

Cards on the Table

By Agatha Christie

Evidence that Hercule Poirot understood bridge is to be found in the Agatha Christie novel *Cards on the Table*. The great detective had to analyze the score pads to identify the murderer. Here is chapter three:

A GAME OF BRIDGE

When the company returned to the drawing-room a bridge table had been set out. Coffee was handed round.

"Who plays bridge?" asked Mr. Shaitana. "Mrs. Lorrimer, I know. And Doctor Roberts. Do you play, Miss Meredith?"

"Yes. I'm not frightfully good, though."

"Excellent. And Major Despard? Good. Supposing you four play here."

"Thank goodness there's to be bridge," said Mrs. Lorrimer in an aside to Poirot. "I'm one of the worst bridge fiends that ever lived. It's growing on me. I simply will not go out to dinner now if there's no bridge afterward! I just fall asleep. I'm ashamed of myself, but there it is."

They cut for partners. Mrs. Lorrimer was partnered with Anne Meredith against Major Despard and Doctor Roberts.

"Women against men," said Mrs. Lorrimer as she took her seat and began shuffling the cards in an expert manner. "The blue cards, don't you think, partner? I'm a forcing two."

"Mind you win," said Mrs. Oliver, her feminist feelings rising. "Show the men they can't have it all their own way."

"They haven't got a hope, the poor dears," said Doctor Roberts cheerfully as he started shuffling the other pack. "Your deal, I think, Mrs. Lorrimer."

Major Despard sat down rather slowly. He was looking at Anne Meredith as though he had just made the discovery that she was remarkably pretty.

"Cut please," said Mrs. Lorrimer impatiently. And with a start of apology he cut the pack she was presenting to him.

Mrs. Lorrimer began to deal with a practiced hand.

"There is another bridge table in the other room," said Mr. Shaitana.

He crossed to a second door and the other four followed him into a small, comfortably furnished smoking-room where a second bridge table was set ready.

"We must cut out," said Colonel Race.

Mr. Shaitana shook his head. "I do not play," he said. "Bridge is not one of the games that amuse me."

The others protested that they would much rather not play, but he overruled them firmly and in the end they sat down - Poirot and Mrs. Oliver against Battle and Race.

Mr. Shaitana watched them for a little while, smiled in a Mephistophelean manner as he observed on what hand Mrs. Oliver declared two no trumps, and then went noiselessly through into the other room.

There they were well down to it, their faces serious, the bids coming quickly. "One heart." "Pass." "Three clubs."

Cards on the Table

By Agatha Christie

"Three spades." "Four diamonds." "Double." "Four hearts."

Mr. Shaitana stood watching a moment smiling to himself. Then he crossed the room and sat down in a big chair by the fireplace. A tray of drinks had been brought in and placed on an adjacent table. The firelight gleamed on the crystal stoppers.

Always an artist in lighting, Mr. Shaitana had simulated the appearance of a merely fire lit room. A small shaded lamp at his elbow gave him light to read by if he so desired. Discreet floodlighting gave the room a subdued glow. A slightly stronger light shone over the bridge table from whence the monotonous ejaculations continued.

"One no trump" - clear and decisive - Mrs. Lorrimer.

"Three hearts" - an aggressive note in the voice - Doctor Roberts.

"No bid" - a quiet voice - Anne Meredith's.

A slight pause always before Despard's voice came. Not so much a slow thinker as a man who liked to be sure before he spoke.

"Four hearts."

"Double."

His face lighted up by the flickering firelight, Mr. Shaitana smiled. He smiled and he went on smiling. His eyelids flickered a little.

His party was amusing him.

"Five diamonds. Game and rubber," said Colonel Race. "Good for you, partner," he said to Poirot. "I didn't think you'd do it. Lucky they didn't lead a spade."

"Wouldn't have made much difference, I expect," said Superintendent Battle, a man of gentle magnanimity.

He had called spades. His partner, Mrs. Oliver, had had a spade, but "something had told her" to lead a club - with disastrous results.

Colonel Race looked at his watch.

"Ten past twelve. Time for another?"

"You'll excuse me," said Superintendent Battle. "But I'm by way of being an 'early to bed' man."

"I, too," said Hercule Poirot.

"We'd better add up," said Race.

The result of the evening's five rubbers was an overwhelming victory for the male sex. Mrs. Oliver had lost three pounds and seven shillings to the other three. The biggest winner was Colonel Race.

Mrs. Oliver, though a bad bridge player, was a sporting loser. She paid up cheerfully.

"Everything went wrong for me tonight," she said. "It is like that sometimes. I held the most beautiful cards yesterday. A hundred and fifty honors three times running." She rose and gathered up her embroidered

Cards on the Table

By Agatha Christie

evening bag, just refraining in time from stroking her hair off her brow.

"I suppose our host is next door," she said.

She went through the communicating door, the others behind her.

Mr. Shaitana was in his chair by the fire. The bridge players were absorbed in their game.

"Double five clubs," Mrs. Lorrimer was saying in her cool, incisive voice.

"Five no trumps."

"Double five no trumps."

Mrs. Oliver came up to the bridge table. This was likely to be an exciting hand.

Superintendent Battle came with her.

Colonel Race went toward Mr. Shaitana, Poirot behind him. "Got to be going, Shaitana," said Race.

Mr. Shaitana did not answer. His head had fallen forward and he seemed to be asleep. Race gave a momentary whimsical glance at Poirot and went a little nearer. Suddenly he uttered a muffled ejaculation, bent forward. Poirot was beside him in a minute, he, too, looking where Colonel Race was pointing - something that might have been a particularly ornate shirt stud - but was not.

