# Cards on the Table

## Chapter 1

MR. SHAITANA

“My dear Monsieur Poirot!”

It was a soft purring voice - a voice used deliberately as an instrument - nothing impulsive or unpremeditated about it. Hercule Poirot swung round.

He bowed. He shook hands ceremoniously.

There was something in his eye that was unusual. One would have said that this chance encounter awakened in him an emotion that he seldom had occasion to feel.

“My dear Mr. Shaitana,” he said.

They both paused. They were like duelists en garde.

Around them a well-dressed languid London crowd eddied mildly. Voices drawled or murmured.

“Darling - exquisite!”

“Simply divine, aren't they, my dear?”

It was the Exhibition of Snuffboxes at Wessex House. Admission one guinea in aid of the London hospitals.

“My dear man,” said Mr. Shaitana, “how nice to see you! Not hanging or guillotining much just at present? Slack season in the criminal world? Or is there to be a robbery here this afternoon? That would be too delicious.”

“Alas, monsieur,” said Poirot, “I am here in a purely private capacity.”

Mr. Shaitana was diverted for a moment by a Lovely Young Thing with tight poodle curls up one side of her head and three cornucopias in black straw on the other. He said, “My dear - why didn't you come to my party? It really was a marvelous party! Quite a lot of people actually spoke to me! One woman even said 'How do you do' and 'Good-by' and 'Thank you so much' - but of course she came from a Garden City, poor dear!”

While the Lovely Young Thing made a suitable reply, Poirot allowed himself a good study of the hirsute adornment on Mr. Shaitana's upper lip.

A fine mustache - a very fine mustache - the only mustache in London, perhaps, that could compete with that of Monsieur Hercule Poirot.

“But it is not so luxuriant,” he murmured to himself. “No, decidedly it is inferior in every respect. Tout de mкme, it catches the eye.”

The whole of Mr. Shaitana's person caught the eye - it was designed to do so. He deliberately attempted a Mephistophelean effect. He was tall and thin; his face was long and melancholy; his eyebrows were heavily accented and jet black; he wore a mustache with stiff waxed ends and a tiny black imperial. His clothes were works of art - of exquisite cut - but with a suggestion of the bizarre.

Every healthy Englishman who saw him longed earnestly and fervently to kick him! They said, with a singular lack of originality, “There's that damned Shaitana!” Their wives, daughters, sisters, aunts, mothers, and even grandmothers said, varying the idiom according to their generation, words to this effect - “I know, my dear. Of course he is too terrible. But so rich! And such marvelous parties! And he's always got something amusing and spiteful to tell you about people.”

Whether Mr. Shaitana was an Argentine or a Portuguese or a Greek, or some other nationality, nobody knew.

But three facts were quite certain.

He existed richly and beautifully in a super flat in Park Lane. He gave wonderful parties - large parties, small parties, macabre parties, respectable parties, and definitely “queer” parties. He was a man of whom nearly everybody was a little afraid.

Why this last was so can hardly be stated in definite words. There was a feeling, perhaps, that he knew a little too much about everybody. And there was a feeling, too, that his sense of humor was a curious one.

People nearly always felt that it would be better not to risk offending Mr, Shaitana.

It was his humor this afternoon to bait that ridiculous looking little man, Hercule Poirot.

“So even a policeman needs recreation?” he said. “You study the arts in your old age, Monsieur Poirot.”

Poirot smiled good-humoredly.

“I see,” he said, “that you yourself have lent three snuff-boxes to the exhibition.”

Mr. Shaitana waved a deprecating hand. “One picks up trifles here and there. You must come to my flat one day. I have some interesting pieces. I do not confine myself to any particular period or class of object.”

“Your tastes are catholic,” said Poirot, smiling.

“As you say.”

Suddenly Mr. Shaitana's eyes danced, the corners of his lips curled up, his eyebrows assumed a fantastic tilt.

“I could even show you objects in your own line, Monsieur Poirot!”

“You have then a private 'Black Museum'?”

“Bah!” Mr. Shaitana snapped disdainful fingers. “The cup used by the Brighton murderer, the jimmy of a celebrated burglar - absurd childishness! I should never burden myself with rubbish like that. I collect only the best objects of their kind.”

“And what do you consider the best objects, artistically speaking, in crime?” inquired Poirot.

