

'Flora has been saved a terrible amount of notoriety and unpleasantness. Not for a moment that I think dear Ralph had anything to do with poor Roger's death. I don't think so. But then I have a trusting heart—I always have had, ever since a child. I am loath to believe the worst of any one. But, of course, one must remember that Ralph was in several air raids as a young boy. The results are apparent long after, sometimes, they say. People are not responsible for their actions in the least. They lose control, you know, without being able to help it.'

'Mother,' cried Flora, 'you don't think Ralph did it?'

'Come, Mrs Ackroyd,' said Blunt.

'I don't know what to think,' said Mrs Ackroyd tearfully. 'It's all very upsetting. What would happen to the estate, I wonder, if Ralph were found guilty?'

Raymond pushed his chair away from the table violently. Major Blunt remained very quiet, looking thoughtfully at her. 'Like shell-shock, you know,' said Mrs Ackroyd obstinately, 'and I dare say Roger kept him very short of money—with the best intentions, of course. I can see you are all against me, but I do think it is very odd that Ralph has not come forward, and I must say I am thankful Flora's engagement was never announced formally.'

'It will be to-morrow,' said Flora in a clear voice.

'Flora!' cried her mother, aghast.

Flora had turned to the secretary.

'Will you send the announcement to the Morning Post and the Times, please, Mr Raymond?'

'If you are sure that it is wise, Miss Ackroyd,' he replied gravely.

She turned impulsively to Blunt.

'You understand,' she said. 'What else can I do? As things are, I must stand by Ralph. Don't you see that I must?'

She looked very searchingly at him, and after a long pause he nodded abruptly.

Mrs Ackroyd burst out into shrill protests. Flora remained unmoved. Then Raymond spoke.

'I appreciate your motives, Miss Ackroyd. But don't you think you're being rather precipitate? Wait a day or two.'

'To-morrow,' said Flora, in a clear voice. 'It's no good, mother, going on like this. Whatever else I am, I'm not disloyal to my friends.'

'M. Poirot,' Mrs Ackroyd appealed tearfully, 'can't you say anything at all? Nothing to be said,' interpolated Blunt. 'She's doing the right thing. I'll stand by her through thick and thin.'

Flora held out her hand to him.

'Thank you, Major Blunt,' she said.

'Mademoiselle,' said Poirot, 'will you let an old man congratulate you on your courage and your loyalty? And will you not misunderstand me if I ask you—ask you most solemnly—to postpone the announcement you speak of for at least two days more?'

Flora hesitated.

'I ask it in Ralph Paton's interests as much as in yours, mademoiselle. You frown. You do not see how that can be. But I assure you that it is so. Pas de blagues. You put the case into my hands—you must not hamper me now.'

Flora paused a few minutes before replying.

'I do not like it,' she said at last, 'but I will do what you say.'

She sat down again at the table.

'And now, messieurs et mesdames,' said Poirot rapidly, 'I will continue with what I was about to say. Understand this, I mean to arrive at the truth. The truth, however ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to the seeker after it. I am much aged, my powers may not be what they were.' Here he clearly expected a contradiction. 'In all probability this is the last case I shall ever investigate. But Hercule Poirot does not end with a failure. Messieurs et mesdames, I tell you, I mean to know. And I shall know—in spite of you all.'

He brought out the last words provocatively, hurling them in our face as it were. I think we all flinched back a little, excepting Geoffrey Raymond, who remained good humoured and imperturbable as usual.

'How do you mean—in spite of us all?' he asked, with slightly raised eyebrows.

'But—just that, monsieur. Every one of you in this room is concealing something from me.' He raised his hand as a faint murmur of protest arose.

'Yes, yes, I know what I am saying. It may be something unimportant—trivial—which is supposed to have no bearing on the case, but there it is. Each one of you has something to hide. Come, now, am I right?'

His glance, challenging and accusing, swept round the table. And every pair of eyes dropped before his. Yes, mine as well.

'I am answered,' said Poirot, with a curious laugh. He got up from his seat.

'I appeal to you all. Tell me the truth—the whole truth.' There was a silence.

'Will no one speak?'

He gave the same short laugh again.

'C'est dommage,' he said, and went out.

of guilt. Mademoiselle, if you really believe in his innocence, persuade him to come forward before it is too late.'

Flora's face had gone very white.

'Too late!' she repeated, very low.

Poirot leant forward, looking at her.

