you will do well to make a clean breast of things. The truth is what we need now.'

The girl hesitated, looking at him doubtfully.

'You do not trust me,' said Poirot gently. 'Yet all the same you came here to find me, did you not? Why was that?'

'Because I don't believe that Ralph did it,' said the girl in a very low voice. 'And I think that you are clever, and will find out the truth. And also— '

'Yes?'

'I think you are kind.'

Poirot nodded his head several times.

'It is very good that—yes, it is very good. Listen, I do in verity believe that this husband of yours is innocent—but the affair marches badly. If I am to save him, I must know all there is to know—even if it should seem to make the case against him blacker than before.'

'How well you understand,' said Ursula.

'So you will tell me the whole story, will you not? From the beginning.'

'You're not going to send me away, I hope,' said Caroline, settling herself comfortably in an arm-chair. 'What I want to know,' she continued, 'is why this child was masquerading as a parlourmaid?'

'Masquerading?' I queried.

'That's what I said. Why did you do it, child? For a wager?'

'For a living,' said Ursula dryly.

And encouraged, she began the story which I reproduce here in my own words.

Ursula Bourne, it seemed, was one of a family of seven—impoverished Irish gentlefolk. On the death of her father, most of the girls were cast out into the world to earn their own living. Ursula's eldest sister was married to Captain Folliott. It was she whom I had seen that Sunday, and the cause of her embarrassment was clear enough now. Determined to earn her living and not attracted to the idea of being a nursery governess—the one profession open to an untrained girl, Ursula preferred the job of parlourmaid. She scorned to label herself a 'lady parlourmaid.' She would be the real thing, her reference being supplied by her sister. At Fernly, despite an aloofness which, as has been seen, caused some comment, she was a success at her job—quick, competent, and thorough.

'I enjoyed the work,' she explained. 'And I had plenty of time to myself.'

And then came her meeting with Ralph Paton, and the love affair which culminated in a secret marriage. Ralph had persuaded her into that, somewhat against her will. He had declared that his stepfather would not hear of his marrying a penniless girl. Better to be married secretly, and break the news to him at some later and more favourable minute.

And so the deed was done, and Ursula Bourne became Ursula Paton. Ralph had declared that he meant to pay off his debts, find a job, and then, when he was in a position to support her, and independent of his adopted father, they would break the news to him.

But to people like Ralph Paton, turning over a new leaf is easier in theory than in practice. He hoped that his stepfather, whilst still in ignorance of the marriage, might be persuaded to pay his debts and put him on his feet again. But the revelation of the amount of Ralph's liabilities merely enraged Roger Ackroyd, and he refused to do anything at all. Some months passed, and then Ralph was bidden once more to Fernly. Roger Ackroyd did not beat about the bush. It was the desire of his heart that Ralph should marry Flora, and he put the matter plainly before the young man.

And here it was that the innate weakness of Ralph Paton showed itself. As always, he grasped at the easy, the immediate solution. As far as I could make out, neither Flora nor Ralph made any pretence of love. It was, on both sides, a business arrangement. Roger Ackroyd dictated his wishes—they agreed to them. Flora accepted a chance of liberty, money, and an enlarged horizon, Ralph, of course, was playing a different game. But he was in a very awkward hole financially. He seized at the chance. His debts would be paid. He could start again with a clean sheet. His was not a nature to envisage the future, but I gather that he saw vaguely the engagement with Flora being broken off after a decent interval had elapsed. Both Flora and he stipulated that it should be kept a secret for the present. He was anxious to conceal it from Ursula. He felt instinctively that her nature, strong and resolute, with an inherent distaste for duplicity, was not one to welcome such a course.

Then came the crucial moment when Roger Ackroyd, always high-handed, decided to announce the engagement. He said no word of his intention to Ralph—only to Flora, and Flora, apathetic, raised no ob-

jection. On Ursula, the news fell like a bombshell. Summoned by her, Ralph came hurriedly down from town. They met in the wood, where part of their conversation was overheard by my sister. Ralph implored her to keep silent for a little while longer, Ursula was equally determined to have done with concealments. She would tell Mr Ackroyd the truth without any further delay. Husband and wife parted acrimoniously.

