The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing. With a shake of the head I passed out and closed the door behind me.

I was startled by seeing the figure of Parker close at hand. He looked embarrassed, and it occurred to me that he might have been listening at the door.

What a fat, smug, oily face the man had, and surely there was something decidedly shifty in his eye.

'Mr Ackroyd particularly does not want to be disturbed,' I said coldly. 'He told me to tell you so.'

'Quite so, sir. I—I fancied I heard the bell ring.'

This was such a palpable untruth that I did not trouble to reply. Preceding me to the hall, Parker helped me on with my overcoat, and I stepped out into the night. The moon was overcast and everything seemed very dark and still. The village church clock chimed nine o'clock as I passed through the lodge gates. I turned to the left towards the village, and almost cannoned into a man coming in the opposite direction.

'This the way to Fernly Park, mister?' asked the stranger in a hoarse voice.

I looked at him. He was wearing a hat pulled down over his eyes, and his coat collar turned up. I could see little or nothing of his face, but he seemed a young fellow. The voice was rough and uneducated.

'These are the lodge gates here,' I said.

'Thank you, mister.' He paused, and then added, quite unnecessarily, 'I'm a stranger in these parts, you see.'

He went on, passing through the gates as I turned to look after him.

The odd thing was that his voice reminded me of some one's voice that I knew, but whose it was I could not think.

Ten minutes later I was at home once more. Caroline was full of curiosity to know why I had returned so early. I had to make up a slightly fictitious account of the evening in order to satisfy her, and I had an uneasy feeling that she saw through the transparent device.

At ten o'clock I rose, yawned, and suggested bed. Caroline acquiesced.

It was Friday night, and on Friday night I wind the clocks. I did it as usual, whilst Caroline satisfied herself that the servants had locked up the kitchen properly.

It was a quarter past ten as we went up the stairs. I had just reached the top when the telephone rang in the hall below.

'Mrs Bates,' said Caroline immediately.

'I'm afraid so,' I said ruefully.

I ran down the stairs and took up the receiver.

'What?' I said. 'What? Certainly, I'll come at once.'

I ran upstairs, caught up my bag, and stuffed a few extra dressings into it.

'Parker telephoning,' I shouted to Caroline, 'from Fernly. They've just found Roger Ackroyd murdered.'

'All this evening I've had a queer feeling of being watched, spied upon. What's that—?'

He turned sharply. So did I. We both had the impression of hearing the latch of the door give ever so slightly. I went across to it and opened it. There was no one there.

'Nerves,' murmured Ackroyd to himself.

He unfolded the thick sheets of paper, and read aloud in a low voice.

> 'My dear, my very dear Roger,—A life calls for a life. I see that—I saw it in your face this afternoon. So I am taking the only road open to me. I leave to you the punishment of the person who has made my life a hell upon earth for the last year. I would not tell you the name this afternoon, but I propose to write it to you now. I have no children or near relations to be spared, so do not fear publicity. If you can, Roger, my very dear Roger, forgive me the wrong I meant to do you, since when the time came, I could not do it after all…'

Ackroyd, his finger on the sheet to turn it over, paused.

'Sheppard, forgive me, but I must read this alone,' he said unsteadily. 'It was meant for my eyes, and my eyes only.'

He put the letter in the envelope and laid it on the table.

'Later, when I am alone.'

'No,' I cried impulsively, 'read it now.'

Ackroyd stared at me in some surprise.

'I beg your pardon,' I said, reddening. 'I do not mean read it aloud to me. But read it through whilst I am still here.'

Ackroyd shook his head.

'No, I'd rather wait.'

But for some reason, obscure to myself, I continued to urge him.

'At least, read the name of the man,' I said.

Now Ackroyd is essentially pig-headed. The more you urge him to do a thing, the more determined he is not to do it. All my arguments were in vain.

'Yes, I've thought of that. I've zigzagged to and fro in my mind.'

'I agree with you that the villain ought to be punished, but the cost has got to be reckoned.'

Ackroyd rose and walked up and down. Presently he sank into the chair again.

'Look here, Sheppard, suppose we leave it like this. If no word comes from her, we'll let the dead things lie.'

