'Not always,' said Flora.

Her voice had lowered itself, and I saw Blunt turn and look at her, bringing his eyes back from (apparently) the coast of Africa to do so. He evidently put his own construction on her change of tone, for he said, after a minute or two, in rather an abrupt manner:—

'I say, you know, you mustn't worry. About that young chap, I mean. Inspector's an ass. Everybody knows—utterly absurd to think he could have done it. Man from outside. Burglar chap. That's the only possible solution.'

Flora turned to look at him.

'You really think so?'

'Don't you?' said Blunt quickly.

'I—oh, yes, of course.'

Another silence, and then Flora burst out:—

'I'm—I'll tell you why I felt so happy this morning. However heartless you think me, I'd rather tell you. It's because the lawyer has been—Mr Hammond. He told us about the will. Uncle Roger has left me twenty thousand pounds. Think of it—twenty thousand beautiful pounds.'

Blunt looked surprised.

'Does it mean so much to you?'

'Mean much to me? Why, it's everything. Freedom—life—no more scheming and scraping and lying— '

'Lying?' said Blunt, sharply interrupting.

Flora seemed taken aback for a minute.

'You know what I mean,' she said uncertainly. 'Pretending to be thankful for all the nasty castoff things rich relations give you. Last year's coats and skirts and hats.'

'Don't know much about ladies' clothes; should have said you were always very well turned out.'

'It's cost me something, though,' said Flora in a low voice. 'Don't let's talk of horrid things. I'm so happy. I'm free. Free to do what I like. Free not to— '

She stopped suddenly.

'Not to what?' asked Blunt quickly.

'I forget now. Nothing important.'

Blunt had a stick in his hand, and he thrust it into the pond, poking at something.

'What are you doing, Major Blunt?'

'There's something bright down there. Wondered what it was—looks like a gold brooch. Now I've stirred up the mud and it's gone.'

'Perhaps it's a crown,' suggested Flora. 'Like the one Mélisande saw in the water.'

'Mélisande,' said Blunt reflectively—'she's in an opera, isn't she?'

'Yes, you seem to know a lot about operas.'

'People take me sometimes,' said Blunt sadly. 'Funny idea of pleasure—worse racket than the natives make with their tom-toms.'

Flora laughed.

'I remember Mélisande,' continued Blunt, 'married an old chap old enough to be her father.'

He threw a small piece of flint into the goldfish pond. Then, with a change of manner, he turned to Flora.

'Miss Ackroyd, can I do anything? About Paton, I mean. I know how dreadfully anxious you must be.'

'Thank you,' said Flora in a cold voice. 'There is really nothing to be done. Ralph will be all right. I've got hold of the most wonderful detective in the world, and he's going to find out all about it.'

For some time I had felt uneasy as to our position. We were not exactly eavesdropping, since the two in the garden below had only to lift their heads to see us. Nevertheless, I should have drawn attention to our presence before now, had not my companion put a warning pressure on my arm. Clearly he wished me to remain silent.

But now he rose briskly to his feet, clearing his throat.

'I demand pardon,' he cried. 'I cannot allow mademoiselle thus extravagantly to compliment me, and not draw attention to my presence. They say the listener hears no good of himself, but that is not the case this time. To spare my blushes, I must join you and apologize.'

He hurried down the path with me close behind him, and joined the others by the pond.

'This is M. Hercule Poirot,' said Flora. 'I expect you've heard of him.'

Poirot bowed.

'I know Major Blunt by reputation,' he said politely. 'I am glad to have encountered you, monsieur. I am in need of some information that you can give me.'

Blunt looked at him inquiringly.

'When did you last see M. Ackroyd alive?'

'At dinner.'

'And you neither saw nor heard anything of him after that?'

'Didn't see him. Heard his voice.'

'How was that?'

'I strolled out on the terrace— '

'Pardon me, what time was this?'

'About half-past nine. I was walking up and down smoking in front of the drawing-room window. I heard Ackroyd talking in his study— '

Poirot stooped and removed a microscopic weed.

'Surely you couldn't hear voices in the study from that part of the terrace,' he murmured.

He was not looking at Blunt, but I was, and to my intense surprise, I saw the latter flush.

