speaking into the dictaphone. It seems clear that the man Charles Kent was really off the premises by then. As to Ralph Paton—?'

He hesitated, glancing at Ursula.

Her colour flared up, but she answered steadily enough.

'Ralph and I parted just before a quarter to ten. He never went near the house, I am sure of that. He had no intention of doing so. The last thing on earth he wanted was to face his stepfather. He would have funked it badly.'

'It isn't that I doubt your story for a moment,' explained Raymond. 'I've always been quite sure Captain Paton was innocent. But one has to think of a court of law—and the questions that would be asked. He is in a most unfortunate position, but if he were to come forward— '

Poirot interrupted.

'That is your advice, yes? That he should come forward?'

'Certainly. If you know where he is— '

'I perceive that you do not believe that I do know. And yet I have told you just now that I know everything. The truth of the telephone call, of the footprints on the window-sill, of the hiding-place of Ralph Paton— '

'Where is he?' said Blunt sharply.

'Not very far away,' said Poirot, smiling.

'In Cranchester?' I asked.

Poirot turned towards me.

'Always you ask me that. The idea of Cranchester it is with you an idée fixe. No, he is not in Cranchester. He is—THERE!'

He pointed a dramatic forefinger. Every one's head turned.

Ralph Paton was standing in the doorway.

Chapter 24

Ralph Paton's Story

It was a very uncomfortable minute for me. I hardly took in what happened next, but there were exclamations and cries of surprise! When I was sufficiently master of myself to be able to realize what was going on, Ralph Paton was standing by his wife, her hand in his, and he was smiling across the room at me.

Poirot, too, was smiling, and at the same time shaking an eloquent finger at me.

'Have I not told you at least thirty-six times that it is useless to conceal things from Hercule Poirot?' he demanded. 'That in such a case he finds out?'

He turned to the others.

'One day, you remember, we held a little séance about a table—just the six of us. I accused the other five persons present of concealing something from me. Four of them gave up their secret. Dr Sheppard did not give up his. But all along I have had my suspicions. Dr Sheppard went to the "Three Boars" that night hoping to find Ralph. He did not find him there; but supposing, I said to myself, that he met him in the street on his way home? Dr Sheppard was a friend of Captain Paton's, and he had come straight from the scene of the crime. He must know that things looked very black against him. Perhaps he knew more than the general public did— '

'I did,' I said ruefully. 'I suppose I might as well make a clean breast of things now. I went to see Ralph that afternoon. At first he refused to take me into his confidence, but later he told me about his marriage, and the hole he was in. As soon as the murder was discovered, I realized that once the facts were known, suspicion could not fail to attach to Ralph—

or, if not to him, to the girl he loved. That night I put the facts plainly before him. The thought of having possibly to give evidence which might incriminate his wife made him resolve at all costs to—to— '

I hesitated, and Ralph filled up the gap.

'To do a bunk,' he said graphically. 'You see, Ursula left me to go back to the house. I thought it possible that she might have attempted to have another interview with my stepfather. He had already been very rude to her that afternoon. It occurred to me that he might have so insulted her—in such an unforgivable manner—that without knowing what she was doing— '

He stopped. Ursula released her hand from his, and stepped back.

'You thought that, Ralph! You actually thought that I might have done it?'

'Let us get back to the culpable conduct of Dr Sheppard,' said Poirot dryly. 'Dr Sheppard consented to do what he could to help him. He was successful in hiding Captain Paton from the police.'

'Where?' asked Raymond. 'In his own house?'

'Ah, no, indeed,' said Poirot. 'You should ask yourself the question that I did. If the good doctor is concealing the young man, what place would he choose? It must necessarily be somewhere near at hand. I think of Cranchester. A hotel? No. Lodgings? Even more emphatically, no. Where, then? Ah! I have it. A nursing home. A home for the mentally unfit. I test my theory. I invent a nephew with mental trouble. I consult Mademoiselle Sheppard as to suitable homes. She gives me the names of two near Cranchester to which her brother has sent patients. I make inquiries. Yes, at one of them a patient was brought there by the doctor himself early on Saturday morning. That patient, though known by another name, I had no difficulty in identifying as Captain Paton. After certain necessary formalities, I was allowed to bring him away. He arrived at my house in the early hours of yesterday morning.'

I looked at him ruefully.

'Caroline's Home Office expert,' I murmured. 'And to think I never guessed!'

