

Your main commentary should be focused on *non canonical constituent order and information packaging*. Other topics may also be addressed.

‘It also seems possible that a small incident not hitherto regarded as important may be connected with the rucksack. According to the Italian servant, Geronimo, on the day, or one of the days, when the police called, the light in the hall had gone. He went to look for a bulb to replace it; found the spare bulbs, too, were missing. He was quite sure that a day or two previously there had been spare bulbs in the drawer. It seems to me a possibility – this is far-fetched and I would not say that I am sure of it, you understand, it is a mere possibility – that there was someone with a guilty conscience who had been mixed up with a smuggling racket before and who feared that his face might be known to the police if they saw him in a bright light. So he quietly removed the bulb from the hall light and took away the new ones so that it should not be replaced. As a result the hall was illuminated by a candle only. This, as I say, is merely a supposition.’

‘It’s an ingenious idea,’ said Wilding.

‘It’s possible, sir,’ said Sergeant Bell eagerly. ‘The more I think of it the more possible I think it is.’

‘But if so,’ went on Wilding, ‘there’s more to it than just Hickory Road?’

Poirot nodded.

‘Oh yes. The organisation must cover a wide range of students’ clubs and so on.’

‘You have to find a connecting link between them,’ said Wilding.

Inspector Sharpe spoke for the first time.

‘There is such a link, sir,’ he said, ‘or there was. A woman who ran several student clubs and organisations. A woman who was right on the spot at Hickory Road. Mrs Nicoletis.’

Wilding flicked a quick glance at Poirot.

‘Yes,’ said Poirot. ‘Mrs Nicoletis fits the bill. She had a financial interest in all these places though she didn’t run them herself. Her method was to get someone of unimpeachable integrity and antecedents to run the place. My friend Mrs Hubbard is such a person. The financial backing was supplied by Mrs Nicoletis – but there again I suspect her of being only a figurehead.’

‘H’m,’ said Wilding. ‘I think it would be interesting to know a little

more about Mrs Nicoletis.’

Sharpe nodded.

‘We’re investigating her,’ he said. ‘Her background and where she came from. It has to be done carefully. We don’t want to alarm our birds too soon. We’re looking into her financial background, too. My word, that woman was a tartar if ever there was one.’

He described his experiences of Mrs Nicoletis when confronted with a search warrant.

‘Brandy bottles, eh?’ said Wilding. ‘So she drank? Well, that ought to make it easier. What’s happened to her? Hooked it –’

‘No sir. She’s dead.’

‘Dead?’ Wilding raised his eyebrows. ‘Monkey business, do you mean?’

‘We think so – yes. We’ll know for certain after the autopsy. I think myself she’d begun to crack. Maybe she didn’t bargain for murder.’

‘You’re talking about the Celia Austin case. Did the girl know something?’

‘She knew something,’ said Poirot, ‘but if I may so put it, I do not think she knew what it was she knew!’

‘You mean she knew something but didn’t appreciate the implications of it?’

‘Yes. Just that. She was not a clever girl. She would be quite likely to fail to grasp an inference. But having seen something, or heard something, she may have mentioned the fact quite unsuspectingly.’

‘You’ve no idea what she saw or heard, M. Poirot?’

‘I make guesses,’ said Poirot. ‘I cannot do more. There has been mention of a passport. Did someone in the house have a false passport allowing them to go to and fro to the Continent under another name? Would the revelation of that fact be a serious danger to that person? Did she see the rucksack being tampered with or did she, perhaps, one day see someone removing the false bottom from the rucksack without realising what it was that that person was doing? Did she perhaps see the person who removed the light bulbs? And mention the fact to him or her, not realising that it was of any importance? Ah, *mon dieu!*’ said Hercule Poirot with irritation.