'What do you mean by word coming from her?' I asked curiously.

'I have the strongest impression that somewhere or somehow she must have left a message for me—before she went. I can't argue about it, but there it is.'

I shook my head.

'She left no letter or word of any kind. I asked.'

'Sheppard, I'm convinced that she did. And more, I've a feeling that by deliberately choosing death, she wanted the whole thing to come out, if only to be revenged on the man who drove her to desperation. I believe that if I could have seen her then, she would have told me his name and bid me go for him for all I was worth.'

He looked at me.

'You don't believe in impressions?'

'Oh, yes, I do, in a sense. If, as you put it, word should come from her— '

I broke off. The door opened noiselessly and Parker entered with a salver on which were some letters.

'The evening post, sir,' he said, handing the salver to Ackroyd.

Then he collected the coffee cups and withdrew.

My attention, diverted for a moment, came back to Ackroyd. He was staring like a man turned to stone at a long blue envelope. The other letters he had let drop to the ground.

'Her writing,' he said in a whisper. 'She must have gone out and posted it last night, just before—before— '

He ripped open the envelope and drew out a thick enclosure. Then he looked up sharply.

'You're sure you shut the window?' he said.

'Quite sure,' I said, surprised. 'Why?'

Chapter 5

Murder

I got out the car in next to no time, and drove rapidly to Fernly. Jumping out, I pulled the bell impatiently. There was some delay in answering, and I rang again.

Then I heard the rattle of the chain and Parker, his impassivity of countenance quite unmoved, stood in the open doorway.

I pushed past him into the hall.

'Where is he?' I demanded sharply.

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'Your master. Mr Ackroyd. Don't stand there staring at me, man. Have you notified the police?'

'The police, sir? Did you say the police?' Parker stared at me as though I were a ghost.

'What's the matter with you, Parker? If, as you say, your master has been murdered— '

A gasp broke from Parker.

'The master? Murdered? Impossible, sir!'

It was my turn to stare.

'Didn't you telephone to me, not five minutes ago, and tell me that Mr Ackroyd had been found murdered?'

'Me, sir? Oh! no indeed, sir. I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing.'

'Do you mean to say it's all a hoax? That there's nothing the matter with Mr Ackroyd?'

'Excuse me, sir, did the person telephoning use my name?'

'I'll give you the exact words I heard. "Is that Dr Sheppard? Parker, the butler at Fernly, speaking. Will you please come at once, sir. Mr Ackroyd has been murdered."'

Parker and I stared at each other blankly.

'A very wicked joke to play, sir,' he said at last, in a shocked tone. 'Fancy saying a thing like that.'

'Where is Mr Ackroyd?' I asked suddenly.

'Still in the study, I fancy, sir. The ladies have gone to bed, and Major Blunt and Mr Raymond are in the billiard room.'

'I think I'll just look in and see him for a minute,' I said. 'I know he didn't want to be disturbed again, but this odd practical joke has made me uneasy. I'd just like to satisfy myself that he's all right.'

'Quite so, sir. It makes me feel quite uneasy myself. If you don't object to my accompanying you as far as the door, sir—?'

'Not at all,' I said. 'Come along.'

I passed through the door on the right, Parker on my heels, traversed the little lobby where a small flight of stairs led upstairs to Ackroyd's bedroom, and tapped on the study door.

There was no answer. I turned the handle, but the door was locked.

'Allow me, sir,' said Parker.

Very nimbly, for a man of his build, he dropped on one knee and applied his eye to the keyhole.

'Key is in the lock all right, sir,' he said, rising. 'On the inside. Mr Ackroyd must have locked himself in and possibly just dropped off to sleep.'

I bent down and verified Parker's statement.

'It seems all right,' I said, 'but, all the same, Parker, I'm going to wake your master up. I shouldn't be satisfied to go home without hearing from his own lips that he's quite all right.'

So saying, I rattled the handle and called out, 'Ackroyd, Ackroyd, just a minute.'

But still there was no answer. I glanced over my shoulder.

'I don't want to alarm the household,' I said hesitatingly.