'Went as far as the corner,' he explained unwillingly.

'Ah! indeed?' said Poirot.

In the mildest manner he conveyed an impression that more was wanted.

'Thought I saw—a woman disappearing into the bushes. Just a gleam of white, you know. Must have been mistaken. It was while I was standing at the corner of the terrace that I heard Ackroyd's voice speaking to that secretary of his.'

'Speaking to Mr Geoffrey Raymond?'

'Yes—that's what I supposed at the time. Seems I was wrong.'

'Mr Ackroyd didn't address him by name?'

'Oh, no.'

'Then, if I may ask, why did you think—?'

Blunt explained laboriously.

'Took it for granted that it would be Raymond, because he had said just before I came out that he was taking some papers to Ackroyd. Never thought of it being anybody else.'

'Can you remember what the words you heard were?'

Blunt said nothing for a minute or two. Then he looked away from Flora into the middle distance and observed to an adjacent tree trunk that it was about time he got back to Africa.

'Are you going on another expedition—shooting things?'

'Expect so. Usually do, you know—shoot things, I mean.'

'You shot that head in the hall, didn't you?'

Blunt nodded. Then he jerked out, going rather red, as he did so:—

'Care for some decent skins any time? If so, I could get 'em for you.'

'Oh! please do,' cried Flora. 'Will you really? You won't forget?'

'I shan't forget,' said Hector Blunt.

He added, in a sudden burst of communicativeness:—

'Time I went. I'm no good in this sort of life. Haven't got the manners for it. I'm a rough fellow, no use in society. Never remember the things one's expected to say. Yes, time I went.'

'But you're not going at once,' cried Flora. 'Not—not while we're in all this trouble. Oh! please. If you go— '

She turned away a little.

'You want me to stay?' asked Blunt.

He spoke deliberately but quite simply.

'We all— '

'I meant you personally,' said Blunt, with directness.

Flora turned slowly back again and met his eyes.

'I want you to stay,' she said, 'if—if that makes any difference.'

'It makes all the difference,' said Blunt.

There was a moment's silence. They sat down on the stone seat by the goldfish pond. It seemed as though neither of them knew quite what to say next.

'It—it's such a lovely morning,' said Flora at last. 'You know, I can't help feeling happy, in spite—in spite of everything. That's awful, I suppose?'

'Quite natural,' said Blunt. 'Never saw your uncle until two years ago, did you? Can't be expected to grieve very much. Much better to have no humbug about it.'

'There's something awfully consoling about you,' said Flora. 'You make things so simple.'

'Things are simple as a rule,' said the big game hunter.

another which wound up the side of a wooded slope. In one spot the trees had been cleared away, and a seat had been put. Sitting there one had a splendid view over the countryside, and one looked right down on the paved recess and the goldfish pond.

'England is very beautiful,' said Poirot, his eyes straying over the prospect. Then he smiled. 'And so are English girls,' he said in a lower tone. 'Hush, my friend, and look at the pretty picture below us.'

It was then that I saw Flora. She was moving along the path we had just left and she was humming a little snatch of song. Her step was more dancing than walking, and in spite of her black dress, there was nothing but joy in her whole attitude. She gave a sudden pirouette on her toes, and her black draperies swung out. At the same time she flung her head back and laughed outright.

As she did so a man stepped out from the trees. It was Hector Blunt.

The girl started. Her expression changed a little.

'How you startled me—I didn't see you.'

Blunt said nothing, but stood looking at her for a minute or two in silence.

'What I like about you,' said Flora, with a touch of malice, 'is your cheery conversation.'

I fancy that at that Blunt reddened under his tan. His voice, when he spoke, sounded different—it had a curious sort of humility in it.

'Never was much of a fellow for talking. Not even when I was young.'

'That was a very long time ago, I suppose,' said Flora gravely.

I caught the undercurrent of laughter in her voice, but I don't think Blunt did.

'Yes,' he said simply, 'it was.'

'How does it feel to be Methuselah?' asked Flora.

This time the laughter was more apparent, but Blunt was following out an idea of his own.

'Remember the Johnny who sold his soul to the devil? In return for being made young again? There's an opera about it.'

'Faust, you mean?'

'That's the beggar. Rum story. Some of us would do it if we could.'