Ursula, steadfast in her purpose, sought an interview with Roger Ackroyd that very afternoon, and revealed the truth to him. Their interview was a stormy one—it might have been even more stormy had not Roger Ackroyd been already obsessed with his own troubles. It was bad enough, however. Ackroyd was not the kind of man to forgive the deceit that had been practised upon him. His rancour was mainly directed to Ralph, but Ursula came in for her share, since he regarded her as a girl who had deliberately tried to 'entrap' the adopted son of a very wealthy man. Unforgivable things were said on both sides.

That same evening Ursula met Ralph by appointment in the small summer-house, stealing out from the house by the side door in order to do so. Their interview was made up of reproaches on both sides. Ralph charged Ursula with having irretrievably ruined his prospects by her ill-timed revelation. Ursula reproached Ralph with his duplicity.

They parted at last. A little over half an hour later came the discovery of Roger Ackroyd's body. Since that night Ursula had neither seen nor heard from Ralph.

As the story unfolded itself, I realized more and more what a damning series of facts it was. Alive, Ackroyd could hardly have failed to alter his will—I knew him well enough to realize that to do so would be his first thought. His death came in the nick of time for Ralph and Ursula Paton. Small wonder the girl had held her tongue, and played her part so consistently.

My meditations were interrupted. It was Poirot's voice speaking, and I knew from the gravity of his tone that he, too, was fully alive to the implications of the position.

'Mademoiselle, I must ask you one question, and you must answer it truthfully, for on it everything may hang: What time was it when you parted from Captain Ralph Paton in the summer-house? Now, take a little minute so that your answer may be very exact.'

Chapter 22

Ursula's Story

For a moment or two the girl looked mutely at Poirot. Then, her reserve breaking down completely, she nodded her head once, and burst into an outburst of sobs.

Caroline pushed past me, and putting her arm round the girl, patted her on the shoulder.

'There, there, my dear,' she said soothingly, 'it will be all right. You'll see—everything will be all right.'

Buried under curiosity and scandal-mongering there is a lot of kindness in Caroline. For the moment, even the interest of Poirot's revelation was lost in the sight of the girl's distress.

Presently Ursula sat up and wiped her eyes.

'This is very weak and silly of me,' she said.

'No, no, my child,' said Poirot kindly. 'We can all realize the strain of this last week.'

'It must have been a terrible ordeal,' I said.

'And then to find that you knew,' continued Ursula. 'How did you know? Was it Ralph who told you?'

Poirot shook his head.

'You know what brought me to you to-night,' went on the girl. 'This— '

She held out a crumpled piece of newspaper, and I recognized the paragraph that Poirot had had inserted.

'It says that Ralph has been arrested. So everything is useless. I need not pretend any longer.'

'Newspaper paragraphs are not always true, mademoiselle,' murmured Poirot, having the grace to look ashamed of himself. 'All the same, I think

'Certainly,' said Mrs Ackroyd rather doubtfully, 'I suppose we must come if M. Poirot says so. But what is it all about? I like to know beforehand.'

I assured the lady truthfully that I myself did not know any more than she did.

'Very well,' said Mrs Ackroyd at last, rather grudgingly, 'I will tell the others, and we will be there at nine o'clock.'

Thereupon I took my leave, and joined Poirot at the agreed meeting-place.

'I've been longer than a quarter of an hour, I'm afraid,' I remarked. 'But once that good lady starts talking it's a matter of the utmost difficulty to get a word in edgeways.'

'It is of no matter,' said Poirot. 'Me, I have been well amused. This park is magnificent.'

We set off homewards. When we arrived, to our great surprise Caroline, who had evidently been watching for us, herself opened the door.

She put her fingers to her lips. Her face was full of importance and excitement.

'Ursula Bourne,' she said, 'the parlourmaid from Fernly. She's here! I've put her in the dining-room. She's in a terrible way, poor thing. Says she must see M. Poirot at once. I've done all I could. Taken her a cup of hot tea. It really goes to one's heart to see any one in such a state.'

