He looked at me very hard—so hard that I felt uncomfortable.

'Can you?' he repeated.

'No motive whatsoever,' I said firmly.

His gaze relaxed. He frowned and murmured to himself:—

'Since the blackmailer was a man, it follows that she cannot be the blackmailer, then— '

I coughed.

'As far as that goes— ' I began doubtfully.

He spun round on me.

'What? What are you going to say?'

'Nothing. Nothing. Only that, strictly speaking, Mrs Ferrars in her letter mentioned a person—she didn't actually specify a man. But we took it for granted, Ackroyd and I, that it was a man.'

Poirot did not seem to be listening to me. He was muttering to himself again.

'But then it is possible after all—yes, certainly it is possible—but then—ah! I must rearrange my ideas. Method, order; never have I needed them more. Everything must fit in—in its appointed place—otherwise I am on the wrong tack.'

He broke off, and whirled round upon me again.

'Where is Marby?'

'It's on the other side of Cranchester.'

'How far away?'

'Oh!—fourteen miles, perhaps.'

'Would it be possible for you to go there? To-morrow, say?'

'To-morrow? Let me see, that's Sunday. Yes, I could arrange it. What do you want me to do there?'

'See this Mrs Folliott. Find out all you can about Ursula Bourne.'

'Very well. But—I don't much care for the job.'

'It is not the time to make difficulties. A man's life may hang on this.'

'Poor Ralph,' I said with a sigh. 'You believe him to be innocent, though?'

Poirot looked at me very gravely.

'Do you want to know the truth?'

'Of course.'

'Then you shall have it. My friend, everything points to the assumption that he is guilty.'

'What!' I exclaimed.

Poirot nodded.

'Yes, that stupid inspector—for he is stupid—has everything pointing his way. I seek for the truth—and the truth leads me every time to Ralph Paton. Motive, opportunity, means. But I will leave no stone unturned. I promised Mademoiselle Flora. And she was very sure, that little one. But very sure indeed.'

things as they are for the present. It's highly probable Mr Ackroyd paid that money away himself.'

The housekeeper bade us a dry good-afternoon, and we took our leave.

I left the house with Poirot.

'I wonder,' I said, breaking the silence, 'what the papers the girl disarranged could have been for Ackroyd to have got into such a state about them? I wonder if there is any clew there to the mystery.'

'The secretary said there were no papers of particular importance on the desk,' said Poirot quietly.

'Yes, but— ' I paused.

'It strikes you as odd that Ackroyd should have flown into a rage about so trivial a matter?'

'Yes, it does rather.'

'But was it a trivial matter?'

'Of course,' I admitted, 'we don't know what those papers may have been. But Raymond certainly said— '

'Leave M. Raymond out of it for a minute. What did you think of that girl?'

'Which girl? The parlourmaid?'

'Yes, the parlourmaid. Ursula Bourne.'

'She seemed a nice girl,' I said hesitatingly.

Poirot repeated my words, but whereas I had laid a slight stress on the fourth word, he put it on the second.

'She seemed a nice girl—yes.'

Then, after a minute's silence, he took something from his pocket and handed it to me.

'See, my friend, I will show you something. Look there.'

The paper he had handed me was that compiled by the inspector and given by him to Poirot that morning. Following the pointing finger, I saw a small cross marked in pencil opposite the name Ursula Bourne.

'You may not have noticed it at the time, my good friend, but there was one person on this list whose alibi had no kind of confirmation. Ursula Bourne.'

'You don't think— '

'Dr Sheppard, I dare to think anything. Ursula Bourne may have killed Mr Ackroyd, but I confess I can see no motive for her doing so. Can you?'

'How long did the interview last?'

'The interview?'

'Yes, the interview between you and Mr Ackroyd in the study?'

'I—I don't know.'

'Twenty minutes? Half an hour?'

'Something like that.'

'Not longer?'

'Not longer than half an hour, certainly.'

'Thank you, mademoiselle.'

I looked curiously at him. He was rearranging a few objects on the table, setting them straight with precise fingers. His eyes were shining.