Mr. Shaitana leaned forward and laid two fingers on Poirot's shoulder. He hissed his words dramatically.

“The human beings who commit them, Monsieur Poirot.”

Poirot's eyebrows rose a trifle.

“Aha, I have startled you,” said Mr. Shaitana. “My dear, dear man, you and I look on these things as from poles apart! For you crime is a matter of routine - a murder, an investigation, a due, and ultimately, for you are undoubtedly an able fellow, a conviction. Such banalities would not interest me! I am not interested in poor specimens of any kind. And the caught murderer is necessarily one of the failures. He is second rate. No, I look on the matter from the artistic point of view. I collect only the best!”

“The best being -” asked Poirot.

“My dear fellow - the ones who have got away with it! The successes! The criminals who lead an agreeable life which no breath of suspicion has ever touched. Admit that is an amusing hobby.”

“It was another word I was thinking of - not amusing.”

“An idea!” cried Shaitana, paying no attention to Poirot. “A little dinner! A dinner to meet my exhibits! Really that is a most amusing thought. I cannot think why it has never occurred to me before. Yes - yes, I see it all - I see it exactly. You must give me a little time - not next week - let us say the week after next. You are free? What day shall we say?”

“Any day of the week after next would suit me,” said Poirot with a bow.

“Good; then let us say Friday. Friday the eighteenth, that will be. I will write it down at once in my little book. Really, the idea pleases me enormously.”

“I am not quite sure if it pleases me,” said Poirot slowly. “I do not mean that I am insensible to the kindness of your invitation - no - not that -”

Shaitana interrupted him. “But it shocks your bourgeois sensibilities? My dear fellow, you must free yourself from the limitations of the policeman mentality.”

Poirot said slowly, “It is true that I have a thoroughly bourgeois attitude to murder.”

“But, my dear, why? A stupid bungled butchering business - yes, I agree with you. But murder can be an art! A murderer can be an artist.”

“Oh, I admit it.”

“Well then?” Mr. Shaitana asked.

“But he is still a murderer'”

“Surely, my dear Monsieur Poirot, to do a thing supremely well is a justification! You want, very unimaginatively, to take every murderer, handcuff him, shut him up, and eventually break his neck for him in the early hours of the morning. In my opinion a really successful murderer should be granted a pension out of the public funds and asked out to dinner!”

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

“I am not as insensitive to art in crime as you think. I can admire the perfect murderer; I can also admire a tiger - that splended tawny striped beast. But I will admire him from outside his cage. I will not go inside. That is to say, not unless it is my duty to do so. For you see, Mr. Shaitana, the tiger might spring.”

Mr. Shaitana laughed. “I see. And the murderer?”

“Might murder,” said Poirot gravely.

“My dear fellow - what an alarmist you are! Then you will not come to meet my collection of - tigers?”

“On the contrary, I shall be enchanted.”

“How brave!”

“You do not quite understand me, Mr. Shaitana. My words were in the nature of a warning. You asked me just now to admit that your idea of a collection of murderers was amusing. I said I could think of another word other than amusing. That word was dangerous. I fancy, Mr. Shaitana, that your hobby might be a dangerous one!”

Mr. Shaitana laughed, a very Mephistophelean laugh. He said, “I may expect you then, on the eighteenth?”

Poirot gave a little bow. “You may expect me on the eighteenth. Mille remerciments.”

“I shall arrange a little party,” replied Shaitana. “Do not forget. Eight o'clock.”

He moved away. Poirot stood a minute or two looking after him.

He shook his head slowly and thoughtfully.

# Cards on the Table

## Chapter 2

DINNER AT MR. SHAITANA'S

The door of Mr. Shaitana's flat opened noiselessly. A gray-haired butler drew it back to let Poirot enter. He closed it equally noiselessly and deftly relieved the guest of his overcoat and hat.

He murmured in a low expressionless voice, “What name shall I say?”

“Monsieur Hercule Poirot.”

There was a little hum of talk that eddied out into the hall as the butler opened a door and announced, “Monsieur Hercule Poirot.”

Sherry glass in hand, Shaitana came forward to meet him. He was as usual immaculately dressed. The Mephistophelean suggestion was heightened tonight, the eyebrows seemed accentuated in their mocking twist.

“Let me introduce you - do you know Mrs. Oliver?”

