'Very likely. So you've come to have a look at our own particular find? Is this Dr Sheppard? Think you'll be able to identify him, sir?'

'I'm not very sure,' I said doubtfully.

'How did you get hold of him?' inquired Poirot.

'Description was circulated, as you know. In the press and privately. Not much to go on, I admit. This fellow has an American accent all right, and he doesn't deny that he was near King's Abbot that night. Just asks what the hell it is to do with us, and that he'll see us in — before he answers any questions.'

'Is it permitted that I, too, see him?' asked Poirot.

The superintendent closed one eye knowingly.

'Very glad to have you, sir. You've got permission to do anything you please. Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard was asking after you the other day. Said he'd heard you were connected unofficially with this case. Where's Captain Paton hiding, sir, can you tell me that?'

'I doubt if it would be wise at the present juncture,'220 said Poirot primly, and I bit my lips to prevent a smile.

The little man really did it very well.

After some further parley, we were taken to interview the prisoner.

He was a young fellow, I should say not more than twenty-two or three. Tall, thin, with slightly shaking hands, and the evidences of considerable physical strength somewhat run to seed. His hair was dark, but his eyes were blue and shifty, seldom meeting a glance squarely. I had all along cherished the illusion that there was something familiar about the figure I had met that night, but if this were indeed he, I was completely mistaken. He did not remind me in the least of any one I knew.

'Now then, Kent,' said the superintendent, 'stand up. Here are some visitors come to see you. Recognize any of them.'

Kent glared at us sullenly, but did not reply. I saw his glance waver over the three of us, and come back to rest on me.

'Well, sir,' said the superintendent to me, 'what do you say?'

'The height's the same,' I said, 'and as far as general appearance goes it might well be the man in question. Beyond that, I couldn't go.'

'What the hell's the meaning of all this?' asked Kent. 'What have you got against me? Come on, out with it! What am I supposed to have done?'

I nodded my head.

'It's the man,' I said. 'I recognize the voice.'

'Recognize my voice, do you? Where do you think you heard it before?'

'On Friday evening last, outside the gates of Fernly Park. You asked me the way there.'

'I did, did I?'

'Do you admit it?' asked the inspector.

'I don't admit anything. Not till I know what you've got on me.'

'Have you not read the papers in the last few days?' asked Poirot, speaking for the first time.

The man's eyes narrowed.

'So that's it, is it? I saw an old gent had been croaked at Fernly. Trying to make out I did the job, are you?'

'You were there that night,' said Poirot quietly.

'How do you know, mister?'

'By this.' Poirot took something from his pocket and held it out.

It was the goose quill we had found in the summer-house.

At the sight of it the man's face changed. He half held out his hand.

'Snow,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'No, my friend, it is empty. It lay where you dropped it in the summer-house that night.'

Charles Kent looked at him uncertainly.

'You seem to know a hell of a lot about everything, you little foreign cock duck. Perhaps you remember this: the papers say that the old gent was croaked between a quarter to ten and ten o'clock?'

'That is so,' agreed Poirot.

'Yes, but is it really so? That's what I'm getting at.'

'This gentleman will tell you,' said Poirot.

He indicated Inspector Raglan. The latter hesitated, glanced at Superintendent Hayes, then at Poirot, and finally, as though receiving sanction, he said:—

'That's right. Between a quarter to ten and ten o'clock.'

'Then you've nothing to keep me here for,' said Kent. 'I was away from Fernly Park by twenty-five minutes past nine. You can ask at the "Dog and Whistle". That's a saloon about a mile out of Fernly on the road to Cranchester. I kicked up a bit of a row there, I remember. As near as nothing to quarter to ten, it was. How about that?'

Inspector Raglan wrote down something in his notebook.

'Well?' demanded Kent.

'Inquiries will be made,' said the inspector. 'If you've spoken the truth, you won't have anything to complain about. What were you doing at Fernly Park anyway?'

'Went there to meet some one.'

'Who?'

'That's none of your business.'

'You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head, my man,' the superintendent warned him.

'To hell with a civil tongue. I went there on my own business, and that's all there is to it. If I was clear away before the murder was done, that's all that concerns the cops.'

'Your name, it is Charles Kent,' said Poirot. 'Where were you born?'

The man stared at him, then he grinned.

'I'm a full-blown Britisher all right,' he said.

'Yes,' said Poirot meditatively, 'I think you are. I fancy you were born in Kent.'

The man stared.

'Why's that? Because of my name? What's that to do with it? Is a man whose name is Kent bound to be born in that particular county?'

'Under certain circumstances, I can imagine he might be,' said Poirot very deliberately. 'Under certain circumstances, you comprehend.'

