

The Adventure of the Cheap Flat

Agatha Christie

So far, in the cases which I have recorded, Poirot's investigations have started from the central fact, whether murder or robbery, and have proceeded from thence by a process of logical deduction to the final triumphant unravelling. In the events I am now about to chronicle, a remarkable chain of circumstances led from the apparently trivial incidents which first attracted Poirot's attention to the sinister happenings which completed a most unusual case.

I had been spending the evening with an old friend of mine, Gerald Parker. There had been, perhaps, about half a dozen people there besides my host and myself, and the talk fell, as it was bound to do sooner or later wherever Parker found himself, on the subject of house-hunting in London. Houses and flats were Parker's special hobby. Since the end of the War, he had occupied at least half a dozen different flats and maisonnettes. No sooner was he settled anywhere than he would light unexpectedly upon a new find, and would forthwith depart bag and baggage. His moves were nearly always accomplished at a slight pecuniary gain, for he had a shrewd business head, but it was sheer love of the sport that actuated him, and not a desire to make money at it. We listened to Parker for some time with the respect of the novice for the expert. Then it was our turn, and a perfect babel of tongues was let loose. Finally the floor was left to Mrs. Robinson, a charming little bride who was there with her husband. I had never met them before, as Robinson was only a recent acquaintance of Parker's.

"Talking of flats," she said, "have you heard of our piece of luck, Mr. Parker? We've got a flat—at last! In Montagu Mansions."

"Well," said Parker, "I've always said there are plenty of flats—at a price!"

"Yes, but this isn't at a price. It's dirt cheap. Eighty pounds a year!"

"But—but Montagu Mansions is just off Knightsbridge, isn't it? Big handsome building. Or are you talking of a poor relation of the same name stuck in the slums somewhere?"

"No, it's the Knightsbridge one. That's what makes it so wonderful."

"Wonderful is the word! It's a blinking miracle. But there must be a catch somewhere. Big premium, I suppose?"

"No premium!"

"No prem—oh, hold my head, somebody!" groaned Parker.

“But we’ve got to buy the furniture,” continued Mrs. Robinson.

“Ah!” Parker brisked up. “I knew there was a catch!”

“For fifty pounds. And it’s beautifully furnished!”

“I give it up,” said Parker. “The present occupants must be lunatics with a taste for philanthropy.”

Mrs. Robinson was looking a little troubled. A little pucker appeared between her dainty brows.

“It is queer, isn’t it? You don’t think that—that—the place is *haunted*?”

“Never heard of a haunted flat,” declared Parker decisively.

“N-o.” Mrs. Robinson appeared far from convinced. “But there were several things about it all that struck me as—well, queer.”

“For instance——” I suggested.

“Ah,” said Parker, “our criminal expert’s attention is aroused! Unburden yourself to him, Mrs. Robinson. Hastings is a great unraveller of mysteries.”

I laughed, embarrassed but not wholly displeased with the rôle thrust upon me.

“Oh, not really queer, Captain Hastings, but when we went to the agents, Stosser and Paul—we hadn’t tried them before because they only have the expensive Mayfair flats, but we thought at any rate it would do no harm—everything they offered us was four and five hundred a year, or else huge premiums, and then, just as we were going, they mentioned that they had a flat at eighty, but that they doubted if it would be any good our going there, because it had been on their books some time and they had sent so many people to see it that it was almost sure to be taken—‘snapped up’ as the clerk put it—only people were so tiresome in not letting them know, and then they went on sending, and people get annoyed at being sent to a place that had, perhaps, been let some time.”

Mrs. Robinson paused for some much needed breath, and then continued: “We thanked him, and said that we quite understood it would probably be no good, but that we should like an order all the same—just in case. And we went there straight away in a taxi, for, after all, you never know. No. 4 was on the second floor, and just as we were waiting for the lift, Elsie Ferguson—she’s a friend of mine, Captain Hastings, and they are looking for a flat too

—came hurrying down the stairs. ‘Ahead of you for once, my dear,’ she said. ‘But it’s no good. It’s already let.’ That seemed to finish it, but—well, as John said, the place was very cheap, we could afford to give more, and perhaps if we offered a premium.——A horrid thing to do, of course, and I feel quite ashamed of telling you, but you know what flat-hunting is.”