'You see now why I drew attention to the reticence of your manuscript,' murmured Poirot. 'It was strictly truthful as far as it went—but it did not go very far, eh, my friend?'

'You mean he was reading a letter aloud,' said Raymond slowly. 'Even so, he must have been reading to some one.'

'But why? We have no evidence that there was any one else in the room. No other voice but Mr Ackroyd's was heard, remember.'

'Surely a man wouldn't read letters of that type aloud to himself—not unless he was—well—going balmy.'

'You have all forgotten one thing,' said Poirot softly: 'the stranger who called at the house the preceding Wednesday.'

They all stared at him.

'But yes,' said Poirot, nodding encouragingly, 'on Wednesday. The young man was not of himself important. But the firm he represented interested me very much.'

'The Dictaphone Company,' gasped Raymond. 'I see it now. A dictaphone. That's what you think?'

Poirot nodded.

'Mr Ackroyd had promised to invest in a dictaphone, you remember. Me, I had the curiosity to inquire of the company in question. Their reply is that Mr Ackroyd did purchase a dictaphone from their representative. Why he concealed the matter from you, I do not know.'

'He must have meant to surprise me with it,' murmured Raymond. 'He had quite a childish love of surprising people. Meant to keep it up his sleeve for a day or so. Probably was playing with it like a new toy. Yes, it fits in. You're quite right—no one would use quite those words in casual conversation.'

'It explains, too,' said Poirot, 'why Major Blunt thought it was you who were in the study. Such scraps as came to him were fragments of dictation, and so his subconscious mind deduced that you were with him. His conscious mind was occupied with something quite different—the white figure he had caught a glimpse of. He fancied it was Miss Ackroyd. Really, of course, it was Ursula Bourne's white apron he saw as she was stealing down to the summer-house.'

Raymond had recovered from his first surprise.

'All the same,' he remarked, 'this discovery of yours, brilliant though it is (I'm quite sure I should never have thought of it), leaves the essential position unchanged. Mr Ackroyd was alive at nine-thirty, since he was

So we come to another and most interesting aspect of the crime. Who was it in the room with Mr Ackroyd at nine-thirty? Not Ralph Paton, who was in the summer-house with his wife. Not Charles Kent, who had already left. Who, then? I posed my cleverest—my most audacious question: Was any one with him?'

Poirot leaned forward and shot the last words triumphantly at us, drawing back afterwards with the air of one who has made a decided hit.

Raymond, however, did not seem impressed, and lodged a mild protest.

'I don't know if you're trying to make me out a liar, M. Poirot, but the matter does not rest on my evidence alone—except perhaps as to the exact words used. Remember, Major Blunt also heard Mr Ackroyd talking to some one. He was on the terrace outside, and couldn't catch the words clearly, but he distinctly heard the voices.'

Poirot nodded.

'I have not forgotten,' he said quietly. 'But Major Blunt was under the impression that it was you to whom Mr Ackroyd was speaking.'

For a moment Raymond seemed taken aback. Then he recovered himself.

'Blunt knows now that he was mistaken,' he said.

'Exactly,' agreed the other man.

'Yet there must have been some reason for his thinking so,' mused Poirot. 'Oh! no,' he held up his hand in protest, 'I know the reason you will give—but it is not enough. We must seek elsewhere. I will put it this way. From the beginning of the case I have been struck by one thing—the nature of those words which Mr Raymond overheard. It has been amazing to me that no one has commented on them—has seen anything odd about them.'

He paused a minute, and then quoted softly:—

'... *The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late that I fear it is impossible for me to accede to your request.* Does nothing strike you as odd about that?'

'I don't think so,' said Raymond. 'He has frequently dictated letters to me, using almost exactly those same words.'

'Exactly,' cried Poirot. 'That is what I seek to arrive at. Would any man use such a phrase in talking to another? Impossible that that should be part of a real conversation. Now, if he had been dictating a letter— '

I was too abashed to argue.

'Dr Sheppard has been very loyal,' said Ralph. 'He has stood by me through thick and thin. He did what he thought was the best. I see now, from what M. Poirot has told me, that it was not really the best. I should have come forward and faced the music. You see, in the home, we never saw a newspaper. I knew nothing of what was going on.'

'Dr Sheppard has been a model of discretion,' said Poirot dryly. 'But me, I discover all the little secrets. It is my business.'

'Now we can have your story of what happened that night,' said Raymond impatiently.