'That'll do,' said the inspector.

Ursula Bourne disappeared. The inspector turned to Miss Russell.

'How long has she been here? Have you got a copy of the reference you had with her?'

Without answering the first question, Miss Russell moved to an adjacent bureau, opened one of the drawers, and took out a handful of letters clipped together with a patent fastener. She selected one and handed it to the inspector.

'H'm,' said he. 'Reads all right. Mrs Richard Folliott, Marby Grange, Marby. Who's this woman?'

'Quite good county people,' said Miss Russell.

'Well,' said the inspector, handing it back, 'let's have a look at the other one, Elsie Dale.'

Elsie Dale was a big fair girl, with a pleasant but slightly stupid face. She answered our questions readily enough, and showed much distress and concern at the loss of the money.

'I don't think there's anything wrong with her,' observed the inspector, after he had dismissed her.

'What about Parker?'

Miss Russell pursed her lips together and made no reply.

'I've a feeling there's something wrong about that man,' the inspector continued thoughtfully. 'The trouble is that I don't quite see when he got his opportunity. He'd be busy with his duties immediately after dinner, and he's got a pretty good alibi all through the evening. I know, for I've been devoting particular attention to it. Well, thank you very much, Miss Russell. We'll leave

Chapter 11

Poirot Pays a Call

I was slightly nervous when I rang the bell at Marby Grange the following afternoon. I wondered very much what Poirot expected to find out. He had entrusted the job to me. Why? Was it because, as in the case of questioning Major Blunt, he wished to remain in the background? The wish, intelligible in the first case, seemed to me quite meaningless here.

My meditations were interrupted by the advent of a smart parlourmaid.

Yes, Mrs Folliott was at home. I was ushered into a big drawing-room, and looked round me curiously as I waited for the mistress of the house. A large bare room, some good bits of old china, and some beautiful etchings, shabby covers and curtains. A lady's room in every sense of the term.

I turned from the inspection of a Bartolozzi on the wall as Mrs Folliott came into the room. She was a tall woman, with untidy brown hair, and a very winning smile.

'Dr Sheppard,' she said hesitatingly.

'That is my name,' I replied. 'I must apologize for calling upon you like this, but I wanted some information about a parlourmaid previously employed by you, Ursula Bourne.'

With the utterance of the name the smile vanished from her face, and all the cordiality froze out of her manner. She looked uncomfortable and ill at ease.

'Ursula Bourne?' she said hesitatingly.

'Yes,' I said. 'Perhaps you don't remember the name?'

'Oh, yes, of course. I—I remember perfectly.'

'She left you just over a year ago, I understand?'

'Yes. Yes, she did. That is quite right.'

'And you were satisfied with her whilst she was with you? How long was she with you, by the way?'

'Oh! a year or two—I can't remember exactly how long. She—she is very capable. I'm sure you will find her quite satisfactory. I didn't know she was leaving Fernly. I hadn't the least idea of it.'

'Can you tell me anything about her?' I asked.

'Anything about her?'

'Yes, where she comes from, who her people are—that sort of thing?'

Mrs Folliott's face wore more than ever its frozen look.

'I don't know at all.'

'Who was she with before she came to you?'

'I'm afraid I don't remember.'

There was a spark of anger now underlying her nervousness. She flung up her head in a gesture that was vaguely familiar.

'Is it really necessary to ask all these questions?'

'Not at all,' I said, with an air of surprise and a tinge of apology in my manner. 'I had no idea you would mind answering them. I am very sorry.'

Her anger left her and she became confused again.

'Oh! I don't mind answering them. I assure you I don't. Why should I? It—it just seemed a little odd, you know. That's all. A little odd.'

One advantage of being a medical practitioner is that you can usually tell when people are lying to you. I should have known from Mrs Folliott's manner, if from nothing else, that she did mind answering my questions—minded intensely. She was thoroughly uncomfortable and upset, and there was plainly some mystery in the background. I judged her to be a woman quite unused to deception of any kind, and consequently rendered acutely uneasy when forced to practice it. A child could have seen through her.