I assured her that I was well aware that in the struggle for house-room the baser side of human nature frequently triumphed over the higher, and that the well-known rule of dog eat dog always applied.

“So we went up and, would you believe it, the flat wasn’t let at all. We were shown over it by the maid, and then we saw the mistress, and the thing was settled then and there. Immediate possession and fifty pounds for the furniture. We signed the agreement next day, and we are to move in to-morrow!” Mrs. Robinson paused triumphantly.

“And what about Mrs. Ferguson?” asked Parker. “Let’s have your deductions, Hastings.”

“‘Obvious, my dear Watson,’” I quoted lightly. “She went to the wrong flat.”

“Oh, Captain Hastings, how clever of you!” cried Mrs. Robinson admiringly.

I rather wished Poirot had been there. Sometimes I have the feeling that he rather underestimates my capabilities.

The whole thing was rather amusing, and I propounded the thing as a mock problem to Poirot on the following morning. He seemed interested, and questioned me rather narrowly as to the rents of flats in various localities.

“A curious story,” he said thoughtfully. “Excuse me, Hastings, I must take a short stroll.”

When he returned, about an hour later, his eyes were gleaming with a peculiar excitement. He laid his stick on the table, and brushed the nap of his hat with his usual tender care before he spoke.

“It is as well, *mon ami*, that we have no affairs of moment on hand. We can devote ourselves wholly to the present investigation.”

“What investigation are you talking about?”

“The remarkable cheapness of your friend’s, Mrs. Robinson’s, new flat.”

“Poirot, you are not serious!”

“I am most serious. Figure to yourself, my friend, that the real rent of those flats is £350. I have just ascertained that from the landlord’s agents. And yet this particular flat is being sublet at eighty pounds! Why?”

“There must be something wrong with it. Perhaps it is haunted, as Mrs. Robinson suggested.”

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

“Then again how curious it is that her friend tells her the flat is let, and, when she goes up, behold, it is not so at all!”

“But surely you agree with me that the other woman must have gone to the wrong flat. That is the only possible solution.”

“You may or may not be right on that point, Hastings. The fact still remains that numerous other applicants were sent to see it, and yet, in spite of its remarkable cheapness, it was still in the market when Mrs. Robinson arrived.”

“That shows that there must be something wrong about it.”

“Mrs. Robinson did not seem to notice anything amiss. Very curious, is it not? Did she impress you as being a truthful woman, Hastings?”

“She was a delightful creature!”

“*Évidemment!* since she renders you incapable of replying to my question. Describe her to me, then.”

“Well, she’s tall and fair; her hair’s really a beautiful shade of auburn——”

“Always you have had a penchant for auburn hair!” murmured Poirot. “But continue.”

“Blue eyes and a very nice complexion and—well, that’s all, I think,” I concluded lamely.

“And her husband?”

“Oh, he’s quite a nice fellow—nothing startling.”

“Dark or fair?”

“I don’t know—betwixt and between, and just an ordinary sort of face.”

Poirot nodded.

“Yes, there are hundreds of these average men—and, anyway, you bring more sympathy and appreciation to your description of women. Do you know anything about these people? Does Parker know them well.”

“They are just recent acquaintances, I believe. But surely, Poirot, you don’t think for an instant——”

Poirot raised his hand.

“*Tout doucement, mon ami*. Have I said that I think anything? All I say is—it is a curious story. And there is nothing to throw light upon it; except perhaps the lady’s name, eh, Hastings?”

“Her name is Stella,” I said stiffly, “but I don’t see——”

Poirot interrupted me with a tremendous chuckle. Something seemed to be amusing him vastly.