'You know it already,' said Ralph. 'There's very little for me to add. I left the summer-house about nine-forty-five, and tramped about the lanes, trying to make up my mind as to what to do next—what line to take. I'm bound to admit that I've not the shadow of an alibi, but I give you my solemn word that I never went to the study, that I never saw my stepfather alive—or dead. Whatever the world thinks, I'd like all of you to believe me.'

'No alibi,' murmured Raymond. 'That's bad. I believe you, of course, but—it's a bad business.'

'It makes things very simple, though,' said Poirot, in a cheerful voice. 'Very simple indeed.'

We all stared at him.

'You see what I mean? No? Just this—to save Captain Paton the real criminal must confess.'

He beamed round at us all.

'But yes—I mean what I say. See now, I did not invite Inspector Raglan to be present. That was for a reason. I did not want to tell him all that I knew—at least I did not want to tell him to-night.'

He leaned forward, and suddenly his voice and his whole personality changed. He suddenly became dangerous.

'I who speak to you—I know the murderer of Mr Ackroyd is in this room now. It is to the murderer I speak. To-morrow the truth goes to Inspector Raglan. You understand?'

There was a tense silence. Into the midst of it came the old Breton woman with a telegram on a salver. Poirot tore it open.

Blunt's voice rose abrupt and resonant.

'The murderer is amongst us, you say? You know—which?'

Poirot had read the message. He crumpled it up in his hand.

'I know—now.'

He tapped the crumpled ball of paper.

'What is that?' said Raymond sharply.

'A wireless message—from a steamer now on her way to the United States.'

There was a dead silence. Poirot rose to his feet bowing.

'Messieurs et Mesdames, this reunion of mine is at an end. Remember—the truth goes to Inspector Raglan in the morning.'

meet some one. Now we know from Dr Sheppard that some one from outside did come to the house that night—the stranger whom he met just by the gate. At a first glance it would seem that our problem was solved, and that the stranger went to the summer-house to meet Ursula Bourne. It was fairly certain that he did go to the summer-house because of the goose quill. That suggested at once to my mind a taker of drugs—and one who had acquired the habit on the other side of the Atlantic where sniffing "snow" is more common than in this country. The man whom Dr Sheppard met had an American accent, which fitted in with that supposition.

But I was held up by one point. The times did not fit. Ursula Bourne could certainly not have gone to the summer-house before nine-thirty, whereas the man must have got there by a few minutes past nine. I could, of course, assume that he waited there for half an hour. The only alternative supposition was that there had been two separate meetings in the summer-house that night. Eh bien, as soon as I went into that alternative I found several significant facts. I discovered that Miss Russell, the housekeeper, had visited Dr Sheppard that morning, and had displayed a good deal of interest in cures for victims of the drug habit. Taking that in conjunction with the goose quill, I assumed that the man in question came to Fernly to meet the housekeeper, and not Ursula Bourne. Who, then, did Ursula Bourne come to the rendezvous to meet? I was not long in doubt. First I found a ring—a wedding ring—with "From R." and a date inside it. Then I learnt that Ralph Paton had been seen coming up the path which led to the summer-house at twenty-five minutes past nine, and I also heard of a certain conversation which had taken place in the wood near the village that very afternoon—a conversation between Ralph Paton and some unknown girl. So I had my facts succeeding each other in a neat and orderly manner. A secret marriage, an engagement announced on the day of the tragedy, the stormy interview in the wood, and the meeting arranged for the summer-house that night.

Incidentally this proved to me one thing, that both Ralph Paton and Ursula Bourne (or Paton) had the strongest motives for wishing Mr Ackroyd out of the way. And it also made one other point unexpectedly clear. It could not have been Ralph Paton who was with Mr Ackroyd in the study at nine-thirty.

'In Cranchester?' I hazarded.

'No,' replied Poirot gravely, 'not in Cranchester.'

He said no more, but at a gesture from him the assembled party took their seats. As they did so, the door opened once more and two other people came in and sat down near the door. They were Parker and the housekeeper.

'The number is complete,' said Poirot. 'Every one is here.'

There was a ring of satisfaction in his tone. And with the sound of it I saw a ripple of something like uneasiness pass over all those faces grouped at the other end of the room. There was a suggestion in all this as of a trap—a trap that had closed.

Poirot read from a list in an important manner.