'In the dining-room?' asked Poirot.

'This way,' I said, and flung open the door.

Ursula Bourne was sitting by the table. Her arms were spread out in front of her, and she had evidently just lifted her head from where it had been buried. Her eyes were red with weeping.

'Ursula Bourne,' I murmured.

But Poirot went past me with outstretched hands.

'No,' he said, 'that is not quite right, I think. It is not Ursula Bourne, is it, my child—but Ursula Paton? Mrs Ralph Paton.'

The girl gave a half laugh, bitter enough in all conscience.

'Do you think I haven't gone over that again and again in my own mind? It was just half-past nine when I went out to meet him. Major Blunt was walking up and down the terrace, so I had to go round through the bushes to avoid him. It must have been about twenty-seven minutes to ten when I reached the summer-house. Ralph was waiting for me. I was with him ten minutes—not longer, for it was just a quarter to ten when I got back to the house.'

I saw now the insistence of her question the other day. If only Ackroyd could have been proved to have been killed before a quarter to ten, and not after.

I saw the reflection of that thought in Poirot's next question.

'Who left the summer-house first?'

'I did.'

'Leaving Ralph Paton in the summer-house?'

'Yes—but you don't think— '

'Mademoiselle, it is of no importance what I think. What did you do when you got back to the house?'

'I went up to my room.'

'And stayed there until when?'

'Until about ten o'clock.'

'Is there any one who can prove that?'

'Prove? That I was in my room, you mean? Oh! no. But surely—oh! I see, they might think—they might think— '

I saw the dawning horror in her eyes.

Poirot finished the sentence for her.

'That it was you who entered by the window and stabbed Mr Ackroyd as he sat in his chair? Yes, they might think just that.'

'Nobody but a fool would think any such thing,' said Caroline indignantly.

She patted Ursula on the shoulder.

The girl had her face hidden in her hands.

'Horrible,' she was murmuring. 'Horrible.'

Caroline gave her a friendly shake.

'Don't worry, my dear,' she said. 'M. Poirot doesn't think that really. As for that husband of yours, I don't think much of him, and I tell you so candidly. Running away and leaving you to face the music.'

But Ursula shook her head energetically.

'Oh, no,' she cried. 'It wasn't like that at all. Ralph would not run away on his own account. I see now. If he heard of his stepfather's murder, he might think himself that I had done it.'

'He wouldn't think any such thing,' said Caroline.

'I was so cruel to him that night—so hard and bitter. I wouldn't listen to what he was trying to say—wouldn't believe that he really cared. I just stood there telling him what I thought of him, and saying the coldest, cruellest things that came into my mind—trying my best to hurt him.'

'Do him no harm,' said Caroline. 'Never worry about what you say to a man. They're so conceited that they never believe you mean it if it's unflattering.'

Ursula went on, nervously twisting and untwisting her hands.

'When the murder was discovered and he didn't come forward, I was terribly upset. Just for a moment I wondered—but then I knew he couldn't—he couldn't...But I wished he would come forward and say openly that he'd had nothing to do with it. I knew that he was very fond of Dr Sheppard, and I fancied that perhaps Dr Sheppard might know where he was hiding.'

She turned to me.

'That's why I said what I did to you that day. I thought, if you knew where he was, you might pass on the message to him.'

'I?' I exclaimed.

'Why should James know where he was?' demanded Caroline sharply.

'It was very unlikely, I know,' admitted Ursula, 'but Ralph had often spoken of Dr Sheppard, and I knew that he would be likely to consider him as his best friend in King's Abbot.'

'My dear child,' I said, 'I have not the least idea where Ralph Paton is at the present moment.'

'That is true enough,' said Poirot.

'But— ' Ursula held out the newspaper cutting in a puzzled fashion.

'Yes,' I said, 'I did.'

'Horrible.' Mrs Ackroyd closed her eyes and shuddered. 'Geoffrey Raymond was in a terrible way. Rang up Liverpool. But they wouldn't tell him anything at the police station there. In fact, they said they hadn't arrested Ralph at all. Mr Raymond insists that it's all a mistake—a—what do they call it?—canard of the newspaper's. I've forbidden it to be mentioned before the servants. Such a terrible disgrace. Fancy if Flora had actually been married to him.'