'Any one would think you were creaking at the joints to hear you talk,' cried Flora, half vexed, half amused.

'Afraid I can't. Something quite ordinary and unimportant. Only caught a scrap of it. I was thinking of something else at the time.'

'It is of no importance,' murmured Poirot. 'Did you move a chair back against the wall when you went into the study after the body was discovered?'

'Chair? No—why should I?'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders but did not answer. He turned to Flora.

'There is one thing I should like to know from you, mademoiselle. When you were examining the things in the silver table with Dr Sheppard, was the dagger in its place, or was it not?'

Flora's chin shot up.

'Inspector Raglan has been asking me that,' she said resentfully. 'I've told him, and I'll tell you. I'm perfectly certain the dagger was not there. He thinks it was and that Ralph sneaked it later in the evening. And—and he doesn't believe me. He thinks I'm saying it to—to shield Ralph.'

'And aren't you?' I asked gravely.

Flora stamped her foot.

'You, too, Dr Sheppard! Oh! it's too bad.'

Poirot tactfully made a diversion.

'It is true what I heard you say, Major Blunt. There is something that glitters in this pond. Let us see if I can reach it.'

He knelt down by the pond, baring his arm to the elbow, and lowered it in very slowly, so as not to disturb the bottom of the pond. But in spite of all his precautions the mud eddied and swirled, and he was forced to draw his arm out again empty-handed.

He gazed ruefully at the mud upon his arm. I offered him my handkerchief, which he accepted with fervent protestations of thanks. Blunt looked at his watch.

'Nearly lunch time,' he said. 'We'd better be getting back to the house.'

'You will lunch with us, M. Poirot?' asked Flora. 'I should like you to meet my mother. She is—very fond of Ralph.'

The little man bowed.

'I shall be delighted, mademoiselle.'

'And you will stay, too, won't you, Dr Sheppard?'

I hesitated.

'Oh, do!'

I wanted to, so I accepted the invitation without further ceremony.

We set out towards the house, Flora and Blunt walking ahead.

'What hair,' said Poirot to me in a low tone, nodding towards Flora. 'The real gold! They will make a pretty couple. She and the dark, handsome Captain Paton. Will they not?'

I looked at him inquiringly, but he began to fuss about a few microscopic drops of water on his coat sleeve. The man reminded me in some ways of a cat. His green eyes and his finicking habits.

'And all for nothing, too,' I said sympathetically. 'I wonder what it was in the pond?'

'Would you like to see?' asked Poirot.

I stared at him. He nodded.

'My good friend,' he said gently and reproachfully, 'Hercule Poirot does not run the risk of disarranging his costume without being sure of attaining his object. To do so would be ridiculous and absurd. I am never ridiculous.'

'But you brought your hand out empty,' I objected.

'There are times when it is necessary to have discretion. Do you tell your patients everything—everything, doctor? I think not. Nor do you tell your excellent sister everything either, is it not so? Before showing my empty hand, I dropped what it contained into my other hand. You shall see what that was.'

He held out his left hand, palm open. On it lay a little circlet of gold. A woman's wedding ring.

I took it from him.

'Look inside,' commanded Poirot.

I did so. Inside was an inscription in fine writing:—

From R., March 13th.

I looked at Poirot, but he was busy inspecting his appearance in a tiny pocket glass. He paid particular attention to his moustaches, and none at all to me. I saw that he did not intend to be communicative.

Chapter 9

The Goldfish Pond

We walked back to the house together. There was no sign of the inspector. Poirot paused on the terrace and stood with his back to the house, slowly turning his head from side to side.

'Une belle propriété,' he said at last appreciatively. 'Who inherits it?'

His words gave me almost a shock. It is an odd thing, but until that moment the question of inheritance had never come into my head. Poirot watched me keenly.

'It is a new idea to you, that,' he said at last. 'You had not thought of it before—eh?'

'No,' I said truthfully. 'I wish I had.'

He looked at me again curiously.

'I wonder just what you mean by that,' he said thoughtfully. 'Ah! no,' as I was about to speak. 'Inutile! You would not tell me your real thought.'

'Every one has something to hide,' I quoted, smiling.

'Exactly.'