'Mrs Ackroyd, Miss Flora Ackroyd, Major Blunt, Mr Geoffrey Raymond, Mrs Ralph Paton, John Parker, Elizabeth Russell.'

He laid the paper down on the table.

'What's the meaning of all this?' began Raymond.

'The list I have just read,' said Poirot, 'is a list of suspected persons. Every one of you present had the opportunity to kill Mr Ackroyd— '

With a cry Mrs Ackroyd sprang up, her throat working.

'I don't like it,' she wailed. 'I don't like it. I would much prefer to go home.'

'You cannot go home, madame,' said Poirot sternly, 'until you have heard what I have to say.'

He paused a moment, then cleared his throat.

'I will start at the beginning. When Miss Ackroyd asked me to investigate the case, I went up to Fernly Park with the good Dr Sheppard. I walked with him along the terrace, where I was shown the footprints on the window-sill. From there Inspector Raglan took me along the path which leads to the drive. My eye was caught by a little summer-house, and I searched it thoroughly. I found two things—a scrap of starched cambric and an empty goose quill. The scrap of cambric immediately suggested to me a maid's apron. When Inspector Raglan showed me his list of the people in the house, I noticed at once that one of the maids—Ursula Bourne, the parlourmaid—had no real alibi. According to her own story, she was in her bedroom from nine-thirty until ten. But supposing that instead she was in the summer-house? If so, she must have gone there to

Chapter 25

The Whole Truth

A slight gesture from Poirot enjoined me to stay behind the rest. I obeyed, going over to the fire and thoughtfully stirring the big logs on it with the toe of my boot.

I was puzzled. For the first time I was absolutely at sea as to Poirot's meaning. For a moment I was inclined to think that the scene I had just witnessed was a gigantic piece of bombast—that he had been what he called 'playing the comedy' with a view to making himself interesting and important. But, in spite of myself, I was forced to believe in an underlying reality. There had been real menace in his words—a certain indisputable sincerity. But I still believed him to be on entirely the wrong tack.

When the door shut behind the last of the party he came over to the fire.

'Well, my friend,' he said quietly, 'and what do you think of it all?'

'I don't know what to think,' I said frankly. 'What was the point? Why not go straight to Inspector Raglan with the truth instead of giving the guilty person this elaborate warning?'

Poirot sat down and drew out his case of tiny Russian cigarettes. He smoked for a minute or two in silence. Then:—

'Use your little gray cells,' he said. 'There is always a reason behind my actions.'

I hesitated for a moment, and then I said slowly:

'The first one that occurs to me is that you yourself do not know who the guilty person is, but that you are sure that he is to be found amongst the people here to-night. Therefore your words were intended to force a confession from the unknown murderer?'

Poirot nodded approvingly.

'A clever idea, but not the truth.'

'I thought, perhaps, that by making him believe you knew, you might force him out into the open—not necessarily by confession. He might try to silence you as he formerly silenced Mr Ackroyd—before you could act to-morrow morning.'

'A trap with myself as the bait! Merci, mon ami, but I am not sufficiently heroic for that.'

'Then I fail to understand you. Surely you are running the risk of letting the murderer escape by thus putting him on his guard?'

Poirot shook his head.

'He cannot escape,' he said gravely. 'There is only one way out—and that way does not lead to freedom.'

'You really believe that one of those people here to-night committed the murder?' I asked incredulously.

'Yes, my friend.'

'Which one?'

There was a silence for some minutes. Then Poirot tossed the stump of his cigarette into the grate and began to speak in a quiet, reflective tone.

'I will take you the way that I have travelled myself. Step by step you shall accompany me, and see for yourself that all the facts point indisputably to one person. Now, to begin with, there were two facts and one little discrepancy in time which especially attracted my attention. The first fact was the telephone call. If Ralph Paton were indeed the murderer, the telephone call became meaningless and absurd. Therefore, I said to myself, Ralph Paton is not the murderer.

I satisfied myself that the call could not have been sent by any one in the house, yet I was convinced that it was amongst those present on the fatal evening that I had to look for my criminal. Therefore I concluded that the telephone call must have been sent by an accomplice. I was not quite pleased with that deduction, but I let it stand for the minute.

I next examined the motive for the call. That was difficult. I could only get at it by judging its result. Which was—that the murder was discovered that night instead of—in all probability—the following morning. You agree with that?'

'This lady is Mrs Ralph Paton. She was married to Captain Paton last March.'