Mrs Ackroyd shut her eyes in anguish. I began to wonder how soon I should be able to deliver Poirot's invitation.

Before I had time to speak, Mrs Ackroyd was off again.

'You were here yesterday, weren't you, with that dreadful Inspector Raglan? Brute of a man—he terrified Flora into saying she took that money from poor Roger's room. And the matter was so simple, really. The dear child wanted to borrow a few pounds, didn't like to disturb her uncle since he'd given strict orders against it, but knowing where he kept his notes she went there and took what she needed.'

'Is that Flora's account of the matter?' I asked.

'My dear doctor, you know what girls are nowadays. So easily acted on by suggestion. You, of course, know all about hypnosis and that sort of thing. The inspector shouts at her, says the word "steal" over and over again, until the poor child gets an inhibition—or is it a complex?—I always mix up those two words—and actually thinks herself that she has stolen the money. I saw at once how it was. But I can't be too thankful for the whole misunderstanding in one way—it seems to have brought those two together—Hector and Flora, I mean. And I assure you that I have been very much worried about Flora in the past: why, at one time I actually thought there was going to be some kind of understanding between her and young Raymond. Just think of it!' Mrs Ackroyd's voice rose in shrill horror. 'A private secretary—with practically no means of his own.'

'It would have been a severe blow to you,' I said. 'Now, Mrs Ackroyd, I've got a message for you from M. Hercule Poirot.'

'For me?'

Mrs Ackroyd looked quite alarmed.

I hastened to reassure her, and I explained what Poirot wanted.

Our tramp took us in the direction of Fernly. I had guessed beforehand that it might do so. I was beginning to understand Poirot's methods. Every little irrelevancy had a bearing upon the whole.

'I have a commission for you, my friend,' he said at last. 'To-night, at my house, I desire to have a little conference. You will attend, will you not?'

'Certainly,' I said.

'Good. I need also all those in the house—that is to say: Mrs Ackroyd, Mademoiselle Flora, Major Blunt, M. Raymond. I want you to be my ambassador. This little reunion is fixed for nine o'clock. You will ask them—yes?'

'With pleasure; but why not ask them yourself?'

'Because they will then put the questions: Why? What for? They will demand what my idea is. And, as you know, my friend, I much dislike to have to explain my little ideas until the time comes.'

I smiled a little.

'My friend Hastings, he of whom I told you, used to say of me that I was the human oyster. But he was unjust. Of facts, I keep nothing to myself. But to every one his own interpretation of them.'

'When do you want me to do this?'

'Now, if you will. We are close to the house.'

'Aren't you coming in?'

'No, me, I will promenade myself in the grounds. I will rejoin you by the lodge gates in a quarter of an hour's time.'

I nodded, and set off on my task. The only member of the family at home proved to be Mrs Ackroyd, who was sipping an early cup of tea. She received me very graciously.

'So grateful to you, doctor,' she murmured, 'for clearing up that little matter with M. Poirot. But life is one trouble after another. You have heard about Flora, of course?'

'What exactly?' I asked cautiously.

'This new engagement. Flora and Hector Blunt. Of course not such a good match as Ralph would have been. But after all, happiness comes first. What dear Flora needs is an older man—some one steady and reliable, and then Hector is really a very distinguished man in his way. You saw the news of Ralph's arrest in the paper this morning?'

'Ah! that,' said Poirot, slightly embarrassed; 'a bagatelle, mademoiselle. A rien du tout. Not for a moment do I believe that Ralph Paton has been arrested.'

'But then— ' began the girl slowly.

Poirot went on quickly:—

'There is one thing I should like to know—did Captain Paton wear shoes or boots that night?'

Ursula shook her head.

'I can't remember.'

'A pity! But how should you? Now, madame,' he smiled at her, his head on one side, his forefinger wagging eloquently, 'no questions. And do not torment yourself. Be of good courage, and place your faith in Hercule Poirot.'