Parker went across and shut the door from the big hall through which we had come.

'I think that will be all right now, sir. The billiard room is at the other side of the house, and so are the kitchen quarters and the ladies' bedrooms.'

I nodded comprehendingly. Then I banged once more frantically on the door, and stooping down, fairly bawled through the keyhole:—

throb of anxiety. Supposing—oh! but surely that was impossible. I remembered the frankness of Ralph's greeting that very afternoon. Absurd!

'She wouldn't tell me his name,' said Ackroyd slowly. 'As a matter of fact, she didn't actually say that it was a man. But of course— '

'Of course,' I agreed. 'It must have been a man. And you've no suspicion at all?'

For answer Ackroyd groaned and dropped his head into his hands.

'It can't be,' he said. 'I'm mad even to think of such a thing. No, I won't even admit to you the wild suspicion that crossed my mind. I'll tell you this much, though. Something she said made me think that the person in question might be actually among my household—but that can't be so. I must have misunderstood her.'

'What did you say to her?' I asked.

'What could I say? She saw, of course, the awful shock it had been to me. And then there was the question, what was my duty in the matter? She had made me, you see, an accessory after the fact. She saw all that, I think, quicker than I did. I was stunned, you know. She asked me for twenty-four hours—made me promise to do nothing till the end of that time. And she steadfastly refused to give me the name of the scoundrel who had been blackmailing her. I suppose she was afraid that I might go straight off and hammer him, and then the fat would have been in the fire as far as she was concerned. She told me that I should hear from her before twenty-four hours had passed. My God! I swear to you, Sheppard, that it never entered my head what she meant to do. Suicide! And I drove her to it.'

'No, no,' I said. 'Don't take an exaggerated view of things. The responsibility for her death doesn't lie at your door.'

'The question is, what am I to do now? The poor lady is dead. Why rake up past trouble?'

'I rather agree with you,' I said.

'But there's another point. How am I to get hold of that scoundrel who drove her to death as surely as if he'd killed her. He knew of the first crime, and he fastened on to it like some obscene vulture. She's paid the penalty. Is he to go scot-free?'

'I see,' I said slowly. 'You want to hunt him down? It will mean a lot of publicity, you know.'

'Who by?' I asked sharply.

'His wife.'

'How do you know that?'

'She told me so herself.'

'When?'

'Yesterday! My God! yesterday! It seems ten years ago.'

I waited a minute, and then he went on.

'You understand, Sheppard, I'm telling you this in confidence. It's to go no further. I want your advice—I can't carry the whole weight by myself. As I said just now, I don't know what to do.'

'Can you tell me the whole story?' I said. 'I'm still in the dark. How did Mrs Ferrars come to make this confession to you?'

'It's like this. Three months ago I asked Mrs Ferrars to marry me. She refused. I asked her again and she consented, but she refused to allow me to make the engagement public until her year of mourning was up. Yesterday I called upon her, pointed out that a year and three weeks had now elapsed since her husband's death, and that there could be no further objection to making the engagement public property. I had noticed that she had been very strange in her manner for some days. Now, suddenly, without the least warning, she broke down completely. She—she told me everything. Her hatred of her brute of a husband, her growing love for me, and the—the dreadful means she had taken. Poison! My God! It was murder in cold blood.'

I saw the repulsion, the horror, in Ackroyd's face. So Mrs Ferrars must have seen it. Ackroyd is not the type of the great lover who can forgive all for love's sake. He is fundamentally a good citizen. All that was sound and wholesome and law-abiding in him must have turned from her utterly in that moment of revelation.

'Yes,' he went on, in a low, monotonous voice, 'she confessed everything. It seems that there is one person who has known all along—who has been blackmailing her for huge sums. It was the strain of that that drove her nearly mad.'

'Who was the man?'

Suddenly before my eyes there arose the picture of Ralph Paton and Mrs Ferrars side by side. Their heads so close together. I felt a momentary

'Ackroyd, Ackroyd! It's Sheppard. Let me in.'

And still—silence. Not a sign of life from within the locked room. Parker and I glanced at each other.