A little shriek burst from Mrs Ackroyd.

'Ralph! Married! Last March! Oh! but it's absurd. How could he be?'

She stared at Ursula as though she had never seen her before.

'Married to Bourne?' she said. 'Really, M. Poirot, I don't believe you.'

Ursula flushed and began to speak, but Flora forestalled her.

Going quickly to the other girl's side, she passed her hand through her arm.

'You must not mind our being surprised,' she said. 'You see, we had no idea of such a thing. You and Ralph have kept your secret very well. I am—very glad about it.'

'You are very kind, Miss Ackroyd,' said Ursula in a low voice, 'and you have every right to be exceedingly angry. Ralph behaved very badly—especially to you.'

'You needn't worry about that,' said Flora, giving her arm a consoling little pat. 'Ralph was in a corner and took the only way out. I should probably have done the same in his place. I do think he might have trusted me with the secret, though. I wouldn't have let him down.'

Poirot rapped gently on a table and cleared his throat significantly.

'The board meeting's going to begin,' said Flora. 'M. Poirot hints that we mustn't talk. But just tell me one thing. Where is Ralph? You must know if any one does.'

'But I don't,' cried Ursula, almost in a wail. 'That's just it, I don't.'

'Isn't he detained at Liverpool?' asked Raymond. 'It said so in the paper.'

'He is not at Liverpool,' said Poirot shortly.

'In fact,' I remarked, 'no one knows where he is.'

'Excepting Hercule Poirot, eh?' said Raymond.

Poirot replied seriously to the other's banter.

'Me, I know everything. Remember that.'

Geoffrey Raymond lifted his eyebrows.

'Everything?' He whistled. 'Whew! that's a tall order.'

'Do you mean to say you can really guess where Ralph Paton is hiding?' I asked incredulously.

'You call it guessing. I call it knowing, my friend.'

people to-night are suspects. Amongst them, I shall find the person who killed Mr Ackroyd.'

'You really believe that?' I said incredulously.

'I see that you do not,' said Poirot dryly. 'Not yet do you appreciate Hercule Poirot at his true worth.'

At that minute Ursula came down the staircase.

'You are ready, my child?' said Poirot. 'That is good. We will go to my house together. Mademoiselle Caroline, believe me, I do everything possible to render you service. Good-evening.'

We went out, leaving Caroline, rather like a dog who has been refused a walk, standing on the front door step gazing after us.

The sitting-room at The Larches had been got ready. On the table were various sirops and glasses. Also a plate of biscuits. Several chairs had been brought in from the other room.

Poirot ran to and fro rearranging things. Pulling out a chair here, altering the position of a lamp there, occasionally stooping to straighten one of the mats that covered the floor. He was specially fussy over the lighting. The lamps were arranged in such a way as to throw a clear light on the side of the room where the chairs were grouped, at the same time leaving the other end of the room, where I presumed Poirot himself would sit, in a dim twilight.

Ursula and I watched him. Presently a bell was heard.

'They arrive,' said Poirot. 'Good, all is in readiness.'

The door opened and the party from Fernly filed in. Poirot went forward and greeted Mrs Ackroyd and Flora.

'It is most good of you to come,' he said. 'And Major Blunt and Mr Raymond.'

The secretary was debonair as ever.

'What's the great idea?' he said, laughing. 'Some scientific machine? Do we have bands round our wrists which register guilty heart-beats? There is such an invention, isn't there?'

'I have read of it, yes,' admitted Poirot. 'But me, I am old-fashioned. I use the old methods. I work only with the little gray cells. Now let us begin—but first I have an announcement to make to you all.'

He took Ursula's hand and drew her forward.

'Ye-es,' I admitted. 'Yes. As you say, Mr Ackroyd, having given orders that he was not to be disturbed, nobody would have been likely to go to the study that night.'

'Très bien. The affair marches, does it not? But matters were still obscure. What was the advantage of having the crime discovered that night in preference to the following morning? The only idea I could get hold of was that the murderer, knowing the crime was to be discovered at a certain time, could make sure of being present when the door was broken in—or at any rate immediately afterwards. And now we come to the second fact—the chair pulled out from the wall. Inspector Raglan dismissed that as of no importance. I, on the contrary, have always regarded it as of supreme importance.

In your manuscript you have drawn a neat little plan of the study. If you had it with you this minute you would see that—the chair being drawn out in the position indicated by Parker—it would stand in a direct line between the door and the window.'