'You still believe that?'

'More than ever, my friend. But it is not easy to hide things from Hercule Poirot. He has a knack of finding out.'

He descended the steps of the Dutch garden as he spoke.

'Let us walk a little,' he said over his shoulder. 'The air is pleasant to-day.'

I followed him. He led me down a path to the left enclosed in yew hedges. A walk led down the middle, bordered each side with formal flower beds, and at the end was a round paved recess with a seat and a pond of goldfish. Instead of pursuing the path to the end, Poirot took

Chapter 10

The Parlourmaid

We found Mrs Ackroyd in the hall. With her was a small dried-up little man, with an aggressive chin and sharp gray eyes, and 'lawyer' written all over him.

'Mr Hammond is staying to lunch with us,' said Mrs Ackroyd. 'You know Major Blunt, Mr Hammond? And dear Dr Sheppard—also a close friend of poor Roger's. And, let me see— '

She paused, surveying Hercule Poirot in some perplexity.

'This is M. Poirot, mother,' said Flora. 'I told you about him this morning.'

'Oh! yes,' said Mrs Ackroyd vaguely. 'Of course, my dear, of course. He is to find Ralph, is he not?'

'He is to find out who killed uncle,' said Flora.

'Oh! my dear,' cried her mother. 'Please! My poor nerves. I am a wreck this morning, a positive wreck. Such a dreadful thing to happen. I can't help feeling that it must have been an accident of some kind. Roger was so fond of handling queer curios. His hand must have slipped, or something.'

This theory was received in polite silence. I saw Poirot edge up to the lawyer, and speak to him in a confidential undertone. They moved aside into the embrasure of the window. I joined them—then hesitated.

'Perhaps I'm intruding,' I said.

'Not at all,' cried Poirot heartily. 'You and I, M. le docteur, we investigate this affair side by side. Without you I should be lost. I desire a little information from the good Mr Hammond.'

'You are acting on behalf of Captain Ralph Paton, I understand,' said the lawyer cautiously.

Poirot shook his head.

'Not so. I am acting in the interests of justice. Miss Ackroyd has asked me to investigate the death of her uncle.'

Mr Hammond seemed slightly taken aback.

'I cannot seriously believe that Captain Paton can be concerned in this crime,' he said, 'however strong the circumstantial evidence against him may be. The mere fact that he was hard pressed for money— '

'Was he hard pressed for money?' interpolated Poirot quickly.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

'It was a chronic condition with Ralph Paton,' he said dryly. 'Money went through his hands like water. He was always applying to his step-father.'

'Had he done so of late? During the last year, for instance?'

'I cannot say. Mr Ackroyd did not mention the fact to me.'

'I comprehend. Mr Hammond, I take it that you are acquainted with the provisions of Mr Ackroyd's will?'

'Certainly. That is my principal business here to-day.'

'Then, seeing that I am acting for Miss Ackroyd, you will not object to telling me the terms of that will?'

'They are quite simple. Shorn of legal phraseology, and after paying certain legacies and bequests— '

'Such as—?' interrupted Poirot.

Mr Hammond seemed a little surprised.

'A thousand pounds to his housekeeper, Miss Russell; fifty pounds to the cook, Emma Cooper; five hundred pounds to his secretary, Mr Geoffrey Raymond. Then to various hospitals— '

Poirot held up his hand.

'Ah! the charitable bequests, they interest me not.'

'Quite so. The income on ten thousand pounds' worth of shares to be paid to Mrs Cecil Ackroyd during her lifetime. Miss Flora Ackroyd inherits twenty thousand pounds outright. The residue—including this property, and the shares in Ackroyd and Son—to his adopted son, Ralph Paton.'

'Mr Ackroyd possessed a large fortune?'

'A very large fortune. Captain Paton will be an exceedingly wealthy young man.'

Again Poirot nodded, but his eyes were fixed on a small garden house—a kind of superior summer-house. It was a little to the left of the path ahead of us, and a gravelled walk ran up to it.

Poirot lingered about until the inspector had gone back towards the house. Then he looked at me.

'You must have indeed been sent from the good God to replace my friend Hastings,' he said, with a twinkle. 'I observe that you do not quit my side. How say you, Dr Sheppard, shall we investigate that summer-house? It interests me.'

