

LITTLE GIRL. Faster, faster! You're a train, you're a train!

THE NANNY. Daisy Armstrong!

(Tickling, laughter. They're in the room.)

Now straight into bed and no more nonsense.

LITTLE GIRL. Oh, all right.

(She gets into bed. The NANNY sits beside her.)

THE NANNY. Close your eyes. Night, night.

(The NANNY exits. We hear the door open and close. A beat of calm, and then we hear a deep, ominous sound, like the bass note of an organ. Light from the hallway spills into the room, and we see the shadow of a hulking man entering the room. Perhaps we see the LITTLE GIRL as well.)

LITTLE GIRL. Who are you? Go away. Nanny!

THE MAN. Come!

LITTLE GIRL. No! I won't! I won't come! Mama! Daddy!

AHHHHHHHHH!

(Her scream turns into the scream of a train whistle, as the train goes past us again with another roar. Vroooooom!)

(Steam from the train billows out across the stage. Out of this mist, HERCULE POIROT walks into view and addresses the audience.)

POIROT. Good evening. The story you are about to witness is one of romance and tragedy, primal murder, and the urge for revenge. What better way to spend a pleasant evening together?

From the beginning it was an odyssey of deception and trickery. One minute I could see the light, like the beam of a train engine hurtling past. The next minute, all was darkness and the thread that I pulled came away in my fingers and led to nothing.

I believe it was the greatest case of my career, but who am I to say? Modesty forbids it. It was certainly the most difficult I have ever encountered, and it made me question the very deepest values that I have held since I was a young man.

(Middle Eastern music is heard.)

It began in the exotic city of Istanbul. I planned to vacation there for several days following a trying case that was on my nerves, but things began changing the moment I stepped into the dining room of the world famous Tokatlian Hotel, where the enormity of the prices was matched only by the self-esteem of the waiters. My name, incidentally, is Hercule Poirot and I am a detective.

Scene Three

(We shift to the dining car where POIROT is waiting, as BOUC bursts suddenly into the room.)

BOUC. No one! There is no one, I tell you! Not a single person is on this train who should not be here!

POIROT. You are positive?

BOUC. *Entirely!* It has gone too far. *Our lives are in danger!*

POIROT. It is like a magic trick.

BOUC. It is unbelievable! I told Michel to go on searching and he may find *something*.

POIROT. I do not expect so.

BOUC. Then where did he go, this man who is dressed like a train conductor?

POIROT. I have no idea! That is the problem! Every time I find a piece of the puzzle, there is a suspect who has an alibi. Colonel Arbuthnot? He could have a grudge against Cassetti from a business dealing – but then MacQueen gives him an alibi from twelve to two, they are chatting on the observation deck! Aha, I say. What about Miss Ohlssohn? – she is strange, there is something not right about her – but she swears that she and Miss Debenham are up all night *chattering* in the room they are sharing. And so it goes with Mrs. Hubbard and the princess *and now Miss Debenham is shot and I am out of suspects!*

(ARBUTHNOT and MARY enter.)

ARBUTHNOT. Poirot! I have brought Miss Debenham as you requested, now what do you want with her?

POIROT. I merely wish to ask her some questions. Colonel, you may go.

ARBUTHNOT. I beg your pardon?

POIROT. You are not needed for this.

ARBUTHNOT. Well, I'm sorry to hear it, because I'm staying.

(Silence.)

MRS. HUBBARD. ... We're listening.

POIROT. The facts of the case could not be more simple. At five o'clock last evening this train left Istanbul on its way to Calais with stops in between. At approximately 12:30 last night, it ran into a snowdrift and was forced to stop. And at ten o'clock this morning, Mr. Cassetti was found dead with eight stabs wounds in his chest. These are the facts. *C'est tout. C'est fini!*

However...these facts permit two possible solutions to the crime. Under the first solution, one of Cassetti's enemies boarded the train at Sofia and brought with him a Wagon-Lit uniform which he later put on. Then, last night, using a pass key to enter Cassetti's compartment, he stabbed the man eight times and left through the door to Mrs. Hubbard's compartment.

MRS. HUBBARD. That's what I've been telling you!

MACQUEEN. Here, here.

BOUC. Well done, my friend. You have solved the case!

PRINCESS. Oh, I would not get too excited. He has not finished yet, have you, *monsieur*?

POIROT. No, princess, I have not finished. Let me propose a second solution because two unexpected events made the first solution impossible.

The first event was the snow which forced the train to stop: it meant that the killer now had a very big problem. *WHERE COULD HE GO?! He could not get off at the next station because there was no next station.* So unless the killer could *fly*, he must still be among us on this train. *He must be one of you!*

(Silence.)