'Look here, Parker,' I said, 'I'm going to break this door in—or rather, we are. I'll take the responsibility.'

'If you say so, sir,' said Parker, rather doubtfully.

'I do say so. I'm seriously alarmed about Mr Ackroyd.'

I looked round the small lobby and picked up a heavy oak chair. Parker and I held it between us and advanced to the assault. Once, twice, and three times we hurled it against the lock. At the third blow it gave, and we staggered into the room.

Ackroyd was sitting as I had left him in the arm-chair before the fire. His head had fallen sideways, and clearly visible, just below the collar of his coat, was a shining piece of twisted metalwork.

Parker and I advanced till we stood over the recumbent figure. I heard the butler draw in his breath with a sharp hiss.

'Stabbed from be'ind,' he murmured. "Orrible!'

He wiped his moist brow with his handkerchief, then stretched out a hand gingerly towards the hilt of the dagger.

'You mustn't touch that,' I said sharply. 'Go at once to the telephone and ring up the police station. Inform them of what has happened. Then tell Mr Raymond and Major Blunt.'

'Very good, sir.'

Parker hurried away, still wiping his perspiring brow.

I did what little had to be done. I was careful not to disturb the position of the body, and not to handle the dagger at all. No object was to be attained by moving it. Ackroyd had clearly been dead some little time.

Then I heard young Raymond's voice, horror-stricken and incredulous, outside.

'What do you say? Oh! impossible! Where's the doctor?'

He appeared impetuously in the doorway, then stopped dead, his face very white. A hand put him aside, and Hector Blunt came past him into the room.

'My God!' said Raymond from behind him; 'it's true, then.'

Blunt came straight on till he reached the chair. He bent over the body, and I thought that, like Parker, he was going to lay hold of the dagger hilt. I drew him back with one hand.

'Nothing must be moved,' I explained. 'The police must see him exactly as he is now.'

Blunt nodded in instant comprehension. His face was expressionless as ever, but I thought I detected signs of emotion beneath the stolid mask. Geoffrey Raymond had joined us now, and stood peering over Blunt's shoulder at the body.

'This is terrible,' he said in a low voice.

He had regained his composure, but as he took off the pince-nez he habitually wore and polished them I observed that his hand was shaking.

'Robbery, I suppose,' he said. 'How did the fellow get in? Through the window? Has anything been taken?'

He went towards the desk.

'You think it's burglary?' I said slowly.

'What else could it be? There's no question of suicide, I suppose?'

'No man could stab himself in such a way,' I said confidently. 'It's murder right enough. But with what motive?'

'Roger hadn't an enemy in the world,' said Blunt quietly. 'Must have been burglars. But what was the thief after? Nothing seems to be disarranged?'

He looked round the room. Raymond was still sorting the papers on the desk.

'There seems nothing missing, and none of the drawers show signs of having been tampered with,' the secretary observed at last. 'It's very mysterious.'

Blunt made a slight motion with his head.

'There are some letters on the floor here,' he said.

I looked down. Three or four letters still lay where Ackroyd had dropped them earlier in the evening.

But the blue envelope containing Mrs Ferrars's letter had disappeared. I half opened my mouth to speak, but at that moment the sound of a bell pealed through the house. There was a confused murmur of voices in the hall, and then Parker appeared with our local inspector and a police constable.

Somewhat surprised, I got up and went to it. It was not a French window, but one of the ordinary sash type. The heavy blue velvet curtains were drawn in front of it, but the window itself was open at the top.

Parker reëntered the room with my bag while I was still at the window.

'That's all right,' I said, emerging again into the room.

'You've put the latch across?'

'Yes, yes. What's the matter with you, Ackroyd?'

The door had just closed behind Parker, or I would not have put the question.

Ackroyd waited just a minute before replying.

'I'm in hell,' he said slowly, after a minute. 'No, don't bother with those damned tablets. I only said that for Parker. Servants are so curious. Come here and sit down. The door's closed too, isn't it?'

'Yes. Nobody can overhear; don't be uneasy.'