He went up to the door and opened it. Inside, the place was almost dark. There were one or two rustic seats, a croquet set, and some folded deck-chairs.

I was startled to observe my new friend. He had dropped to his hands and knees and was crawling about the floor. Every now and then he shook his head as though not satisfied. Finally, he sat back on his heels.

'Nothing,' he murmured. 'Well, perhaps it was not to be expected. But it would have meant so much— '

He broke off, stiffening all over. Then he stretched out his hand to one of the rustic chairs. He detached something from one side of it.

'What is it?' I cried. 'What have you found?'

He smiled, unclosing his hand so that I should see what lay in the palm of it. A scrap of stiff white cambric.

I took it from him, looked at it curiously, and then handed it back.

'What do you make of it, eh, my friend?' he asked, eyeing me keenly.

'A scrap torn from a handkerchief,' I suggested, shrugging my shoulders.

He made another dart and picked up a small quill—a goose quill by the look of it.

'And that?' he cried triumphantly. 'What do you make of that?'

I only stared.

He slipped the quill into his pocket, and looked again at the scrap of white stuff.

'A fragment of a handkerchief?' he mused. 'Perhaps you are right. But remember this—a good laundry does not starch a handkerchief.'

He nodded at me triumphantly, then he put away the scrap carefully in his pocket-book.

'It's difficult to say exactly why he did that,' he said at last. 'But murderers do funny things. You'd know that if you were in the police force. The cleverest of them make stupid mistakes sometimes. But come along and I'll show you those footprints.'

We followed him round the corner of the terrace to the study window. At a word from Raglan a police constable produced the shoes which had been obtained from the local inn.

The inspector laid them over the marks.

'They're the same,' he said confidently. 'That is to say, they're not the same pair that actually made these prints. He went away in those. This is a pair just like them, but older—see how the studs are worn down.'

'Surely a great many people wear shoes with rubber studs in them?' asked Poirot.

'That's so, of course,' said the inspector. 'I shouldn't put so much stress on the footmarks if it wasn't for everything else.'

'A very foolish young man, Captain Ralph Paton,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'To leave so much evidence of his presence.'

'Ah! well,' said the inspector, 'it was a dry, fine night, you know. He left no prints on the terrace or on the gravelled path. But, unluckily for him, a spring must have welled up just lately at the end of the path from the drive. See here.'

A small gravelled path joined the terrace a few feet away. In one spot, a few yards from its termination, the ground was wet and boggy. Crossing this wet place there were again the marks of footsteps, and amongst them the shoes with rubber studs.

Poirot followed the path on a little way, the inspector by his side.

'You noticed the women's footprints?' he said suddenly.

The inspector laughed.

'Naturally. But several different women have walked this way—and men as well. It's a regular short cut to the house, you see. It would be impossible to sort out all the footsteps. After all, it's the ones on the window-sill that are really important.'

Poirot nodded.

'It's no good going farther,' said the inspector, as we came in view of the drive. 'It's all gravelled again here, and hard as it can be.'

There was a silence. Poirot and the lawyer looked at each other.

'Mr Hammond,' came Mrs Ackroyd's voice plaintively from the fireplace.

The lawyer answered the summons. Poirot took my arm and drew me right into the window.

'Regard the irises,' he remarked in rather a loud voice. 'Magnificent, are they not? A straight and pleasing effect.'

At the same time I felt the pressure of his hand on my arm, and he added in a low tone:—

'Do you really wish to aid me? To take part in this investigation?'

'Yes, indeed,' I said eagerly. 'There's nothing I should like better. You don't know what a dull old fogey's life I lead. Never anything out of the ordinary.'

'Good, we will be colleagues then. In a minute or two I fancy Major Blunt will join us. He is not happy with the good mamma. Now there are some things I want to know—but I do not wish to seem to want to know them. You comprehend? So it will be your part to ask the questions.'

'What questions do you want me to ask?' I asked apprehensively.

'I want you to introduce the name of Mrs Ferrars.'

'Yes?'

'Speak of her in a natural fashion. Ask him if he was down here when her husband died. You understand the kind of thing I mean. And while he replies, watch his face without seeming to watch it. C'est compris?'