But it was also clear that she had no intention of telling me anything further. Whatever the mystery centring around Ursula Bourne might be, I was not going to learn it through Mrs Folliott.

Defeated, I apologized once more for disturbing her, took my hat and departed.

I went to see a couple of patients and arrived home about six o'clock. Caroline was sitting beside the wreck of tea things. She had that look of suppressed

Miss Russell pursed up her lips.

'It was none of my doing. I understand Mr Ackroyd found fault with her yesterday afternoon. It was her duty to do the study, and she disarranged some of the papers on his desk, I believe. He was very annoyed about it, and she gave notice. At least, that is what I understood from her, but perhaps you'd like to see her yourselves?'

The inspector assented. I had already noticed the girl when she was waiting on us at lunch. A tall girl, with a lot of brown hair rolled tightly away at the back of her neck, and very steady gray eyes. She came in answer to the housekeeper's summons, and stood very straight with those same gray eyes fixed on us.

'You are Ursula Bourne?' asked the inspector.

'Yes, sir.'

'I understand you are leaving?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Why is that?'

'I disarranged some papers on Mr Ackroyd's desk. He was very angry about it, and I said I had better leave. He told me to go as soon as possible.'

'Were you in Mr Ackroyd's bedroom at all last night? Tidying up or anything?'

'No, sir. That is Elsie's work. I never went near that part of the house.'

'I must tell you, my girl, that a large sum of money is missing from Mr Ackroyd's room.'

At last I saw her roused. A wave of colour swept over her face.

'I know nothing about any money. If you think I took it, and that that is why Mr Ackroyd dismissed me, you are wrong.'

'I'm not accusing you of taking it, my girl,' said the inspector. 'Don't flare up so.'

The girl looked at him coldly.

'You can search my things if you like,' she said disdainfully. 'But you won't find anything.'

Poirot suddenly interposed.

'It was yesterday afternoon that Mr Ackroyd dismissed you—or you dismissed yourself, was it not?' he asked.

The girl nodded.

'I'm sure he hadn't. He even said, "I don't want to take a hundred pounds down to dinner with me. Too bulgy."'

'Then the affair is very simple,' remarked Poirot. 'Either he paid out that forty pounds sometime last evening, or else it has been stolen.'

'That's the matter in a nutshell,' agreed the inspector. He turned to Mrs Ackroyd. 'Which of the servants would come in here yesterday evening?'

'I suppose the housemaid would turn down the bed.'

'Who is she? What do you know about her?'

'She's not been here very long,' said Mrs Ackroyd. 'But she's a nice ordinary country girl.'

'I think we ought to clear this matter up,' said the inspector. 'If Mr Ackroyd paid that money away himself, it may have a bearing on the mystery of the crime. The other servants all right, as far as you know?'

'Oh, I think so.'

'Not missed anything before?'

'No.'

'None of them leaving, or anything like that?'

'The parlourmaid is leaving.'

'When?'

'She gave notice yesterday, I believe.'

'To you?'

'Oh, no. I have nothing to do with the servants. Miss Russell attends to the household matters.'

The inspector remained lost in thought for a minute or two. Then he nodded his head and remarked, 'I think I'd better have a word with Miss Russell, and I'll see the girl Dale as well.'

Poirot and I accompanied him to the housekeeper's room. Miss Russell received us with her usual sang-froid.

Elsie Dale had been at Fernly five months. A nice girl, quick at her duties, and most respectable. Good references. The last girl in the world to take anything not belonging to her.

What about the parlourmaid?

'She, too, was a most superior girl. Very quiet and ladylike. An excellent worker.'

'Then why is she leaving?' asked the inspector.

exultation on her face which I know only too well. It is a sure sign with her, of either the getting or the giving of information. I wondered which it had been.

'I've had a very interesting afternoon,' began Caroline as I dropped into my own particular easy chair, and stretched out my feet to the inviting blaze in the fireplace.

'Have you?' I asked. 'Miss Ganett drop in to tea?'

Miss Ganett is one of the chief of our newsmongers.

'Guess again,' said Caroline with intense complacency.

