us who was in the Armstrong household?

MACQUEEN. Mrs. Armstrong had a sister. She went to graduate school, but after the tragedy she moved to Europe and I think she got married. Her name was *Helena*. And also Mrs. Armstrong's mother would come to visit. She was an actress.

POIROT. Anyone else?