“And Stella means a star, does it not? Famous!”

“What on earth——”

“And stars give light! *Voilà!* Calm yourself, Hastings. Do not put on that air of injured dignity. Come, we will go to Montagu Mansions and make a few inquiries.”

I accompanied him, nothing loath. The Mansions were a handsome block of buildings in excellent repair. A uniformed porter was sunning himself on the threshold, and it was to him that Poirot addressed himself:

“Pardon, but could you tell me if a Mr. and Mrs. Robinson reside here?”

The porter was a man of few words and apparently of a sour or suspicious disposition. He hardly looked at us and grunted out:

“No. 4. Second floor.”

“I thank you. Can you tell me how long they have been here?”

“Six months.”

I started forward in amazement, conscious as I did so of Poirot’s malicious grin.

“Impossible,” I cried. “You must be making a mistake.”

“Six months.”

“Are you sure? The lady I mean is tall and fair with reddish gold hair and—”

“That’s ’er,” said the porter. “Come in the Michaelmas quarter, they did. Just six months ago.”

He appeared to lose interest in us and retreated slowly up the hall. I followed Poirot outside.

“*Eh bien*, Hastings?” my friend demanded slyly. “Are you so sure now that delightful women always speak the truth?”

I did not reply.

Poirot had steered his way into Brompton Road before I asked him what he was going to do and where we were going.

“To the house agents, Hastings. I have a great desire to have a flat in Montagu Mansions. If I am not mistaken, several interesting things will take place there before long.”

We were fortunate in our quest. No. 8, on the fourth floor, was to be let furnished at ten guineas a week. Poirot promptly took it for a month. Outside in the street again, he silenced my protests:

“But I make money nowadays! Why should I not indulge a whim? By the way, Hastings, have you a revolver?”

“Yes—somewhere,” I answered, slightly thrilled. “Do you think—”

“That you will need it? It is quite possible. The idea pleases you, I see. Always the spectacular and romantic appeals to you.”

The following day saw us installed in our temporary home. The flat was pleasantly

furnished. It occupied the same position in the building as that of the Robinsons, but was two floors higher.

The day after our installation was a Sunday. In the afternoon, Poirot left the front door ajar, and summoned me hastily as a bang reverberated from somewhere below.

“Look over the banisters. Are those your friends. Do not let them see you.”

I craned my neck over the staircase.

“That’s them,” I declared in an ungrammatical whisper.

“Good. Wait awhile.”

About half an hour later, a young woman emerged in brilliant and varied clothing. With a sigh of satisfaction, Poirot tiptoed back into the flat.

“*C’est ça*. After the master and mistress, the maid. The flat should now be empty.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked uneasily.

Poirot had trotted briskly into the scullery and was hauling at the rope of the coal-lift.

“We are about to descend after the method of the dustbins,” he explained cheerfully. “No one will observe us. The Sunday concert, the Sunday ‘afternoon out,’ and finally the Sunday nap after the Sunday dinner of England—*le rosbif*—all these will distract attention from the doings of Hercule Poirot. Come, my friend.”

He stepped into the rough wooden contrivance and I followed him gingerly.

“Are we going to break into the flat?” I asked dubiously.

Poirot’s answer was not too reassuring:

“Not precisely to-day,” he replied.

Pulling on the rope, we descended slowly till we reached the second floor. Poirot uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as he perceived that the wooden door into the scullery was open.

“You observe? Never do they bolt these doors in the daytime. And yet anyone could mount or descend as we have done. At night yes—though not always then—and it is against that

that we are going to make provision.”

He had drawn some tools from his pocket as he spoke, and at once set deftly to work, his object being to arrange the bolt so that it could be pulled back from the lift. The operation only occupied about three minutes. Then Poirot returned the tools to his pocket, and we reascended once more to our own domain.

On Monday Poirot was out all day, but when he returned in the evening he flung himself into his chair with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Hastings, shall I recount to you a little history? A story after your own heart and which will remind you of your favourite cinema?”