'The window!' I said quickly.

'You, too, have my first idea. I imagined that the chair was drawn out so that something connected with the window should not be seen by any one entering through the door. But I soon abandoned that supposition, for though the chair was a grandfather with a high back, it obscured very little of the window—only the part between the sash and the ground. No, mon ami—but remember that just in front of the window there stood a table with books and magazines upon it. Now that table was completely hidden by the drawn-out chair—and immediately I had my first shadowy suspicion of the truth.

Supposing that there had been something on that table not intended to be seen? Something placed there by the murderer? As yet I had no inkling of what that something might be. But I knew certain very interesting facts about it. For instance, it was something that the murderer had not been able to take away with him at the time that he committed the crime. At the same time it was vital that it should be removed as soon as possible after the crime had been discovered. And so—the telephone message, and the opportunity for the murderer to be on the spot when the body was discovered.

Now four people were on the scene before the police arrived. Yourself, Parker, Major Blunt, and Mr Raymond. Parker I eliminated at once, since at whatever time the crime was discovered, he was the one person certain to be on the spot. Also it was he who told me of the pulled-out chair. Parker, then, was cleared (of the murder, that is. I still thought it possible that he had been blackmailing Mrs Ferrars). Raymond and Blunt, however, remained under suspicion since, if the crime had been discovered in the early hours of the morning, it was quite possible that they might have arrived on the scene too late to prevent the object on the round table being discovered.

Now what was that object? You heard my arguments to-night in reference to the scrap of conversation overheard? As soon as I learned that a representative of a dictaphone company had called, the idea of a dictaphone took root in my mind. You heard what I said in this room not half an hour ago? They all agreed with my theory—but one vital fact seems to have escaped them. Granted that a dictaphone was being used by Mr Ackroyd that night—why was no dictaphone found?'

'I never thought of that,' I said.

'We know that a dictaphone was supplied to Mr Ackroyd. But no dictaphone has been found amongst his effects. So, if something was taken from that table—why should not that something be the dictaphone? But there were certain difficulties in the way. The attention of every one was, of course, focused on the murdered man. I think any one could have gone to the table unnoticed by the other people in the room. But a dictaphone has a certain bulk—it cannot be slipped casually into a pocket. There must have been a receptacle of some kind capable of holding it.

You see where I am arriving? The figure of the murderer is taking shape. A person who was on the scene straightway, but who might not have been if the crime had been discovered the following morning. A person carrying a receptacle into which the dictaphone might be fitted— '

I interrupted.

'But why remove the dictaphone? What was the point?'

'You are like Mr Raymond. You take it for granted that what was heard at nine-thirty was Mr Ackroyd's voice speaking into a dictaphone. But consider this useful invention for a little minute. You dictate into it, do

tray, and the announcement that Poirot and my sister had supped together at half-past seven, and that the former had then gone to my workshop to finish his reading of the manuscript.

'I hope, James,' said my sister, 'that you've been careful in what you say about me in it?'

My jaw dropped. I had not been careful at all.

'Not that it matters very much,' said Caroline, reading my expression correctly. 'M. Poirot will know what to think. He understands me much better than you do.'

I went into the workshop. Poirot was sitting by the window. The manuscript lay neatly piled on a chair beside him. He laid his hand on it and spoke.

'Eh bien,' he said, 'I congratulate you—on your modesty!'

'Oh!' I said, rather taken aback.

'And on your reticence,' he added.

I said 'Oh!' again.

'Not so did Hastings write,' continued my friend. 'On every page, many, many times was the word "I." What he thought—what he did. But you—you have kept your personality in the background; only once or twice does it obtrude—in scenes of home life, shall we say?'

I blushed a little before the twinkle in his eye.

'What do you really think of the stuff?' I asked nervously.

'You want my candid opinion?'

'Yes.'

Poirot laid his jesting manner aside.

'A very meticulous and accurate account,' he said kindly. 'You have recorded all the facts faithfully and exactly—though you have shown yourself becomingly reticent as to your own share in them.'

'And it has helped you?'

'Yes. I may say that it has helped me considerably. Come, we must go over to my house and set the stage for my little performance.'

Caroline was in the hall. I think she hoped that she might be invited to accompany us. Poirot dealt with the situation tactfully.

'I should much like to have had you present, mademoiselle,' he said regretfully, 'but at this juncture it would not be wise. See you, all these