There was so much meaning in his voice as to surprise the two police officers. As for Charles Kent, he flushed a brick red, and for a moment I thought he was going to spring at Poirot. He thought better of it, however, and turned away with a kind of laugh.

Poirot nodded as though satisfied, and made his way out through the door. He was joined presently by the two officers.

'We'll verify that statement,' remarked Raglan. 'I don't think he's lying, though. But he's got to come clear with a statement as to what he was doing at Fernly. It looks to me as though we'd got our blackmailer all right. On the other hand, granted his story's correct, he couldn't have had anything to do with the actual murder. He'd got ten pounds on him when he was arrested—rather a large sum. I fancy that forty pounds went to him—the numbers of

Chapter 18

Charles Kent

Half an hour later saw Poirot, myself, and Inspector Raglan in the train on the way to Liverpool. The inspector was clearly very excited.

'We may get a line on the blackmailing part of the business, if on nothing else,' he declared jubilantly. 'He's a rough customer, this fellow, by what I heard over the phone. Takes dope, too. We ought to find it easy to get what we want out of him. If there was the shadow of a motive, nothing's more likely than that he killed Mr Ackroyd. But in that case, why is young Paton keeping out of the way? The whole thing's a muddle—that's what it is. By the way, M. Poirot, you were quite right about those fingerprints. They were Mr Ackroyd's own. I had rather the same idea myself, but I dismissed it as hardly feasible.'

I smiled to myself. Inspector Raglan was so very plainly saving his face.

'As regards this man,' said Poirot, 'he is not yet arrested, eh?'

'No, detained under suspicion.'

'And what account does he give of himself?'

'Precious little,' said the inspector, with a grin. 'He's a wary bird, I gather. A lot of abuse, but very little more.'

On arrival at Liverpool I was surprised to find that Poirot was welcomed with acclamation. Superintendent Hayes, who met us, had worked with Poirot over some case long ago, and had evidently an exaggerated opinion of his powers.

'Now we've got M. Poirot here we shan't be long,' he said cheerfully. 'I thought you'd retired, moosior?'

'So I had, my good Hayes, so I had. But how tedious is retirement! You cannot imagine to yourself the monotony with which day comes after day.'

the notes didn't correspond, but of course he'd have changed them first thing. Mr Ackroyd must have given him the money, and he made off with it as fast as possible. What was that about Kent being his birthplace? What's that got to do with it?'

'Nothing whatever,' said Poirot mildly. 'A little idea of mine, that was all. Me, I am famous for my little ideas.'

'Are you really?' said Raglan, studying him with a puzzled expression.

The superintendent went into a roar of laughter.

'Many's the time I've heard Inspector Japp say that. M. Poirot and his little ideas! Too fanciful for me, he'd say, but always something in them.'

'You mock yourself at me,' said Poirot, smiling; 'but never mind. The old ones they laugh last sometimes, when the young, clever ones do not laugh at all.'

And nodding his head at them in a sage manner, he walked out into the street.

He and I lunched together at an hotel. I know now that the whole thing lay clearly unravelled before him. He had got the last thread he needed to lead him to the truth.

But at the time I had no suspicion of the fact. I overestimated his general self-confidence, and I took it for granted that the things which puzzled me must be equally puzzling to him.

My chief puzzle was what the man Charles Kent could have been doing at Fernly. Again and again I put the question to myself and could get no satisfactory reply.

At last I ventured a tentative query to Poirot. His reply was immediate.

'Mon ami, I do not think; I know.'

'Really?' I said incredulously.

'Yes, indeed. I suppose now that to you it would not make sense if I said that he went to Fernly that night because he was born in Kent?'

I stared at him.

'It certainly doesn't seem to make sense to me,' I said dryly.

'Ah!' said Poirot pityingly. 'Well, no matter. I have still my little idea.'

'You are speaking of Ralph Paton,' she said. 'You may be right, you may not, but you have no business to condemn a man unheard.'

The telephone bell rang sharply. I went out into the hall, and took off the receiver.

'What?' I said. 'Yes. Dr Sheppard speaking.'

I listened for a minute or two, then replied briefly. Replacing the receiver, I went back into the drawing-room.

'Poirot,' I said, 'they have detained a man at Liverpool. His name is Charles Kent, and he is believed to be the stranger who visited Fernly that night. They want me to go to Liverpool at once and identify him.'