'Sheppard, nobody knows what I've gone through in the last twenty-four hours. If a man's house ever fell in ruins about him, mine has about me. This business of Ralph's is the last straw. But we won't talk about that now. It's the other—the other—! I don't know what to do about it. And I've got to make up my mind soon.'

'What's the trouble?'

Ackroyd remained silent for a minute or two. He seemed curiously averse to begin. When he did speak, the question he asked came as a complete surprise. It was the last thing I expected.

'Sheppard, you attended Ashley Ferrars in his last illness, didn't you?'

'Yes, I did.'

He seemed to find even greater difficulty in framing his next question.

'Did you never suspect—did it ever enter your head—that—well, that he might have been poisoned?'

I was silent for a minute or two. Then I made up my mind what to say. Roger Ackroyd was not Caroline.

'I'll tell you the truth,' I said. 'At the time I had no suspicion whatever, but since—well, it was mere idle talk on my sister's part that first put the idea into my head. Since then I haven't been able to get it out again. But, mind you, I've no foundation whatever for that suspicion.'

'He was poisoned,' said Ackroyd.

He spoke in a dull heavy voice.

Dinner was not a cheerful affair. Ackroyd was visibly preoccupied. He looked wretched, and ate next to nothing. Mrs Ackroyd, Raymond, and I kept the conversation going. Flora seemed affected by her uncle's depression, and Blunt relapsed into his usual taciturnity.

Immediately after dinner Ackroyd slipped his arm through mine and led me off to his study.

'Once we've had coffee, we shan't be disturbed again,' he explained. 'I told Raymond to see to it that we shouldn't be interrupted.'

I studied him quietly without appearing to do so. He was clearly under the influence of some strong excitement. For a minute or two he paced up and down the room, then, as Parker entered with the coffee tray, he sank into an arm-chair in front of the fire.

The study was a comfortable apartment. Book-shelves lined one wall of it. The chairs were big and covered in dark blue leather. A large desk stood by the window and was covered with papers neatly docketed and filed. On a round table were various magazines and sporting papers.

'I've had a return of that pain after food lately,' remarked Ackroyd casually, as he helped himself to coffee. 'You must give me some more of those tablets of yours.'

It struck me that he was anxious to convey the impression that our conference was a medical one. I played up accordingly.

'I thought as much. I brought some up with me.'

'Good man. Hand them over now.'

'They're in my bag in the hall. I'll get them.'

Ackroyd arrested me.

'Don't you trouble. Parker will get them. Bring in the doctor's bag, will you, Parker?'

'Very good, sir.'

Parker withdrew. As I was about to speak, Ackroyd threw up his hand.

'Not yet. Wait. Don't you see I'm in such a state of nerves that I can hardly contain myself?'

I saw that plainly enough. And I was very uneasy. All sorts of forebodings assailed me.

Ackroyd spoke again almost immediately.

'Make certain that window's closed, will you?' he asked.

'Good evening, gentlemen,' said the inspector. 'I'm terribly sorry for this! A good kind gentleman like Mr Ackroyd. The butler says it is murder. No possibility of accident or suicide, doctor?'

'None whatever,' I said.

'Ah! A bad business.'

He came and stood over the body.

'Been moved at all?' he asked sharply.

'Beyond making certain that life was extinct—an easy matter—I have not disturbed the body in any way.'

'Ah! And everything points to the murderer having got clear away—for the moment, that is. Now then, let me hear all about it. Who found the body?'

I explained the circumstances carefully.

'A telephone message, you say? From the butler?'

'A message that I never sent,' declared Parker earnestly. 'I've not been near the telephone the whole evening. The others can bear me out that I haven't.'

'Very odd, that. Did it sound like Parker's voice, doctor?'

'Well—I can't say I noticed. I took it for granted, you see.'

'Naturally. Well, you got up here, broke in the door, and found poor Mr Ackroyd like this. How long should you say he had been dead, doctor?'

'Half an hour at least—perhaps longer,' I said.

'The door was locked on the inside, you say? What about the window?'

'I myself closed and bolted it earlier in the evening at Mr Ackroyd's request.'

The inspector strode across to it and threw back the curtains.

'Well, it's open now anyway,' he remarked.

True enough, the window was open, the lower sash being raised to its fullest extent.