“Go ahead,” I laughed. “I presume that it is a true story, not one of your efforts of fancy.”

“It is true enough. Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard will vouch for its accuracy, since it was through his kind offices that it came to my ears. Listen, Hastings. A little over six months ago some important Naval plans were stolen from an American Government department. They showed the position of some of the most important Harbour defences, and would be worth a considerable sum to any foreign Government—that of Japan, for example. Suspicion fell upon a young man named Luigi Valdarno, an Italian by birth, who was employed in a minor capacity in the Department and who was missing at the same time as the papers. Whether Luigi Valdarno was the thief or not, he was found two days later on the East Side in New York, shot dead. The papers were not on him. Now for some time past Luigi Valdarno had been going about with a Miss Elsa Hardt, a young concert singer who had recently appeared and who lived with a brother in an apartment in Washington. Nothing was known of the antecedents of Miss Elsa Hardt, and she disappeared suddenly about the time of Valdarno’s death. There are reasons for believing that she was in reality an accomplished international spy who has done much nefarious work under various *aliases*. The American Secret Service, whilst doing their best to trace her, also kept an eye upon certain insignificant Japanese gentlemen living in Washington. They felt pretty certain that, when Elsa Hardt had covered her tracks sufficiently, she would approach the gentlemen in question. One of them left suddenly for England a fortnight ago. On the face of it, therefore, it would seem that Elsa Hardt is in England.” Poirot paused, and then added softly: “The official description of Elsa Hardt is: Height 5 ft. 7, eyes blue, hair auburn, fair complexion, nose straight, no special distinguishing marks.”

“Mrs. Robinson!” I gasped.

“Well, there is a chance of it, anyhow,” amended Poirot. “Also, I learn that a swarthy man, a

foreigner of some kind, was inquiring about the occupants of No. 4 only this morning. Therefore, *mon ami*, I fear that you must forswear your beauty sleep to-night, and join me in my all-night vigil in the flat below—armed with that excellent revolver of yours, *bien entendu!*”

“Rather,” I cried with enthusiasm. “When shall we start?”

“The hour of midnight is both solemn and suitable, I fancy. Nothing is likely to occur before then.”

At twelve o’clock precisely, we crept cautiously into the coal-lift and lowered ourselves to the second floor. Under Poirot’s manipulation, the wooden door quickly swung inwards, and we climbed into the flat. From the scullery we passed into the kitchen where we established ourselves comfortably in two chairs with the door into the hall ajar.

“Now we have but to wait,” said Poirot contentedly, closing his eyes.

To me, the waiting appeared endless. I was terrified of going to sleep. Just when it seemed to me that I had been there about eight hours—and had, as I found out afterwards, in reality been exactly one hour and twenty minutes—a faint scratching sound came to my ears. Poirot’s hand touched mine. I rose, and together we moved carefully in the direction of the hall. The noise came from there. Poirot placed his lips to my ear.

“Outside the front door. They are cutting out the lock. When I give the word, not before, fall upon him from behind and hold him fast. Be careful, he will have a knife.”

Presently there was a rending sound, and a little circle of light appeared through the door. It was extinguished immediately and then the door was slowly opened. Poirot and I flattened ourselves against the wall. I heard a man’s breathing as he passed us. Then he flashed on his torch, and as he did so, Poirot hissed in my ear:

“*Allez.*”

We sprang together, Poirot with a quick movement enveloped the intruder’s head with a light woollen scarf whilst I pinioned his arms. The whole affair was quick and noiseless. I twisted a dagger from his hand, and as Poirot brought down the scarf from his eyes, whilst keeping it wound tightly round his mouth, I jerked up my revolver where he could see it and understand that resistance was useless. As he ceased to struggle Poirot put his mouth close to his ear and began to whisper rapidly. After a minute the man nodded. Then enjoining silence with a movement of the hand, Poirot led the way out of the flat and down the stairs. Our captive followed, and I brought up the rear with the revolver. When we were out in the street, Poirot turned to me.