'See now, mademoiselle,' he said very gently, 'it is Papa Poirot who asks you this. The old Papa Poirot who has much knowledge and much experience. I would not seek to entrap you, mademoiselle. Will you not trust me—and tell me where Ralph Paton is hiding?'

The girl rose, and stood facing him.

'M. Poirot,' she said in a clear voice, 'I swear to you—swear solemnly—that I have no idea where Ralph is, and that I have neither seen him nor heard from him either on the day of—or the murder, or since.'

She sat down again. Poirot gazed at her in silence for a minute or two, then he brought his hand down on the table with a sharp rap.

'Bien! That is that,' he said. His face hardened. 'Now I appeal to these others who sit round this table, Mrs Ackroyd, Major Blunt, Dr Sheppard, Mr Raymond. You are all friends and intimates of the missing man. If you know where Ralph Paton is hiding, speak out.'

There was a long silence. Poirot looked to each in turn.

'I beg of you,' he said in a low voice, 'speak out.'

But still there was silence, broken at last by Mrs Ackroyd.

'I must say,' she observed in a plaintive voice, 'that Ralph's absence is most peculiar—most peculiar indeed. Not to come forward at such a time. It looks, you know, as though there were something behind it. I can't help thinking, Flora dear, that it was a very fortunate thing your engagement was never formally announced.'

'Mother!' cried Flora angrily.

'Providence,' declared Mrs Ackroyd. 'I have a devout belief in Providence—a divinity that shapes our ends, as Shakespeare's beautiful line runs.'

'Surely you don't make the Almighty directly responsible for thick ankles, Mrs Ackroyd, do you?' asked Geoffrey Raymond, his irresponsible laugh ringing out.

His idea was, I think, to loosen the tension, but Mrs Ackroyd threw him a glance of reproach and took out her handkerchief.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders again.

'To make a confusing case even more confusing.'

'Well,' said the inspector, 'I'll look into it. What gave you the idea in the first place?'

'When you were so kind as to show me the dagger and draw attention to the fingerprints, I know very little of loops and whorls—see, I confess my ignorance frankly. But it did occur to me that the position of the prints was somewhat awkward. Not so would I have held a dagger in order to strike. Naturally, with the right hand brought up over the shoulder backwards, it would have been difficult to put it in exactly the right position.'

Inspector Raglan stared at the little man. Poirot, with an air of great unconcern, flicked a speck of dust from his coat sleeve.

'Well,' said the inspector, 'it's an idea. I'll look into it all right, but don't you be disappointed if nothing comes of it.'

He endeavoured to make his tone kindly and patronizing. Poirot watched him go off. Then he turned to me with twinkling eyes.

'Another time,' he observed, 'I must be more careful of his amour propre. And now that we are left to our own devices, what do you think, my good friend, of a little reunion of the family?'

The 'little reunion,' as Poirot called it, took place about half an hour later. We sat round the table in the dining-room at Fernly—Poirot at the head of the table, like the chairman of some ghastly board meeting. The servants were not present, so we were six in all. Mrs Ackroyd, Flora, Major Blunt, young Raymond, Poirot, and myself.

When every one was assembled, Poirot rose and bowed.

'Messieurs, mesdames, I have called you together for a certain purpose.' He paused. 'To begin with, I want to make a very special plea to mademoiselle.'

'To me?' said Flora.

'Mademoiselle, you are engaged to Captain Ralph Paton. If any one is in his confidence, you are. I beg you, most earnestly, if you know of his whereabouts, to persuade him to come forward. One little minute'—as Flora raised her head to speak—'say nothing till you have well reflected. Mademoiselle, his position grows daily more dangerous. If he had come forward at once, no matter how damning the facts, he might have had a chance of explaining them away. But this silence—this flight—what can it mean? Surely only one thing, knowledge

Chapter 13



HAT evening, at Poirot's request, I went over to his house after dinner. Caroline saw me depart with visible reluctance. I think she would have liked to have accompanied me.

Poirot greeted me hospitably. He had placed a bottle of Irish whisky (which I detest) on a small table, with a soda water siphon and a glass. He himself was engaged in brewing hot chocolate. It was a favourite beverage of his, I discovered later.

He inquired politely after my sister, whom he declared to be a most interesting woman.

'I'm afraid you've been giving her a swelled head,' I said dryly. 'What about Sunday afternoon?'

He laughed and twinkled.

'I always like to employ the expert,' he remarked obscurely, but he refused to explain the remark.

'You got all the local gossip anyway,' I remarked. 'True, and untrue. And a great deal of valuable information,' he added quietly.

'Such as—?'