MRS. HUBBARD. You said there were two unexpected events. We just can't wait to hear the other one.

POIROT. The second event was the discovery of the fragment of a letter that said, "Remember little Daisy Armstrong." And from this fragment we know that the

POIROT. But for me, the importance of the watch was not the *time* it told, but the place it was *found* – in Mr. Cassetti's pajama pocket, an unlikely place to keep a watch, don't you think? Do you sleep with your watch in your pajamas? Do you? Or you? Of course you do not, it would be uncomfortable, which led me to conclude that the watch was deliberately placed in the man's pocket so that I would think that the time of death was 1:15 – *a time when every single person on this train had an alibi!* But in fact Mr. Cassetti did not die until after *two o'clock when absolutely no one has an alibi!*

MRS. HUBBARD. You know I really don't think we need to be subjected to a performance like this in front of all the –

POIROT. SIT DOWN, Mrs. Hubbard. As for who actually killed Mr. Cassetti, the second real clue was found on the floor near the body – the handkerchief with the letter H in the fabric – and I now return it to its rightful owner, Princess Natalya Dragomiroff.

PRINCESS. But my name begins with an N, *monsieur*.

POIROT. Except that in Russian – in the Cyrillic alphabet, the letter N is written like the letter H in English.

(He presents it to her.)

PRINCESS. Thank you. I must have dropped it.

(She takes it.)

POIROT. And that leaves the most puzzling occurrence of the entire case.

MARY'S VOICE. *(Flashback.)* EEEEEEEEE!!

(Bang!)

POIROT. As some of you will recall, I was speaking with Mrs. Hubbard and the colonel, when suddenly there was a scream and a gunshot –

MARY'S VOICE. *(Flashback.)* EEEEEEEEE!!

(Bang!)

GRETA. (*Flashback. She sobs.*) I am a missionary and I verk in Africa with little babies.

POIROT. As for Michel, it struck me from the beginning that a scheme like this could not be accomplished without someone on the *inside* – let's say a conductor who could come and go as he pleased. And then I recalled that the maid Suzanne who took her own life was from Paris, like Michel, and I wondered if this unfortunate girl was not Michel's daughter who went to work in America.

(*MICHEL covers his eyes and weeps.*)

And that leaves one last passenger on this train who is not accounted for – it leaves Mrs. Hubbard, who has certainly turned in the finest performance of the evening. It is not hard to see that she is an actress by profession, the grandmother of little Daisy Armstrong, the great Linda Arden, who has dazzled so many audiences during her distinguished career.

MRS. HUBBARD. (*Flashback.*)

COME ON AND HEAR, COME ON AND HEAR ALEXANDER'S
RAGTIME BAND

POIROT. Mrs. Hubbard, I salute you and assume that you masterminded the scheme from the beginning.

BOUC. (*To MRS. HUBBARD.*) Is this true?

MRS. HUBBARD. (*Shrugs.*) I always wanted to be a director.

POIROT. And so, in the end, the murder was committed. There were eight stab wounds in the body. Some strong, some weak, some left-handed, some right-handed. And there were eight killers. You planned it together, you killed together, and in the name of justice you played God together.

(*We see the murder now.*)

(*In a blue light of memory, each of the murderers plunges the knife into the body in front of him. Meanwhile we hear screech after screech of terror in the score.*)

PRINCESS. For that little girl.

(They look around. He's gone.)

(Tableau.)

*(Then a light comes up on POIROT by himself.
He speaks to the audience.)*

POIROT. And so the case was over at last, and the passengers went their separate ways. I have learned since that time that Greta Ohlsson did in fact get to Africa – for the first time, as it turned out – and she did work for the children and saved many lives. The colonel and Miss Debenham were married in a quiet ceremony in St. James Square, *Monsieur* MacQueen returned to his business, Michel to his trains, and the princess left us for the great beyond.

The countess, alas, went back to her husband, *Monsieur* Bouc and I have remained good friends, and Mrs. Hubbard – the great Linda Arden – has recently returned to the stage in a musical entitled *No, No, Nannette*, in which, I am told, she brings the audiences to their feet.

Meanwhile, I beg you to believe me when I tell you that I wish all of them well, and I hope that they prosper till the end of their days. But at night, in the darkness, when I am all alone, I ask myself again and again if this was justice; if I did the right thing. And on many such nights, it is not until morning that I can close my eyes.

(The lights fade.)

(And then the lights are out.)

End of Play