“There is a taxi waiting just round the corner. Give me the revolver. We shall not need it now.”

“But if this fellow tries to escape?”

Poirot smiled.

“He will not.”

I returned in a minute with the waiting taxi. The scarf had been unwound from the stranger’s face, and I gave a start of surprise.

“He’s not a Jap,” I ejaculated in a whisper to Poirot.

“Observation was always your strong point, Hastings! Nothing escapes you. No, the man is not a Jap. He is an Italian.”

We got into the taxi, and Poirot gave the driver an address in St. John’s Wood. I was by now completely fogged. I did not like to ask Poirot where we were going in front of our captive, and strove in vain to obtain some light upon the proceedings.

We alighted at the door of a small house standing back from the road. A returning wayfarer, slightly drunk, was lurching along the pavement and almost collided with Poirot, who said something sharply to him which I did not catch. All three of us went up the steps of the house. Poirot rang the bell and motioned us to stand a little aside. There was no answer and he rang again and then seized the knocker which he plied for some minutes vigorously.

A light appeared suddenly above the fanlight, and the door was opened cautiously a little way.

“What the devil do you want?” a man’s voice demanded harshly.

“I want the doctor. My wife is taken ill.”

“There’s no doctor here.”

The man prepared to shut the door, but Poirot thrust his foot in adroitly. He became suddenly a perfect caricature of an infuriated Frenchman.

“What you say, there is no doctor? I will have the law of you. You must come! I will stay here and ring and knock all night.”

“My dear sir——” The door was opened again, the man, clad in a dressing-gown and slippers, stepped forward to pacify Poirot with an uneasy glance round.

“I will call the police.”

Poirot prepared to descend the steps.

“No, don’t do that for Heaven’s sake!” The man dashed after him.

With a neat push Poirot sent him staggering down the steps. In another minute all three of us were inside the door and it was pushed to and bolted.

“Quick—in here.” Poirot led the way into the nearest room switching on the light as he did so. “And you—behind the curtain.”

“Si, signor,” said the Italian and slid rapidly behind the full folds of rose-coloured velvet which draped the embrasure of the window.

Not a minute too soon. Just as he disappeared from view a woman rushed into the room. She was tall with reddish hair and held a scarlet kimono round her slender form.

“Where is my husband?” she cried, with a quick frightened glance. “Who are you?”

Poirot stepped forward with a bow.

“It is to be hoped your husband will not suffer from a chill. I observed that he had slippers on his feet, and that his dressing-gown was a warm one.”

“Who are you? What are you doing in my house?”

“It is true that none of us have the pleasure of your acquaintance, madame. It is especially to be regretted as one of our number has come specially from New York in order to meet you.”

The curtains parted and the Italian stepped out. To my horror I observed that he was brandishing my revolver, which Poirot must doubtless have put down through inadvertence in the cab.

The woman gave a piercing scream and turned to fly, but Poirot was standing in front of the closed door.

“Let me by,” she shrieked. “He will murder me.”

“Who was it dat croaked Luigi Valdarno?” asked the Italian hoarsely, brandishing the weapon, and sweeping each one of us with it. We dared not move.

“My God, Poirot, this is awful. What shall we do?” I cried.

“You will oblige me by refraining from talking so much, Hastings. I can assure you that our friend will not shoot until I give the word.”

“Youse sure o’ dat, eh?” said the Italian, leering unpleasantly.

It was more than I was, but the woman turned to Poirot like a flash.

“What is it you want?”

Poirot bowed.

“I do not think it is necessary to insult Miss Elsa Hardt’s intelligence by telling her.”

With a swift movement, the woman snatched up a big black velvet cat which served as a cover for the telephone.

“They are stitched in the lining of that.”

“Clever,” murmured Poirot appreciatively. He stood aside from the door. “Good evening, madame. I will detain your friend from New York whilst you make your getaway.”