I guessed several times, working slowly through all the members of Caroline's Intelligence Corps. My sister received each guess with a triumphant shake of the head. In the end she volunteered the information herself.

'M. Poirot!' she said. 'Now what do you think of that?'

I thought a good many things of it, but I was careful not to say them to Caroline.

'Why did he come?' I asked.

'To see me, of course. He said that knowing my brother so well, he hoped he might be permitted to make the acquaintance of his charming sister—your charming sister, I've got mixed up, but you know what I mean.'

'What did he talk about?' I asked.

'He told me a lot about himself and his cases. You know that Prince Paul of Mauretania—the one who's just married a dancer?'

'Yes?'

'I saw a most intriguing paragraph about her in Society Snippets the other day, hinting that she was really a Russian Grand Duchess—one of the Czar's daughters who managed to escape from the Bolsheviks. Well, it seems that M. Poirot solved a baffling murder mystery that threatened to involve them both. Prince Paul was beside himself with gratitude.'

'Did he give him an emerald tie pin the size of a plover's egg?' I inquired sarcastically.

'He didn't mention it. Why?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'I thought it was always done. It is in detective fiction anyway. The super detective always has his rooms littered with rubies and pearls and emeralds from grateful Royal clients.'

'It's very interesting to hear about these things from the inside,' said my sister complacently.

It would be—to Caroline. I could not but admire the ingenuity of M. Hercule Poirot, who had selected unerringly the case of all others that would most appeal to an elderly maiden lady living in a small village.

'Did he tell you if the dancer was really a Grand Duchess?' I inquired.

'He was not at liberty to speak,' said Caroline importantly.

I wondered how far Poirot had strained the truth in talking to Caroline—probably not at all. He had conveyed his innuendoes by means of his eyebrows and his shoulders.

'And after all this,' I remarked, 'I suppose you were ready to eat out of his hand.'

'Don't be coarse, James. I don't know where you get these vulgar expressions from.'

'Probably from my only link with the outside world—my patients. Unfortunately my practice does not lie amongst Royal princes and interesting Russian émigrés.'

Caroline pushed her spectacles up and looked at me.

'You seem very grumpy, James. It must be your liver. A blue pill, I think, to-night.'

To see me in my own home, you would never imagine that I was a doctor of medicine. Caroline does the home prescribing both for herself and me.

'Damn my liver,' I said irritably. 'Did you talk about the murder at all?'

'Well, naturally, James. What else is there to talk about locally? I was able to set M. Poirot right upon several points. He was very grateful to me. He said I had the makings of a born detective in me—and a wonderful psychological insight into human nature.'

Caroline was exactly like a cat that is full to overflowing with rich cream. She was positively purring.

'He talked a lot about the little gray cells of the brain, and of their functions. His own, he says, are of the first quality.'

'He would say so,' I remarked bitterly. 'Modesty is certainly not his middle name.'

'I wish you would not be so horribly American, James. He thought it very important that Ralph should be found as soon as possible, and induced to come forward and give an account of himself. He says that his disappearance will produce a very unfortunate impression at the inquest.'

'I think,' said the lawyer, 'we ought to make sure the money is there before I leave.'

'Certainly,' agreed the secretary. 'I'll take you up now...Oh! I forgot. The door's locked.'

Inquiry from Parker elicited the information that Inspector Raglan was in the housekeeper's room asking a few supplementary questions. A few minutes later the inspector joined the party in the hall, bringing the key with him. He unlocked the door and we passed into the lobby and up the small staircase. At the top of the stairs the door into Ackroyd's bedroom stood open. Inside the room it was dark, the curtains were drawn, and the bed was turned down just as it had been last night. The inspector drew the curtains, letting in the sunlight, and Geoffrey Raymond went to the top drawer of a rosewood bureau.

'He kept his money like that, in an unlocked drawer. Just fancy,' commented the inspector.

The secretary flushed a little.

'Mr Ackroyd had perfect faith in the honesty of all the servants,' he said hotly.

'Oh! quite so,' said the inspector hastily.