The showman in him enjoyed the little start of surprise that Poirot gave.

Mrs. Ariadne Oliver was extremely well known as one of the foremost writers of detective and other sensational stories. She wrote chatty, if not particularly grammatical, articles on “The Tendency of the Criminal,” Famous Crimes Passionnels,“ ”Murder for Love v. Murder for Gain.“ She was also a hotheaded feminist and when any murder of importance was occupying space in the press there was sure to be an interview with Mrs. Oliver, and it was mentioned that Mrs. Oliver had said, ”Now if a woman were the head of Scotland Yard!" She was an earnest believer in woman's intuition.

For the rest she was an agreeable woman of middle age, handsome in a rather untidy fashion, with fine eyes, substantial shoulders, and a large quantity of rebellious gray hair with which she was continually experimenting. One day her appearance would be highly intellectual - a brow with the hair scraped back from it and coiled in a large bun in the neck; on another, Mrs. Oliver would suddenly appear with Madonna loops, or large masses of slightly untidy curls. On this particular evening Mrs. Oliver was trying out a fringe.

She greeted Poirot, whom she had met before at a literary dinner, in an agreeable bass voice.

“And Superintendent Battle you doubtless know,” said Mr. Shaitana.

A big square wooden-faced man moved forward. Not only did an onlooker feel that Superintendent Battle was carved out of wood - he also managed to convey the impression that the wood in question was the timber out of a battleship.

Superintendent Battle was supposed to be Scotland Yard's best representative. He always looked stolid and rather stupid. “I know Monsieur Poirot,” said Superintendent Battle.

And his wooden face creased into a smile and then returned to its former unexpressiveness.

“Colonel Race,” went on Mr. Shaitana. Poirot had not previously met Colonel Race, but he knew something about him. A dark, handsome, deeply bronzed man of fifty, he was usually to be found in some outpost of Empire - especially if there were trouble brewing. Secret Service is a melodramatic term, but it described pretty accurately to the lay mind the nature and scope of Colonel Race's activities.

Poirot had by now taken in and appreciated the particular essence of his host's humorous intentions.

“Our other guests are late,” said Mr. Shaitana. “My fault, perhaps. I believe I told them eight-fifteen.”

But at that moment the door opened and the butler announced, “Doctor Roberts.”

The man who came in did so with a kind of parody of a brisk bedside manner. He was a cheerful, highly colored individual of middle age. Small twinkling eyes, a touch of baldness, a tendency of embonpoint and a general air of a well-scrubbed and disinfected medical practitioner. His manner was cheerful and confident. You felt that his diagnosis would be correct and his treatments agreeable and practical - “a little champagne in convalescence perhaps.” A man of the world!

“Not late, I hope?” said Doctor Roberts genially.

He shook hands with his host and was introduced to the others. He seemed particularly gratified at meeting Battle. “Why, you're one of the big noises at Scotland Yard, aren't you? This is interesting! Too bad to make you talk shop but I warn you I shall have a try at it. Always been interested in crime. Bad thing for a doctor, perhaps. Mustn't say so to my nervous patients - ha, ha!”

Again the door opened.

“Mrs. Lorrimer.”

Mrs. Lorrimer was a well-dressed woman of sixty. She had lovely cut features, beautifully arranged gray hair, and a clear, incisive voice.

“I hope I'm not late,” she said, advancing to her host. She turned from him to greet Doctor Roberts with whom she was acquainted.

The butler announced, “Major Despard.”

Major Despard was a tall, lean, handsome man, his face slightly marred by a scar on the temple. Introductions completed, he gravitated naturally to the side of Colonel Race - and the two men were soon talking sport and comparing their experiences on safari.

For the last time the door opened and the butler announced, “Miss Meredith.”

A girl in the early twenties entered. She was of medium height and pretty. Brown curls clustered in her neck, her gray eyes were large and wide apart. Her face was powdered but not made up. Her voice was slow and rather shy.

She said, “Oh, dear, am I the last?”

Mr. Shaitana descended on her with sherry and an ornate and complimentary reply. His introductions were formal and almost ceremonious.

Miss Meredith was left sipping her sherry by Poirot's side.

“Our friend is very punctilious,” said Poirot with a smile.

The girl agreed. “I know. People rather dispense with introductions nowadays. They just say, 'I expect you know everybody,' and leave it at that.”