'Let us take a man—a very ordinary man. A man with no idea of murder in his heart. There is in him somewhere a strain of weakness—deep down. It has so far never been called into play. Perhaps it never will be—and if so he will go to his grave honoured and respected by every one. But let us suppose that something occurs. He is in difficulties—or perhaps not that even. He may stumble by accident on a secret—a secret involving life or death to some one. And his first impulse will be to speak out—to do his duty as an honest citizen. And then the strain of weakness tells. Here is a chance of money—a great amount of money. He wants money—he desires it—and it is so easy. He has to do nothing for it—just keep silence. That is the beginning. The desire for money grows. He must have more—and more! He is intoxicated by the gold mine which has opened at his feet. He becomes greedy. And in his greed he overreaches himself. One can press a man as far as one likes—but with a woman one must not press too far. For a woman has at heart a great desire to speak the truth. How many husbands who have deceived their wives go comfortably to their graves, carrying their secret with them! How many wives who have deceived their husbands wreck their lives by throwing the fact in those same husbands' teeth! They have been pressed too far. In a reckless moment (which they will afterwards regret, bien entendu) they fling safety to the winds and turn at bay, proclaiming the truth with great momentary satisfaction to themselves. So it was, I think, in this case. The strain was too great. And so there came your proverb, the death of the goose that laid the golden eggs. But that is not the end. Exposure faced the man of whom we are speaking. And he is not the same man he was—say, a year ago. His moral fibre is blunted. He is desperate. He is fighting a losing battle, and he is prepared to take any means that come to his hand, for exposure means ruin to him. And so—the dagger strikes!'

He was silent for a moment. It was as though he had laid a spell upon the room. I cannot try to describe the impression his words produced. There was something in the merciless analysis, and the ruthless power of vision which struck fear into both of us.

'Afterwards,' he went on softly, 'the danger removed, he will be himself again, normal, kindly. But if the need again arises, then once more he will strike.'

Caroline roused herself at last.

Chapter 19

Flora Ackroyd

As I was returning from my round the following morning, I was hailed by Inspector Raglan. I pulled up, and the inspector mounted on the step.

'Good-morning, Dr Sheppard,' he said. 'Well, that alibi is all right enough.'

'Charles Kent's?'

'Charles Kent's. The barmaid at the "Dog and Whistle", Sally Jones, she remembers him perfectly. Picked out his photograph from among five others. It was just a quarter to ten when he came into the bar, and the "Dog and Whistle" is well over a mile from Fernly Park. The girl mentions that he had a lot of money on him—she saw him take a handful of notes out of his pocket. Rather surprised her, it did, seeing the class of fellow he was, with a pair of boots clean dropping off him. That's where that forty pounds went right enough.'

'The man still refuses to give an account of his visit to Fernly?'

'Obstinate as a mule he is. I had a chat with Hayes at Liverpool over the wire this morning.'

'Hercule Poirot says he knows the reason the man went there that night,' I observed.

'Does he?' cried the inspector eagerly.

'Yes,' I said maliciously. 'He says he went there because he was born in Kent.'

I felt a distinct pleasure in passing on my own discomfiture.

Raglan stared at me for a moment or two uncomprehendingly. Then a grin overspread his weaselly countenance and he tapped his forehead significantly.

'Bit gone here,' he said. 'I've thought so for some time. Poor old chap, so that's why he had to give up and come down here. In the family, very likely. He's got a nephew who's quite off his crumpet.'

'Poirot has?' I said, very surprised.

'Yes. Hasn't he ever mentioned him to you? Quite docile, I believe, and all that, but mad as a hatter, poor lad.'

'Who told you that?'

Again a grin showed itself on Inspector Raglan's face.

'Your sister, Miss Sheppard, she told me all about it.'

Really, Caroline is amazing. She never rests until she knows the last details of everybody's family secrets. Unfortunately, I have never been able to instil into her the decency of keeping them to herself.

'Jump in, inspector,' I said, opening the door of the car. 'We'll go up to The Larches together, and acquaint our Belgian friend with the latest news.'

'Might as well, I suppose. After all, even if he is a bit balmy, it was a useful tip he gave me about those fingerprints. He's got a bee in his bonnet about the man Kent, but who knows—there may be something useful behind it.'

Poirot received us with his usual smiling courtesy.

He listened to the information we had brought him, nodding his head now and then.

'Seems quite O.K., doesn't it?' said the inspector rather gloomily. 'A chap can't be murdering some one in one place when he's drinking in the bar in another place a mile away.'

'Are you going to release him?'

'Don't see what else we can do. We can't very well hold him for obtaining money on false pretences. Can't prove a ruddy thing.'

The inspector tossed a match into the grate in a disgruntled fashion. Poirot retrieved it and put it neatly in a little receptacle designed for the purpose. His action was purely mechanical. I could see that his thoughts were on something very different.