'A Home Office expert,' I said, amazed. 'My dear Caroline!'

'Mark my words, James, you'll see that I'm right. That Russell woman was here that morning after your poisons. Roger Ackroyd might easily have been poisoned in his food that night.'

I laughed out loud.

'Nonsense,' I cried. 'He was stabbed in the neck. You know that as well as I do.'

'After death, James,' said Caroline; 'to make a false clew.'

'My good woman,' I said, 'I examined the body, and I know what I'm talking about. That wound wasn't inflicted after death—it was the cause of death, and you need make no mistake about it.'

Caroline merely continued to look omniscient, which so annoyed me that I went on:—

'Perhaps you will tell me, Caroline, if I have a medical degree or if I have not?'

'You have the medical degree, I dare say, James—at least, I mean I know you have. But you've no imagination whatever.'

'Having endowed you with a treble portion, there was none left over for me,' I said dryly.

I was amused to notice Caroline's manoeuvrers that afternoon when Poirot duly arrived. My sister, without asking a direct question, skirted the subject of the mysterious guest in every way imaginable. By the twinkle in Poirot's eyes, I saw that he realized her object. He remained blandly impervious, and blocked her bowling so successfully that she herself was at a loss how to proceed.

Having, I suspect, quietly enjoyed the little game, he rose to his feet and suggested a walk.

'It is that I need to reduce the figure a little,' he explained.255 'You will come with me, doctor? And perhaps later Miss Caroline will give us some tea.'

'Delighted,' said Caroline. 'Won't your—er—guest come in also?'

'You are too kind,' said Poirot. 'But no, my friend reposes himself. Soon you must make his acquaintance.'

'Quite an old friend of yours, so somebody told me,' said Caroline, making one last valiant effort.

'Did they?' murmured Poirot. 'Well, we must start.'

'Without much success,' I reminded her.

'Poor boy, and so they've caught him. I consider, James, that it's your duty to see that he isn't hung.'

'What do you expect me to do?'

'Why, you're a medical man, aren't you? You've known him from a boy upwards. Not mentally responsible. That's the line to take, clearly. I read only the other day that they're very happy in Broadmoor—it's quite like a high-class club.'

But Caroline's words had reminded me of something.

'I never knew that Poirot had an imbecile nephew?' I said curiously.

'Didn't you? Oh, he told me all about it. Poor lad. It's a great grief to all the family. They've kept him at home so far, but it's getting to such a pitch that they're afraid he'll have to go into some kind of institution.'

'I suppose you know pretty well everything there is to know about Poirot's family by this time,' I said, exasperated.

'Pretty well,' said Caroline complacently. 'It's a great relief to people to be able to tell all their troubles to some one.'

'It might be,' I said, 'if they were ever allowed to do so spontaneously. Whether they enjoy having confidences screwed out of them by force is another matter.'

Caroline merely looked at me with the air of a Christian martyr enjoying martyrdom.

'You are so self-contained, James,' she said. 'You hate speaking out, or parting with any information yourself, and you think everybody else must be just like you. I should hope that I never screw confidences out of anybody. For instance, if M. Poirot comes in this afternoon, as he said he might do, I shall not dream of asking him who it was arrived at his house early this morning.'

'Early this morning?' I queried.

'Very early,' said Caroline. 'Before the milk came. I just happened to be looking out of the window—the blind was flapping. It was a man. He came in a closed car, and he was all muffled up. I couldn't get a glimpse of his face. But I will tell you my idea, and you'll see that I'm right.'

'What's your idea?'

Caroline dropped her voice mysteriously.

'A Home Office expert,' she breathed.

Chapter 23

Poirot's Little Reunion

'And now,' said Caroline, rising, 'that child is coming upstairs to lie down. Don't you worry, my dear. M. Poirot will do everything he can for you—be sure of that.'

'I ought to go back to Fernly,' said Ursula uncertainly.

But Caroline silenced her protests with a firm hand.

'Nonsense. You're in my hands for the time being. You'll stay here for the present, anyway—eh, M. Poirot?'