He shook his head.

'Why not have told me the truth?' he countered. 'In a place like this, all Ralph Paton's doings were bound to be known. If your sister had not happened to pass through the wood that day somebody else would have done so.'

'I suppose they would,' I said grumpily. 'What about this interest of yours in my patients?'

Again he twinkled.

'Only one of them, doctor. Only one of them.'

'The last?' I hazarded.

'I find Miss Russell a study of the most interesting,' he said evasively.

'Do you agree with my sister and Mrs Ackroyd that there is something fishy about her?' I asked.

'Eh? What do you say—fishy?'

I explained to the best of my ability.

'And they say that, do they?'

'Didn't my sister convey as much to you yesterday afternoon?'

'C'est possible.'

'For no reason whatever,' I declared.

'Les femmes,' generalized Poirot. 'They are marvellous! They invent haphazard—and by miracle they are right. Not that it is that, really. Women observe subconsciously a thousand little details, without knowing that they are doing so. Their subconscious mind adds these little things together—and they call the result intuition. Me, I am very skilled in psychology. I know these things.'

He swelled his chest out importantly, looking so ridiculous, that I found it difficult not to burst out laughing. Then he took a small sip of his chocolate, and carefully wiped his moustache.

'I wish you'd tell me,' I burst out, 'what you really think of it all?'

He put down his cup.

'You wish that?'

'I do.'

'You have seen what I have seen. Should not our ideas be the same?'
'I'm afraid you're laughing at me,' I said stiffly. 'Of course, I've no experience of matters of this kind.'

Poirot smiled at me indulgently.

'You are like the little child who wants to know the way the engine works. You wish to see the affair, not as the family doctor sees it, but with the eye of a detective who knows and cares for no one—to whom they are all strangers and all equally liable to suspicion.'

'You put it very well,' I said.

'So I give you then, a little lecture. The first thing is to get a clear history of what happened that evening—always bearing in mind that the person who speaks may be lying.'

'Come now,' he said at last, annoyed by Poirot's detached manner, 'you've got to admit that those prints were made by some one who was in the house that night?'

'Bien entendu,' said Poirot, nodding his head.

'Well, I've taken the prints of every member of the household, every one, mind you, from the old lady down to the kitchenmaid.'

I don't think Mrs Ackroyd would enjoy being referred to as the old lady. She must spend a considerable amount on cosmetics.

'Every one's,' repeated the inspector fussily.
'Including mine,' I said dryly.

'Very well. None of them correspond. That leaves us two alternatives. Ralph Paton, or the mysterious stranger the doctor here tells us about. When we get hold of those two—'

'Much valuable time may have been lost,' broke in Poirot.

'I don't quite get you, Mr Poirot?'

You have taken the prints of every one in the house, you say,' murmured Poirot. 'Is that the exact truth you are telling me there, M. l'Inspecteur?'

'Certainly.'

'Without overlooking any one?'

'Without overlooking any one.'

'The quick or the dead?'

For a moment the inspector looked bewildered at what he took to be a religious observation. Then he reacted slowly.

'You mean—'

'The dead, M. l'Inspecteur.'

The inspector still took a minute or two to understand.

'I am suggesting,' said Poirot placidly, 'that the fingerprints on the dagger handle are those of Mr Ackroyd himself. It is an easy matter to verify. His body is still available.'

'But why? What would be the point of it? You're surely not suggesting suicide, Mr Poirot?'

'Ah! no. My theory is that the murderer wore gloves or wrapped something round his hand. After the blow was struck, he picked up the victim's hand and closed it round the dagger handle.'

'But why?'

'Well, it's on the cards. That telephone message from the station, just three minutes before the Liverpool express left—there ought to be something in that.'

'Unless it was deliberately intended to throw you off the scent. That might just possibly be the point of the telephone message.'

'That's an idea,' said the inspector eagerly. 'Do you really think that's the explanation of the telephone call?'

'My friend,' said Poirot gravely, 'I do not know. But I will tell you this: I believe that when we find the explanation of that telephone call we shall find the explanation of the murder.'

'You said something like that before, I remember,' I observed, looking at him curiously.

Poirot nodded.

'I always come back to it,' he said seriously.

'It seems to me utterly irrelevant,' I declared.

'I wouldn't say that,' demurred the inspector. 'But I must confess I think Mr Poirot here harps on it a little too much. We've better clews than that. The fingerprints on the dagger, for instance.'

Poirot became suddenly very foreign in manner, as he often did when excited over anything.