'If I were you,' he said at last, 'I should not release the man Charles Kent yet.'

'What do you mean?'

Raglan stared at him.

'What I say. I should not release him yet.'

'Eight years older. But I've always considered it my duty to look after you. With a bad bringing up, Heaven knows what mischief you might have got into by now.'

'I might have married a beautiful adventuress,' I murmured, gazing at the ceiling, and blowing smoke rings.

'Adventuress!' said Caroline, with a snort. 'If we're talking of adventuresses— '

She left the sentence unfinished.

'Well?' I said, with some curiosity.

'Nothing. But I can think of some one not a hundred miles away.'

Then she turned to Poirot suddenly.

'James sticks to it that you believe some one in the house committed the murder. All I can say is, you're wrong.'

'I should not like to be wrong,' said Poirot. 'It is not—how do you say—my métier?'

'I've got the facts pretty clearly,' continued Caroline, taking no notice of Poirot's remark, 'from James and others. As far as I can see, of the people in the house, only two could have had the chance of doing it. Ralph Paton and Flora Ackroyd.'

'My dear Caroline— '

'Now, James, don't interrupt me. I know what I'm talking about. Parker met her outside the door, didn't he? He didn't hear her uncle saying goodnight to her. She could have killed him then and there.'

'Caroline.'

'I'm not saying she did, James. I'm saying she could have done. As a matter of fact, though Flora is like all these young girls nowadays, with no veneration for their betters and thinking they know best on every subject under the sun, I don't for a minute believe she'd kill even a chicken. But there it is. Mr Raymond and Major Blunt have alibis. Mrs Ackroyd's got an alibi. Even that Russell woman seems to have one—and a good job for her it is she has. Who is left? Only Ralph and Flora! And say what you will, I don't believe Ralph Paton is a murderer. A boy we've known all our lives.'

Poirot was silent for a minute, watching the curling smoke rise from his cigarette. When at last he spoke, it was in a gentle far-away voice that produced a curious impression. It was totally unlike his usual manner.

But Caroline is seldom daunted for long. With magnificent mendacity, she explained to Poirot that although James laughed at her for doing so, she adhered strictly to a vegetarian diet. She descanted ecstatically on the delights of nut cutlets (which I am quite sure she has never tasted) and ate a Welsh rarebit with gusto and frequent cutting remarks as to the dangers of 'flesh' foods.

Afterwards, when we were sitting in front of the fire and smoking, Caroline attacked Poirot directly.

'Not found Ralph Paton yet?' she asked.

'Where should I find him, mademoiselle?'

'I thought, perhaps, you'd found him in Cranchester,' said Caroline, with intense meaning in her tone.

Poirot looked merely bewildered.

'In Cranchester? But why in Cranchester?'

I enlightened him with a touch of malice.

'One of our ample staff of private detectives happened to see you in a car on the Cranchester road yesterday,' I explained.

Poirot's bewilderment vanished. He laughed heartily.

'Ah, that! A simple visit to the dentist, c'est tout. My tooth, it aches. I go there. My tooth, it is at once better. I think to return quickly. The dentist, he says No. Better to have it out. I argue. He insists. He has his way! That particular tooth, it will never ache again.'

Caroline collapsed rather like a pricked balloon.

We fell to discussing Ralph Paton.

'A weak nature,' I insisted. 'But not a vicious one.'

'Ah!' said Poirot. 'But weakness, where does it end?'

'Exactly,' said Caroline. 'Take James here—weak as water, if I weren't about to look after him.'

'My dear Caroline,' I said irritably, 'can't you talk without dragging in personalities?'

'You are weak, James,' said Caroline, quite unmoved. 'I'm eight years older than you are—oh! I don't mind M. Poirot knowing that— '

'I should never have guessed it, mademoiselle,' said Poirot, with a gallant little bow.

'You don't think he can have had anything to do with the murder, do you?'

'I think probably not—but one cannot be certain yet.'

'But haven't I just told you— '

Poirot raised a hand protestingly.

'Mais oui, mais oui. I heard. I am not deaf—nor stupid, thank the good God! But see you, you approach the matter from the wrong—the wrong—premises, is not that the word?'

The inspector stared at him heavily.

'I don't see how you make that out. Look here, we know Mr Ackroyd was alive at a quarter to ten. You admit that, don't you?'

Poirot looked at him for a moment, then shook his head with a quick smile.

'I admit nothing that is not—proved!'

'Well, we've got proof enough of that. We've got Miss Flora Ackroyd's evidence.'

'That she said good-night to her uncle? But me—I do not always believe what a young lady tells me—no, not even when she is charming and beautiful.'