Poirot bent, raised one of Mr. Shaitana's hands then let it fall. He met Race's inquiring glance and nodded. The latter raised his voice.

"Superintendent Battle, just a minute."

The superintendent came over to them. Mrs. Oliver continued to watch the play of five, no trumps doubled.

Superintendent Battle, despite his appearance of stolidity, was a very quick man. His eyebrows went up and he said in a low voice as he joined them. "Something wrong?"

With a nod Colonel Race indicated the silent figure in the chair.

As Battle bent over it, Poirot looked thoughtfully at what he could see of Mr. Shaitana's face. Rather a silly face it looked now, the mouth drooping open - the devilish expression lacking.

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

Superintendent Battle straightened himself. He had examined without touching the thing which looked like an extra stud in Mr. Shaitana's shirt and it was not an extra stud. He had raised the limp hand and let it fall.

Now he stood up, unemotional, capable, soldierly - prepared to take charge efficiently of the situation.

"Just a minute, please," he said.

And the raised voice was his official voice, so different that all the heads at the bridge table turned to him, and Anne Meredith's hand remained poised over an ace of spades in the dummy.

"I'm sorry to tell you all," he said, "that our host, Mr. Shaitana, is dead."

Cards on the Table

By Agatha Christie

Mrs. Lorrimer and Doctor Roberts rose to their feet. Despard stared and frowned. Anne Meredith gave a little gasp.

"Are you sure, man?"

Doctor Roberts, his professional instincts aroused, came briskly across the floor with a bounding medical "in at the death" step.

Without seeming to, the bulk of Superintendent Battle impeded his progress.

"Just a minute, Doctor Roberts. Can you tell me first who's been in and out of this room this evening?"

Roberts stared at him.

"In and out? I don't understand you. Nobody has."

The superintendent transferred his gaze.

"Is that right, Mrs. Lorrimer?"

"Quite right."

"Not the butler nor any of the servants?"

"No. The butler brought in that tray as we sat down to bridge. He has not been in since."

Superintendent Battle looked at Despard.

Despard nodded in agreement.

Anne said rather breathlessly, "Yes - yes, that's right."

"What's all this, man," said Roberts impatiently. "Just let me examine him - may be just a fainting fit."

"It isn't a fainting fit, and I'm sorry - but nobody's going to touch him until the divisional surgeon comes. Mr. Shaitana's been murdered, ladies and gentlemen."

"Murdered?" A horrified incredulous sigh from Anne.

A stare, a very blank stare from Despard.

A sharp incisive "Murdered?" from Mrs. Lorrimer.

A "Good God!" from Doctor Roberts.

Superintendent Battle nodded his head slowly. He looked rather like a Chinese porcelain mandarin. His expression was quite blank.

"Stabbed," he said. "That's the way of it. Stabbed."

Then he shot out a question. "Any of you leave the bridge table during the evening?"

He saw four expressions break up - waver. He saw fear - comprehension - indignation - dismay - horror, but he saw nothing definitely helpful.

"Well?"

Cards on the Table

By Agatha Christie

There was a pause and then Major Despard said quietly, he had risen now and was standing like a soldier on parade, his narrow intelligent face turned to Battle, "I think every one of us, at one time, or another, moved from the bridge table - either to get drinks or to put wood on the fire. I did both. When I went to the fire Shaitana was asleep in his chair."

"Asleep?"

"I thought so - yes."

"He may have been," said Battle. "Or he may have been dead then. We'll go into that presently. I'll ask you now to go into the room, next door." He turned to the quiet figure at his elbow. "Colonel Race, perhaps you'll go with them?"

Race gave a quick nod of comprehension.

"Right, Superintendent."

The four bridge players went slowly through the doorway.

Mrs. Oliver sat down in a chair at the far end of the room and began to sob quietly.

Battle took up the telephone receiver and spoke.

Then he said, "The local police will be round immediately. Orders from headquarters are that I'm to take on the case. Divisional surgeon will be here almost at once. How long should you say he'd been dead, Monsieur Poirot? I'd say well over an hour myself."

"I agree. Alas that one cannot be more exact - that one cannot say, 'This man has been dead one hour twenty-five minutes and forty seconds.'"

Battle nodded absently.

"He was sitting right in front of the fire. That makes a slight difference. Over an hour, not more than two and a half - that's what our doctor will say, I'll be bound. And nobody heard anything and nobody saw anything. Amazing! What a desperate chance to take. He might have cried out."

"But he did not. The murderer's luck held. As you say, mon ami, it was a very desperate business."

"Any ideas, Monsieur Poirot? As to motive? Anything of that kind?"

Poirot said slowly, "Yes, I have something to say on that score. Tell me - Monsieur Shaitana, he did not give you any hint of what kind of a party you were coming to tonight?"

Superintendent Battle looked at him curiously.

"No, Monsieur Poirot. He didn't say anything at all. Why?"

A bell whirred in the distance and a knocker was plied.

"That's our people," said Superintendent Battle. "I'll go and let 'em in. We'll have your story presently. Must get on with the routine work."

Poirot nodded. Battle left the room.

Mrs. Oliver continued to sob.

Cards on the Table

By Agatha Christie

Poirot went over to the bridge table. Without touching anything he examined the scores. He shook his head once or twice.

"The stupid little man! Oh, the stupid little man," murmured Hercule Poirot. "To dress up as the devil and try to frighten people. Quel enfantillage!"

The door opened. The divisional surgeon came in, bag in hand; he was followed by the divisional inspector talking to Battle. A camera man came next. There was a constable in the hall.

The routine of the detection of crime had begun.