'M. l'Inspecteur,' he said, 'beware of the blind—the blind—comment dire?—the little street that has no end to it.'

Inspector Raglan stared, but I was quicker.

'You mean a blind alley?' I said.

'That is it—the blind street that leads nowhere. So it may be with those fingerprints—they may lead you nowhere.'

'I don't see how that can well be,' said the police officer. 'I suppose you're hinting that they're faked? I've read of such things being done, though I can't say I've ever come across it in my experience. But fake or true—they're bound to lead somewhere.'

Poirot merely shrugged his shoulders, flinging out his arms wide.

The inspector then showed us various enlarged photographs of the fingerprints, and proceeded to become technical on the subject of loops and whorls.

I raised my eyebrows.

'Rather a suspicious attitude.'

'But necessary—I assure you, necessary. Now first—Dr Sheppard leaves the house at ten minutes to nine. How do I know that?'

'Because I told you so.'

'But you might not be speaking the truth—or the watch you went by might be wrong. But Parker also says that you left the house at ten minutes to nine. So we accept that statement and pass on. At nine o'clock you run into a man—and here we come to what we will call the Romance of the Mysterious Stranger—just outside the Park gates. How do I know that that is so?'

'I told you so,' I began again, but Poirot interrupted me with a gesture of impatience.

'Ah! but it is that you are a little stupid to-night, my friend. You know that it is so—but how am I to know? Eh bien, I am able to tell you that the Mysterious Stranger was not a hallucination on your part, because the maid of a Miss Ganett met him a few minutes before you did, and of her too he inquired the way to Fernly Park. We accept his presence, therefore, and we can be fairly sure of two things about him—that he was a stranger to the neighbourhood, and that whatever his object in going to Fernly, there was no great secrecy about it, since he twice asked the way there.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I see that.'

'Now I have made it my business to find out more about this man. He had a drink at the "Three Boars", I learn, and the barmaid there says that he spoke with an American accent and mentioned having just come over from the States. Did it strike you that he had an American accent?'

'Yes, I think he had,' I said, after a minute or two, during which I cast my mind back; 'but a very slight one.'

'Précisément. There is also this which, you will remember, I picked up in the summer-house?'

He held out to me the little quill. I looked at it curiously. Then a memory of something I had read stirred in me.

Poirot, who had been watching my face, nodded.

'Yes, heroin "snow." Drug-takers carry it like this, and sniff it up the nose.' 'Diamorphine hydrochloride,' I murmured mechanically.

'This method of taking the drug is very common on the other side. Another proof, if we wanted one, that the man came from Canada or the States.'

'What first attracted your attention to that summer-house?' I asked curiously.

'My friend the inspector took it for granted that any one using that path did so as a short cut to the house, but as soon as I saw the summer-house, I realized that the same path would be taken by any one using the summer-house as a rendezvous. Now it seems fairly certain that the stranger came neither to the front nor to the back door. Then did some one from the house go out and meet him? If so, what could be a more convenient place than that little summer-house? I searched it with the hope that I might find some clew inside. I found two, the scrap of cambric and the quill.'

'And the scrap of cambric?' I asked curiously. 'What about that?'

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

'You do not use your little gray cells,' he remarked dryly. 'The scrap of starched cambric should be obvious.'

'Not very obvious to me.' I changed the subject. 'Anyway,' I said, 'this man went to the summer-house to meet somebody. Who was that somebody?'

'Exactly the question,' said Poirot. 'You will remember that Mrs Ackroyd and her daughter came over from Canada to live here?'

'Is that what you meant to-day when you accused them of hiding the truth?'
'Perhaps. Now another point. What did you think of the parlourmaid's story?'

'What story?'

'The story of her dismissal. Does it take half an hour to dismiss a servant? Was the story of those important papers a likely one? And remember, though she says she was in her bedroom from nine-thirty until ten o'clock, there is no one to confirm her statement.'

'You bewilder me,' I said.

'To me it grows clearer. But tell me now your own ideas and theories.'

I drew a piece of paper from my pocket.

'I just scribbled down a few suggestions,' I said apologetically.

'But excellent—you have method. Let us hear them.'

I read out in a somewhat embarrassed voice.

'To begin with, one must look at the thing logically—'

Chapter 12

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joint inquest was held on Monday.

A I do not propose to give the proceedings in detail. To do so would only be to go over the same ground again and again. By arrangement with the police, very little was allowed to come out. I gave evidence as to the cause of Ackroyd's death and the probable time. The absence of Ralph Paton was commented on by the coroner, but not unduly stressed. Afterwards, Poirot and I had a few words with Inspector Raglan. The inspector was very grave.