The inspector produced a pocket torch and flashed it along the sill outside.

'This is the way he went all right,' he remarked, 'and got in. See here.'

In the light of the powerful torch, several clearly defined footmarks could be seen. They seemed to be those of shoes with rubber studs in the soles. One particularly clear one pointed inwards, another, slightly overlapping it, pointed outwards.

'Plain as a pikestaff,' said the inspector. 'Any valuables missing?'

Geoffrey Raymond shook his head.

'Not so that we can discover. Mr Ackroyd never kept anything of particular value in this room.'

'H'm,' said the inspector. 'Man found an open window. Climbed in, saw Mr Ackroyd sitting there—maybe he'd fallen asleep. Man stabbed him from behind, then lost his nerve and made off. But he's left his tracks pretty clearly. We ought to get hold of him without much difficulty. No suspicious strangers been hanging about anywhere?'

'Oh!' I said suddenly.

'What is it, doctor?'

'I met a man this evening—just as I was turning out of the gate. He asked me the way to Fernly Park.'

'What time would that be?'

'Just nine o'clock. I heard it chime the hour as I was turning out of the gate.'

'Can you describe him?'

I did so to the best of my ability.

The inspector turned to the butler.

'Any one answering that description come to the front door?'

'No, sir. No one has been to the house at all this evening.'

'What about the back?'

'I don't think so, sir, but I'll make inquiries.'

He moved towards the door, but the inspector held up a large hand.

'No, thanks. I'll do my own inquiring. But first of all I want to fix the time a little more clearly. When was Mr Ackroyd last seen alive?'

'Probably by me,' I said, 'when I left at—let me see—about ten minutes to nine. He told me that he didn't wish to be disturbed, and I repeated the order to Parker.'

'Just so, sir,' said Parker respectfully.

'Mr Ackroyd was certainly alive at half-past nine,' put in Raymond, 'for I heard his voice in here talking.'

'Who was he talking to?'

'That I don't know. Of course, at the time I took it for granted that it was Dr Sheppard who was with him. I wanted to ask him a question about some papers I was engaged upon, but when I heard the voices I

A lot of people know Hector Blunt—at least by repute. He has shot more wild animals in unlikely places than any man living, I suppose. When you mention him, people say: 'Blunt—you don't mean the big game man, do you?'

His friendship with Ackroyd has always puzzled me a little. The two men are so totally dissimilar. Hector Blunt is perhaps five years Ackroyd's junior. They made friends early in life, and though their ways have diverged, the friendship still holds. About once in two years Blunt spends a fortnight at Fernly, and an immense animal's head, with an amazing number of horns which fixes you with a glazed stare as soon as you come inside the front door, is a permanent reminder of the friendship.

Blunt had entered the room now with his own peculiar, deliberate, yet soft-footed tread. He is a man of medium height, sturdily and rather stockily built. His face is almost mahogany-coloured, and is peculiarly expressionless. He has gray eyes that give the impression of always watching something that is happening very far away. He talks little, and what he does say is said jerkily, as though the words were forced out of him unwillingly.

He said now: 'How are you, Sheppard?' in his usual abrupt fashion, and then stood squarely in front of the fireplace looking over our heads as though he saw something very interesting happening in Timbuctoo.

'Major Blunt,' said Flora, 'I wish you'd tell me about these African things. I'm sure you know what they all are.'

I have heard Hector Blunt described as a woman hater, but I noticed that he joined Flora at the silver table with what might be described as alacrity. They bent over it together.

I was afraid Mrs Ackroyd would begin talking about settlements again, so I made a few hurried remarks about the new sweet pea. I knew there was a new sweet pea because the Daily Mail had told me so that morning. Mrs Ackroyd knows nothing about horticulture, but she is the kind of woman who likes to appear well-informed about the topics of the day, and she, too, reads the Daily Mail. We were able to converse quite intelligently until Ackroyd and his secretary joined us, and immediately afterwards Parker announced dinner.

My place at table was between Mrs Ackroyd and Flora. Blunt was on Mrs Ackroyd's other side, and Geoffrey Raymond next to him.