

A

Scene Two

(We hear a small hotel band playing "I Want to Go Back to Michigan" by Irving Berlin. POIROT bows slightly and now we are in the dining room of the Tokatlian Hotel in Istanbul in 1934. The HEAD WAITER escorts POIROT into the room.)

HEAD WAITER. This way, *monsieur*. I have a beautiful table that I'm sure you will enjoy. It is *monsieur's* first time in Istanbul?

POIROT. That is correct. How did you know?

HEAD WAITER. Ohh, I have my ways, *monsieur*. My little observations. In this business, one needs to be a detective, like that famous Poirot fellow who comes from France.

POIROT. I believe he is Belgian.

HEAD WAITER. No, no. From France. I know him personally.

POIROT. Ah.

HEAD WAITER. Your table, *monsieur*.

POIROT. *Merci*.

(As POIROT sits and takes up a newspaper, COLONEL ARBUTHNOT bursts the dining room and hurries over to a table where MARY DEBENHAM is waiting. The COLONEL is a Scotsman with a Scottish accent in his mid-thirties, handsome, and very matter-of-fact. MISS DEBENHAM is an English beauty in her late twenties. There is a sadness, however, around her eyes. She is anxious.)

ARBUTHNOT. Mary. There you are!

MARY. James! At last! Where have you been?!

ARBUTHNOT. Oh, I'm not that late, am I?

MARY. Of course you are. You're always late. And I was terrified we'd miss the train. It would ruin everything!

young American in his thirties with a strained, rather beleaguered face.)

MRS. HUBBARD. Excuse me, young man. Are you American?

MACQUEEN. Y-yes I am.

MRS. HUBBARD. I thought so. I can see from your passport.

Us Americans have to stick together, you know. Especially in a place like this. I can't even pronounce half the things on the menu. Can you believe it? And what's a falafafafafafafel? I keep seeing them on the street and they look like you could play hockey with 'em.

MACQUEEN. I believe they're made of fried chickpeas.

MRS. HUBBARD. Well there ya go. Who knew? Some people will fry anything. By the way, I don't mean to snoop but I see your train ticket sitting there on the table and I wonder - do you know if they're providing a bus to the station?

MACQUEEN. I don't think so. I-I believe the hotel has a private car.

MRS. HUBBARD. Well don't you worry, I'll ask and find out. As the Bible says, "If Moses doesn't know the answer, ask the concierge." Now I better go. I think I'm annoying that odd little man with the silly moustache. (*Sotto voce.*) And I don't think it's real.

(As MACQUEEN and MRS. HUBBARD exit, MONSIEUR BOUC enters. He sees POIROT, his face lights up and he chuckles happily. He taps POIROT on the shoulder. BOUC is another Belgian, a young middle-aged man of good humor.)

BOUC. I hope that the food at this humble establishment is up to your usual standards.

POIROT. What? What's this?... Ah, *mon Dieu*, it is *Monsieur Bouc*!

BOUC. My friend! Haha!

POIROT. *Mon ami!* But what are you doing here?

BOUC. What am *I* doing here? This is my city! I live here!

(B)

POIROT. Of course, I'm a fool!

BOUC. I run Wagon-Lit, the greatest train company in the entire world, and the central office is in this hotel. *Garçon!* This meal is on me, please charge my office.

POIROT. *Ah non.*

BOUC. *Ah oui.* It will give me pleasure, you are my guest here. So tell me, what are you doing here? You are solving a crime, eh?

POIROT. No, no, I did that last week in Syria. It was a bad affair. An army officer, a missing check, a beautiful woman, puh. It did not end well.

(As POIROT describes the case, a MAN appears in a blue down light, wearing an army tunic and an officer's hat. We are witnessing POIROT's memory.)

The man was guilty, that was certain. But perhaps, because I pressed the man too hard to admit his guilt...

(The MAN raises a pistol to his temple and fires. Bang! The noise is startling. The MAN collapses and fades away.)

It was unfortunate in the extreme. And yet I believe I did nothing wrong.

BOUC. Of course you did nothing wrong. If you break the law you must pay the price. That is what *you* have told me.

POIROT. It is what I live by.

BOUC. Now tell me, you are staying here at the hotel?

POIROT. I was hoping, eh? I was going to play the tourist, but at the desk there was a telegram from Scotland Yard, begging me to return at once, so I have asked the concierge to get me a ticket for tonight on your famous Orient Express.

BOUC. There will be no problem, and the best news is, I will be joining you, for I go to Lausanne tonight on business.

POIROT. Haha! *C'est magnifique.*

(*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.*)