There was no time for more, for at that minute, as Poirot had prophesied, Blunt left the others in his abrupt fashion and came over to us.

I suggested strolling on the terrace, and he acquiesced. Poirot stayed behind.

I stopped to examine a late rose.

'How things change in the course of a day or so,' I observed. 'I was up here last Wednesday, I remember, walking up and down this same terrace. Ackroyd was with me—full of spirits. And now—three days later—Ackroyd's dead, poor fellow, Mrs Ferrars's dead—you knew her, didn't you? But of course you did.'

Blunt nodded his head.

'Had you seen her since you'd been down this time?'

'Went with Ackroyd to call. Last Tuesday, think it was. Fascinating woman—but something queer about her. Deep—one would never know what she was up to.'

I looked into his steady gray eyes. Nothing there surely. I went on:—

'I suppose you'd met her before.'

'Last time I was here—she and her husband had just come here to live.' He paused a minute and then added: 'Rum thing, she had changed a lot between then and now.'

'How—changed?' I asked.

'Looked ten years older.'

'Were you down here when her husband died?' I asked, trying to make the question sound as casual as possible.

'No. From all I heard it would be a good riddance. Uncharitable, perhaps, but the truth.'

I agreed.

'Ashley Ferrars was by no means a pattern husband,' I said cautiously.

'Blackguard, I thought,' said Blunt.

'No,' I said, 'only a man with more money than was good for him.'

'Oh! money! All the troubles in the world can be put down to money—or the lack of it.'

'Which has been your particular trouble?' I asked.

'I've enough for what I want. I'm one of the lucky ones.'

'Indeed.'

'I'm not too flush just now, as a matter of fact. Came into a legacy a year ago, and like a fool let myself be persuaded into putting it into some wild-cat scheme.'

I sympathized, and narrated my own similar trouble.

Then the gong pealed out, and we all went in to lunch. Poirot drew me back a little.

'Eh! bien?'

'He's all right,' I said. 'I'm sure of it.'

'Nothing—disturbing?'

'He had a legacy just a year ago,' I said. 'But why not? Why shouldn't he? I'll swear the man is perfectly square and aboveboard.'

'Without doubt, without doubt,' said Poirot soothingly. 'Do not upset yourself.'

'The cook has been here seven years, the parlourmaid eighteen months, and Parker just over a year. The others are new. Except for something fishy about Parker, they all seem quite all right.'

'A very complete list,' said Poirot, handing it back to him. 'I am quite sure that Parker did not do the murder,' he added gravely.

'So is my sister,' I struck in. 'And she's usually right.' Nobody paid any attention to my interpolation.

'That disposes pretty effectually of the household,' continued the inspector. 'Now we come to a very grave point. The woman at the lodge—Mary Black—was pulling the curtains last night when she saw Ralph Paton turn in at the gate and go up towards the house.'

'She is sure of that?' I asked sharply.

'Quite sure. She knows him well by sight. He went past very quickly and turned off by the path to the right, which is a short cut to the terrace.'

'And what time was that?' asked Poirot, who had sat with an immovable face.

'Exactly twenty-five minutes past nine,' said the inspector gravely.

There was a silence. Then the inspector spoke again.

'It's all clear enough. It fits in without a flaw. At twenty-five minutes past nine, Captain Paton is seen passing the lodge; at nine-thirty or thereabouts, Mr Geoffrey Raymond hears some one in here asking for money and Mr Ackroyd refusing. What happens next? Captain Paton leaves the same way—through the window. He walks along the terrace, angry and baffled. He comes to the open drawing-room window. Say it's now a quarter to ten. Miss Flora Ackroyd is saying good-night to her uncle. Major Blunt, Mr Raymond, and Mrs Ackroyd are in the billiard room. The drawing-room is empty. He steals in, takes the dagger from the silver table, and returns to the study window. He slips off his shoes, climbs in, and—well, I don't need to go into details. Then he slips out again and goes off. Hadn't the nerve to go back to the inn. He makes for the station, rings up from there— '

'Why?' said Poirot softly.

I jumped at the interruption. The little man was leaning forward. His eyes shone with a queer green light.

For a moment Inspector Raglan was taken aback by the question.