'It will be the best plan,' agreed the little Belgian. 'This evening I shall want mademoiselle—I beg her pardon, madame—to attend my little reunion. Nine o'clock at my house. It is most necessary that she should be there.'

Caroline nodded, and went with Ursula out of the room. The door shut behind them. Poirot dropped down into a chair again.

'So far, so good,' he said. 'Things are straightening themselves out.'

'They're getting to look blacker and blacker against Ralph Paton,' I observed gloomily.

Poirot nodded.

'Yes, that is so. But it was to be expected, was it not?'

I looked at him, slightly puzzled by the remark. He was leaning back in the chair, his eyes half closed, the tips of his fingers just touching each other. Suddenly he sighed and shook his head.

'What is it?' I asked.

'It is that there are moments when a great longing for my friend Hastings comes over me. That is the friend of whom I spoke to you—the one who resides now in the Argentine. Always, when I have had a big case, he has been by my side. And he has helped me—yes, often he has helped

me. For he had a knack, that one, of stumbling over the truth unawares—without noticing it himself, bien entendu. At times he has said something particularly foolish, and behold that foolish remark has revealed the truth to me! And then, too, it was his practice to keep a written record of the cases that proved interesting.'

I gave a slight embarrassed cough.

'As far as that goes,' I began, and then stopped.

Poirot sat upright in his chair. His eyes sparkled.

'But yes? What is it that you would say?'

'Well, as a matter of fact, I've read some of Captain Hastings's narratives, and I thought, why not try my hand at something of the same kind? Seemed a pity not to—unique opportunity—probably the only time I'll be mixed up with anything of this kind.'

I felt myself getting hotter and hotter, and more and more incoherent, as I floundered through the above speech.

Poirot sprang from his chair. I had a moment's terror that he was going to embrace me French fashion, but mercifully he refrained.

'But this is magnificent—you have then written down your impressions of the case as you went along?'

I nodded.

'Epatant!' cried Poirot. 'Let me see them—this instant.'

I was not quite prepared for such a sudden demand. I racked my brains to remember certain details.

'I hope you won't mind,' I stammered. 'I may have been a little—er—personal now and then.'

'Oh! I comprehend perfectly; you have referred to me as comic—as, perhaps, ridiculous now and then? It matters not at all. Hastings, he also was not always polite. Me, I have the mind above such trivialities.'

Still somewhat doubtful, I rummaged in the drawers of my desk and produced an untidy pile of manuscript which I handed over to him. With an eye on possible publication in the future, I had divided the work into chapters, and the night before I had brought it up to date with an account of Miss Russell's visit. Poirot had therefore twenty chapters.

I left him with them.

I was obliged to go out to a case at some distance away, and it was past eight o'clock when I got back, to be greeted with a plate of hot dinner on a

Chapter 21

The Paragraph in the Paper

Caroline, of course, had not failed to see Miss Russell come to the surgery door. I had anticipated this, and had ready an elaborate account of the lady's bad knee. But Caroline was not in a cross-questioning mood. Her point of view was that she knew what Miss Russell had really come for and that I didn't.

'Pumping you, James,' said Caroline. 'Pumping you in the most shameless manner, I've not a doubt. It's no good interrupting. I dare say you hadn't the least idea she was doing it even. Men are so simple. She knows that you are in M. Poirot's confidence, and she wants to find out things. Do you know what I think, James?'

'I couldn't begin to imagine. You think so many extraordinary things.'

'It's no good being sarcastic. I think Miss Russell knows more about Mr Ackroyd's death than she is prepared to admit.'

Caroline leaned back triumphantly in her chair.

'Do you really think so?' I said absently.

'You are very dull to-day, James. No animation about you. It's that liver of yours.'

Our conversation then dealt with purely personal matters.

The paragraph inspired by Poirot duly appeared in our daily paper the next morning. I was in the dark as to its purpose, but its effect on Caroline was immense.

She began by stating, most untruly, that she had said as much all along. I raised my eyebrows, but did not argue. Caroline, however, must have felt a prick of conscience, for she went on:—

'I mayn't have actually mentioned Liverpool, but I knew he'd try to get away to America. That's what Crippen did.'