Raymond opened the drawer, took out a round leather collar-box from the back of it, and opening it, drew out a thick wallet.

'Here is the money,' he said, taking out a fat roll of notes. 'You will find the hundred intact, I know, for Mr Ackroyd put it in the collar-box in my presence last night when he was dressing for dinner, and of course it has not been touched since.'

Mr Hammond took the roll from him and counted it. He looked up sharply.

'A hundred pounds, you said. But there is only sixty here.'

Raymond stared at him.

'Impossible,' he cried, springing forward. Taking the notes from the other's hand, he counted them aloud.

Mr Hammond had been right. The total amounted to sixty pounds.

'But—I can't understand it,' cried the secretary, bewildered.

Poirot asked a question.

'You saw Mr Ackroyd put this money away last night when he was dressing for dinner? You are sure he had not paid away any of it already?'

'About the inquest,' I said. 'Where would you prefer it to be held. Here, or at the "Three Boars"?'

Mrs Ackroyd stared at me with a dropped jaw.

'The inquest?' she asked, the picture of consternation. 'But surely there won't have to be an inquest?'

Mr Hammond gave a dry little cough and murmured, 'Inevitable. Under the circumstances,' in two short little barks.

'But surely Dr Sheppard can arrange— '

'There are limits to my powers of arrangement,' I said dryly.

'If his death was an accident— '

'He was murdered, Mrs Ackroyd,' I said brutally.

She gave a little cry.

'No theory of accident will hold water for a minute.'

Mrs Ackroyd looked at me in distress. I had no patience with what I thought was her silly fear of unpleasantness.

'If there's an inquest, I—I shan't have to answer questions and all that, shall I?' she asked.

'I don't know what will be necessary,' I answered. 'I imagine Mr Raymond will take the brunt of it off you. He knows all the circumstances, and can give formal evidence of identification.'

The lawyer assented with a little bow.

'I really don't think there is anything to dread, Mrs Ackroyd,' he said. 'You will be spared all unpleasantness. Now, as to the question of money, have you all you need for the present? I mean,' he added, as she looked at him inquiringly, 'ready money. Cash, you know. If not, I can arrange to let you have whatever you require.'

'That ought to be all right,' said Raymond, who was standing by. 'Mr Ackroyd cashed a cheque for a hundred pounds yesterday.'

'A hundred pounds?'

'Yes. For wages and other expenses due to-day. At the moment it is still intact.'

'Where is this money? In his desk?'

'No, he always kept his cash in his bedroom. In an old collar-box, to be accurate. Funny idea, wasn't it?'

'And what did you say to that?'

'I agreed with him,' said Caroline importantly. 'And I was able to tell him the way people were already talking about it.'

'Caroline,' I said sharply, 'did you tell M. Poirot what you overheard in the wood that day?'

'I did,' said Caroline complacently.

I got up and began to walk about.

'You realize what you're doing, I hope,' I jerked out. 'You're putting a halter round Ralph Paton's neck as surely as you're sitting in that chair.'

'Not at all,' said Caroline, quite unruffled. 'I was surprised you hadn't told him.'

'I took very good care not to,' I said. 'I'm fond of that boy.'

'So am I. That's why I say you're talking nonsense. I don't believe Ralph did it, and so the truth can't hurt him, and we ought to give M. Poirot all the help we can. Why, think, very likely Ralph was out with that identical girl on the night of the murder, and if so, he's got a perfect alibi.'

'If he's got a perfect alibi,' I retorted, 'why doesn't he come forward and say so?'

'Might get the girl into trouble,' said Caroline sapiently. 'But if M. Poirot gets hold of her, and puts it to her as her duty, she'll come forward of her own accord and clear Ralph.'

'You seem to have invented a romantic fairy story of your own,' I said. 'You read too many trashy novels, Caroline. I've always told you so.'

I dropped into my chair again.

'Did Poirot ask you any more questions?' I inquired.

'Only about the patients you had that morning.'

'The patients?' I demanded, unbelievingly.

'Yes, your surgery patients. How many and who they were?'

'Do you mean to say you were able to tell him that?' I demanded.