“Whether you do or you don't?” “Whether you do or don't. Sometimes it makes it awkward - but I think this is more awe inspiring.”

She hesitated and then said, “Is that Mrs. Oliver the novelist?”

Mrs. Oliver's bass voice rose powerfully at that minute speaking to Doctor Roberts.

“You can't get away from a woman's instinct, Doctor. Women know these things.”

Forgetting that she no longer had a brow, she endeavored to sweep her hair back from it but was foiled by the fringe.

“That is Mrs. Oliver,” said Poirot.

“The one who wrote The Body in the Library?”

“That identical one.”

Miss Meredith frowned a little.

“And that wooden-looking man - a superintendent, did Mr. Shaitana say?”

“From Scotland Yard.”

“And you?”

“And me?”

“I know all about you, Monsieur Poirot. It was you who really solved the A.B.C. crimes.”

“Mademoiselle, you cover me with confusion.”

Miss Meredith drew her brows together.

“Mr. Shaitana,” she began and then stopped. “Mr. Shaitana -”

Poirot said quietly, “One might say he was 'crime minded.' It seems so. Doubtless he wishes to hear us dispute ourselves. He is already egging on Mrs. Oliver and Doctor Roberts. They are now discussing untraceable poisons.”

Miss Meredith gave a little gasp as she said, “What a queer man he is!”

“Doctor Roberts?”

“No, Mr. Shaitana.”

She shivered a little and said, “There's always something a little frightening about him, I think. You never know what would strike him as amusing. It might - it might be something cruel!”

“Such as fox hunting, eh?”

Miss Meredith threw him a reproachful glance.

“I meant - oh, something Oriental!”

“He has perhaps the tortuous mind,” admitted Poirot.

“Torturer's?”

“No, no, tortuous, I said.”

“I don't think I like him frightfully,” confided Miss Meredith, her voice dropping.

“You will like his dinner, though,” Poirot assured her. “He has a marvelous cook.”

She looked at him doubtfully and then laughed. “Why,” she exclaimed, “I believe you are quite human!”

“But certainly I am human!”

“You see,” said Miss Meredith, “all these celebrities are rather intimidating.”

“Mademoiselle, you should not be intimidated - you should be thrilled! You should have all ready your autograph book and your fountain pen.”

“Well, you see, I'm not really terribly interested in crime. I don't think women are; it's always men who read detective stories.”

Hercule Poirot sighed affectedly.

“Alas!” he murmured. “What would I not give at this minute to be even the most minor of film stars!”

The butler threw the door open.

“Dinner is served,” he announced.

Poirot's prognostication was amply justified. The dinner was delicious and its serving perfection. Subdued light, polished wood, the blue gleam of Irish glass. In the dimness, at the head of the table Mr. Shaitana looked more than ever diabolical.

He apologized gracefully for the uneven number of the sexes. Mrs. Lorrimer was on his right hand, Mrs. Oliver on his left. Miss Meredith was between Superintendent Battle and Major Despard. Poirot was between Mrs. Lorrimer and Doctor Roberts.

The latter murmured facetiously to him, “You're not going to be allowed to monopolize the only pretty girl all the evening. You French fellows, you don't waste your time, do you?”

“I happen to be Belgian,” murmured Poirot.

“Same thing where the ladies are concerned, I expect, my boy,” said the doctor cheerfully.

Then, dropping the facetiousness, and adopting a professional tone he began to talk to Colonel Race on his other side about the latest developments in the treatment of sleeping sickness.

Mrs. Lorrimer turned to Poirot and began to talk of the latest plays. Her judgments were sound and her criticisms apt. They drifted on to books and then to world politics. He found her a well-informed and thoroughly intelligent woman.

On the opposite side of the table Mrs. Oliver was asking Major Despard if he knew of any unheard-of, out-of-the-way poisons.

“Well, there's curare.”

“My dear man, vieux jeu! That's been done hundreds of times. I mean something new!”

Major Despard said dryly, “Primitive tribes are rather old fashioned. They stick to the good old stuff their grandfathers and great-grandfathers used before them.”

“Very tiresome of them,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I should have thought they were always experimenting with pounding up herbs and things. Such a chance for explorers, I always think. They could come home and kill off all their rich old uncles with some new drug that no one's ever heard of.”