“Whatta fool!” roared the big Italian, and raising the revolver he fired point-blank at the woman’s retreating figure just as I flung myself upon him.

But the weapon merely clicked harmlessly and Poirot’s voice rose in mild reproof.

“Never will you trust your old friend, Hastings. I do not care for my friends to carry loaded pistols about with them and never would I permit a mere acquaintance to do so. No, no, *mon ami*.” This to the Italian who swearing hoarsely. Poirot continued to address him in a tone of mild reproof: “See now, what I have done for you. I have saved you from being hanged. And do not think that our beautiful lady will escape. No, no, the house is watched, back and front. Straight into the arms of the police they will go. Is not that a beautiful and consoling thought? Yes, you may leave the room now. But be careful—be very careful. I—Ah, he is gone! And my friend Hastings looks at me with eyes of reproach. But it was all so simple! It was clear, from the first, that out of several hundred, probably, applicants for No.

4, Montagu Mansions only the Robinsons were considered suitable. Why? What was there that singled them out from the rest—at practically a glance. Their appearance? Possibly, but it was not so unusual. Their name, then!”

“But there’s nothing unusual about the name of Robinson,” I cried. “It’s quite a common name.”

“Ah! *Sapristi*, but exactly! That was the point. Elsa Hardt and her husband, or brother or whatever he really is, come from New York, and take a flat in the name of Mr. and Mrs. Robinson. Suddenly they learn that one of these secret societies, the Mafia, or the Camorra, to which doubtless Luigi Valdarno belonged, is on their track. What do they do? They hit on a scheme of transparent simplicity. Evidently they knew that their pursuers were not personally acquainted with either of them. What then can be simpler? They offer the flat at an absurdly low rental. Of the thousands of young couples in London looking for flats, there cannot fail to be several Robinsons. It is only a matter of waiting. If you will look at the name of Robinson in the telephone directory, you will realize that a fair-haired Mrs. Robinson was pretty sure to come along sooner or later. Then what will happen? The avenger arrives. He knows the name, he knows the address. He strikes! All is over, vengeance is satisfied, and Miss Elsa Hardt has escaped by the skin of her teeth once more. By the way, Hastings, you must present me to the real Mrs. Robinson—that delightful and truthful creature! What will they think when they find their flat has been broken into! We must hurry back. Ah, that sounds like Japp and his friends arriving.”

A mighty tattoo sounded on the knocker.

“How did you know this address?” I asked as I followed Poirot out into the hall. “Oh, of course, you had the first Mrs. Robinson followed when she left the other flat.”

“*A la bonne heure*, Hastings. You use your grey cells at last. Now for a little surprise for Japp.”

Softly unbolting the door, he stuck the cat’s head round the edge and ejaculated a piercing “Miaow.”

The Scotland Yard inspector, who was standing outside with another man, jumped in spite of himself.

“Oh, it’s only Monsieur Poirot at one of his little jokes!” he exclaimed, as Poirot’s head followed that of the cat. “Let us in, moosior.”

“You have our friends safe and sound?”

“Yes, we’ve got the birds all right. But they hadn’t got the goods with them.”

“I see. So you come to search. Well, I am about to depart with Hastings, but I should like to give you a little lecture upon the history and habits of the domestic cat.”

“For the Lord’s sake, have you gone completely balmy?”

“The cat,” declaimed Poirot, “was worshipped by the ancient Egyptians. It is still regarded as a symbol of good luck if a black cat crosses your path. This cat crossed your path to-night, Japp. To speak of the interior of any animal or any person is not, I know, considered polite in England. But the interior of this cat is perfectly delicate. I refer to the lining.”

With a sudden grunt, the second man seized the cat from Poirot’s hand.

“Oh, I forgot to introduce you,” said Japp. “Mr. Poirot, this is Mr. Burt of the United States Secret Service.”

The American’s trained fingers had felt what he was looking for. He held out his hand, and for a moment speech failed him. Then he rose to the occasion.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Mr. Burt.

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