'It looks bad, Mr Poirot,' he said. 'I'm trying to judge the thing fair and square. I'm a local man, and I've seen Captain Paton many times in Cranchester. I'm not wanting him to be the guilty one—but it's bad whichever way you look at it. If he's innocent, why doesn't he come forward? We've got evidence against him, but it's just possible that that evidence could be explained away. Then why doesn't he give an explanation?'

A lot more lay behind the inspector's words than I knew at the time. Ralph's description had been wired to every port and railway station in England. The police everywhere were on the alert. His rooms in town were watched, and any houses he had been known to be in the habit of frequenting. With such a cordon it seemed impossible that Ralph should be able to evade detection. He had no luggage, and, as far as any one knew, no money.

'I can't find any one who saw him at the station that night,' continued the inspector. 'And yet he's well known down here, and you'd think somebody would have noticed him. There's no news from Liverpool either.'

'You think he went to Liverpool?' queried Poirot.

'Just what my poor Hastings used to say,' interrupted Poirot, 'but alas! he never did so.'

'Point No. 1.—Mr Ackroyd was heard talking to some one at half-past nine.

Point No. 2.—At some time during the evening Ralph Paton must have come in through the window, as evidenced by the prints of his shoes.

Point No. 3.—Mr Ackroyd was nervous that evening, and would only have admitted some one he knew.

Point No. 4.—The person with Mr Ackroyd at nine-thirty was asking for money. We know Ralph Paton was in a scrape.

These four points go to show that the person with Mr Ackroyd at nine-thirty was Ralph Paton. But we know that Mr Ackroyd was alive at a quarter to ten, therefore it was not Ralph who killed him. Ralph left the window open. Afterwards the murderer came in that way.

'And who was the murderer?' inquired Poirot.

'The American stranger. He may have been in league with Parker, and possibly in Parker we have the man who blackmailed Mrs Ferrars. If so, Parker may have heard enough to realize the game was up, have told his accomplice so, and the latter did the crime with the dagger which Parker gave him.'

'It is a theory that,' admitted Poirot. 'Decidedly you have cells of a kind. But it leaves a good deal unaccounted for.'

'Such as—?'

'The telephone call, the pushed-out chair—'

'Do you really think the latter important?' I interrupted.

'Perhaps not,' admitted my friend. 'It may have been pulled out by accident, and Raymond or Blunt may have shoved it into place unconsciously under the stress of emotion. Then there is the missing forty pounds.'

'Given by Ackroyd to Ralph,' I suggested. 'He may have reconsidered his first refusal.'

'That still leaves one thing unexplained?'

'What?'

'Why was Blunt so certain in his own mind that it was Raymond with Mr Ackroyd at nine-thirty?'

'He explained that,' I said.

'You think so? I will not press the point. Tell me instead, what were Ralph Paton's reasons for disappearing?'

'That's rather more difficult,' I said slowly. 'I shall have to speak as a medical man. Ralph's nerves must have gone phut! If he suddenly found out that his uncle had been murdered within a few minutes of his leaving him—after, perhaps, a rather stormy interview—well, he might get the wind up and clear right out. Men have been known to do that—act guiltily when they're perfectly innocent.'

'Yes, that is true,' said Poirot. 'But we must not lose sight of one thing.'

'I know what you're going to say,' I remarked: 'motive. Ralph Paton inherits a great fortune by his uncle's death.'

'That is one motive,' agreed Poirot.

'One?'

'Mais oui. Do you realize that there are three separate motives staring us in the face. Somebody certainly stole the blue envelope and its contents. That is one motive. Blackmail! Ralph Paton may have been the man who blackmailed Mrs Ferrars. Remember, as far as Hammond knew, Ralph Paton had not applied to his uncle for help of late. That looks as though he were being supplied with money elsewhere. Then there is the fact that he was in some—how do you say—scrape?—which he feared might get to his uncle's ears. And finally there is the one you have just mentioned.'

'Dear me,' I said, rather taken aback. 'The case does seem black against him.'

'Does it?' said Poirot. 'That is where we disagree, you and I. Three motives—it is almost too much. I am inclined to believe that, after all, Ralph Paton is innocent.'

I heard Caroline's voice, rather acid in note, calling from the top of the stairs.

'James, you will be late for dinner.'

I put some coal on the fire and went upstairs obediently. It is well at any price to have peace in the home.