Caroline is really amazing.

'Why not?' asked my sister triumphantly. 'I can see the path up to the surgery door perfectly from this window. And I've got an excellent memory, James. Much better than yours, let me tell you.'

'I'm sure you have,' I murmured mechanically.

My sister went on, checking the names on her fingers.

'There was old Mrs Bennett, and that boy from the farm with the bad finger, Dolly Grice to have a needle out of her finger; that American steward off the liner. Let me see—that's four. Yes, and old George Evans with his ulcer. And lastly— '

She paused significantly.

'Well?'

Caroline brought out her climax triumphantly. She hissed in the most approved style—aided by the fortunate number of s's at her disposal.

'Miss Russell!'

She sat back in her chair and looked at me meaningly, and when Caroline looks at you meaningly, it is impossible to miss it.

'I don't know what you mean,' I said, quite untruthfully. 'Why shouldn't Miss Russell consult me about her bad knee?'

'Bad knee,' said Caroline. 'Fiddlesticks! No more bad knee than you and I. She was after something else.'

'What?' I asked.

Caroline had to admit that she didn't know.

'But depend upon it, that was what he was trying to get at, M. Poirot, I mean. There's something fishy about that woman, and he knows it.'

'Precisely the remark Mrs Ackroyd made to me yesterday,' I said. 'That there was something fishy about Miss Russell.'

'Ah!' said Caroline darkly, 'Mrs Ackroyd! There's another!'

'Another what?'

Caroline refused to explain her remarks. She merely nodded her head several times, rolled up her knitting, and went upstairs to don the high mauve silk blouse and the gold locket which she calls dressing for dinner.

I stayed there staring into the fire and thinking over Caroline's words. Had Poirot really come to gain information about Miss Russell, or was it only Caroline's tortuous mind that interpreted everything according to her own ideas?

There had certainly been nothing in Miss Russell's manner that morning to arouse suspicion. At least—

I remembered her persistent conversation on the subject of drug-taking and from that she had led the conversation to poisons and poisoning. But there was nothing in that. Ackroyd had not been poisoned. Still, it was odd…

'I can't help feeling a little hurt,' she murmured, producing a handkerchief of the kind obviously not meant to be cried into. 'Hurt, I mean, by Roger's lack of confidence in me. That twenty thousand pounds ought to have been left to me—not to Flora. A mother could be trusted to safeguard the interests of her child. A lack of trust, I call it.'

'You forget, Mrs Ackroyd,' I said, 'Flora was Ackroyd's own niece, a blood relation. It would have been different had you been his sister instead of his sister-in-law.'

'As poor Cecil's widow, I think my feelings ought to have been considered,' said the lady, touching her eye-lashes gingerly with the handkerchief. 'But Roger was always most peculiar—not to say mean—about money matters. It has been a most difficult position for both Flora and myself. He did not even give the poor child an allowance. He would pay her bills, you know, and even that with a good deal of reluctance and asking what she wanted all those fal-lals for—so like a man—but—now I've forgotten what it was I was going to say! Oh, yes, not a penny we could call our own, you know. Flora resented it—yes, I must say she resented it—very strongly. Though devoted to her uncle, of course. But any girl would have resented it. Yes, I must say Roger had very strange ideas about money. He wouldn't even buy new face towels, though I told him the old ones were in holes. And then,' proceeded Mrs Ackroyd, with a sudden leap highly characteristic of her conversation, 'to leave all that money—a thousand pounds—fancy, a thousand pounds!—to that woman.'

'What woman?'

'That Russell woman. Something very queer about her, and so I've always said. But Roger wouldn't hear a word against her. Said she was a woman of great force of character, and that he admired and respected her. He was always going on about her rectitude and independence and moral worth. I think there's something fishy about her. She was certainly doing her best to marry Roger. But I soon put a stop to that. She's always hated me. Naturally. I saw through her.'

I began to wonder if there was any chance of stemming Mrs Ackroyd's eloquence, and getting away.

Mr Hammond provided the necessary diversion by coming up to say good-by. I seized my chance and rose also.