'But hang it all, man, Parker saw her coming out of the door.'

'No.' Poirot's voice rang out with sudden sharpness. 'That is just what he did not see. I satisfied myself of that by a little experiment the other day—you remember, doctor? Parker saw her outside the door, with her hand on the handle. He did not see her come out of the room.'

'But—where else could she have been?'

'Perhaps on the stairs.'

'The stairs?'

'That is my little idea—yes.'

'But those stairs only lead to Mr Ackroyd's bedroom.'

'Precisely.'

And still the inspector stared.

'You think she'd been up to her uncle's bedroom? Well, why not? Why should she lie about it?'

'Ah! that is just the question. It depends on what she was doing there, does it not?'

'You mean—the money? Hang it all, you don't suggest that it was Miss Ackroyd who took that forty pounds?'

'I suggest nothing,' said Poirot. 'But I will remind you of this. Life was not very easy for that mother and daughter. There were bills—there was constant trouble over small sums of money. Roger Ackroyd was a peculiar man over money matters. The girl might be at her wit's end for a comparatively small sum. Figure to yourself then what happens. She has taken the money, she descends the little staircase. When she is half-way down she hears the chink of glass from the hall. She has not a doubt of what it is—Parker coming to the study. At all costs she must not be found on the stairs—Parker will not forget it, he will think it odd. If the money is missed, Parker is sure to remember having seen her come down those stairs. She has just time to rush down to the study door—with her hand on the handle to show that she has just come out, when Parker appears in the doorway. She says the first thing that comes into her head, a repetition of Roger Ackroyd's orders earlier in the evening, and then goes upstairs to her own room.'

'Yes, but later,' persisted the inspector, 'she must have realized the vital importance of speaking the truth? Why, the whole case hinges on it!'

'Afterwards,' said Poirot dryly, 'it was a little difficult for Mademoiselle Flora. She is told simply that the police are here and that there has been a robbery. Naturally she jumps to the conclusion that the theft of the money has been discovered. Her one idea is to stick to her story. When she learns that her uncle is dead she is panic-stricken. Young women do not faint nowadays, monsieur, without considerable provocation. Eh bien! there it is. She is bound to stick to her story, or else confess everything. And a young and pretty girl does not like to admit that she is a thief—especially before those whose esteem she is anxious to retain.'

Raglan brought his fist down with a thump on the table.

'I'll not believe it,' he said. 'It's—it's not credible. And you—you've known this all along?'

'The possibility has been in my mind from the first,' admitted Poirot. 'I was always convinced that Mademoiselle Flora was hiding something from us. To satisfy myself, I made the little experiment I told you of. Dr Sheppard accompanied me.'

'A test for Parker, you said it was,' I remarked bitterly.

'Mon ami,' said Poirot apologetically, 'as I told you at the time, one must say something.'

'Ah!' cried Poirot, 'never will my English be quite perfect. A curious language. I should then have said disarranged, n'est-ce pas?'

'Disturbed is the word you had in mind.'

'I thank you, my friend. The word exact, you are zealous for it. Eh bien, what about our friend Parker now? With twenty thousand pounds in hand, would he have continued being a butler? Je ne pense pas. It is, of course, possible that he banked the money under another name, but I am disposed to believe he spoke the truth to us. If he is a scoundrel, he is a scoundrel on a mean scale. He has not the big ideas. That leaves us as a possibility, Raymond, or—well—Major Blunt.'

'Surely not Raymond,' I objected. 'Since we know that he was desperately hard up for a matter of five hundred pounds.'

'That is what he says, yes.'

'And as to Hector Blunt— '

'I will tell you something as to the good Major Blunt,' interrupted Poirot. 'It is my business to make inquiries. I make them. Eh bien—that legacy of which he speaks, I have discovered that the amount of it was close upon twenty thousand pounds. What do you think of that?'

I was so taken aback that I could hardly speak.

'It's impossible,' I said at last. 'A well-known man like Hector Blunt.'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'Who knows? At least he is a man with big ideas. I confess that I hardly see him as a blackmailer, but there is another possibility that you have not even considered.'

'What is that?'

'The fire, my friend. Ackroyd himself may have destroyed that letter, blue envelope and all, after you left him.'

'I hardly think that likely,' I said slowly. 'And yet—of course, it may be so. He might have changed his mind.'

We had just arrived at my house, and on the spur of the moment I invited Poirot to come in and take pot luck.

I thought Caroline would be pleased with me, but it is hard to satisfy one's women folk. It appears that we were eating chops for lunch—the kitchen staff being regaled on tripe and onions. And two chops set before three people are productive of embarrassment.