'Why should he have telephoned?'

'May have had doubts if the old man was really dead. Thought he'd get the doctor up there as soon as possible, but didn't want to give himself away. Yes, I say now, how's that for a theory? Something in that, I should say.'

The inspector swelled his chest out importantly. He was so plainly delighted with himself that any words of ours would have been quite superfluous.

We arrived back at my house at this minute, and I hurried in to my surgery patients, who had all been waiting a considerable time, leaving Poirot to walk to the police station with the inspector.

Having dismissed the last patient, I strolled into the little room at the back of the house which I call my workshop—I am rather proud of the home-made wireless set I turned out. Caroline hates my workroom. I keep my tools there, and Annie is not allowed to wreak havoc with a dustpan and brush. I was just adjusting the interior of an alarm clock which had been denounced as wholly unreliable by the household, when the door opened and Caroline put her head in.

'Oh! there you are, James,' she said, with deep disapproval. 'M. Poirot wants to see you.'

'Well,' I said, rather irritably, for her sudden entrance had startled me and I had let go of a piece of delicate mechanism, 'if he wants to see me, he can come in here.'

'In here?' said Caroline.

'That's what I said—in here.'

Caroline gave a sniff of disapproval and retired. She returned in a moment or two, ushering in Poirot, and then retired again, shutting the door with a bang.

'Aha! my friend,' said Poirot, coming forward and rubbing his hands. 'You have not got rid of me so easily, you see!'

'Finished with the inspector?' I asked.

'For the moment, yes. And you, you have seen all the patients?'

'Yes.'

Poirot sat down and looked at me, tilting his egg-shaped head on one side, with the air of one who savors a very delicious joke.

'You are in error,' he said at last. 'You have still one patient to see.'

'Not you?' I exclaimed in surprise.

'Ah, not me, bien entendu. Me, I have the health magnificent. No, to tell you the truth, it is a little complot of mine. There is some one I wish to see, you understand—and at the same time it is not necessary that the whole village should intrigue itself about the matter—which is what would happen if the lady were seen to come to my house—for it is a lady. But to you she has already come as a patient before.'

'Miss Russell!' I exclaimed.

'Précisément. I wish much to speak with her, so I send her the little note and make the appointment in your surgery. You are not annoyed with me?'

'On the contrary,' I said. 'That is, presuming I am allowed to be present at the interview?'

'But naturally! In your own surgery!'

'You know,' I said, throwing down the pincers I was holding, 'it's extraordinarily intriguing, the whole thing. Every new development that arises is like the shake you give to a kaleidoscope—the thing changes entirely in aspect. Now, why are you so anxious to see Miss Russell?'

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

'Surely it is obvious?' he murmured.

'There you go again,' I grumbled. 'According to you everything is obvious. But you leave me walking about in a fog.'

Poirot shook his head genially at me.

'You mock yourself at me. Take the matter of Mademoiselle Flora. The inspector was surprised—but you—you were not.'

'I never dreamed of her being the thief,' I expostulated.

'That—perhaps no. But I was watching your face and you were not—like Inspector Raglan—startled and incredulous.'

I thought for a minute or two.

'Perhaps you are right,' I said at last. 'All along I've felt that Flora was keeping back something—so the truth, when it came, was subconsciously expected. It upset Inspector Raglan very much indeed, poor man.'

'Ah! pour ça, oui! The poor man must rearrange all his ideas. I profited by his state of mental chaos to induce him to grant me a little favour.'

'What was that?'

Poirot took a sheet of notepaper from his pocket. Some words were written on it, and he read them aloud.

'The police have, for some days, been seeking for Captain Ralph Paton, the nephew of Mr Ackroyd of Fernly Park, whose death occurred under such tragic circumstances last Friday. Captain Paton has been found at Liverpool, where he was on the point of embarking for America.'

He folded up the piece of paper again.

'That, my friend, will be in the newspapers to-morrow morning.'

I stared at him, dumbfounded.

'But—but it isn't true! He's not at Liverpool!'

Poirot beamed on me.

'You have the intelligence so quick! No, he has not been found at Liverpool. Inspector Raglan was very loath to let me send this paragraph to the press, especially as I could not take him into my confidence. But I assured him most solemnly that very interesting results would follow its appearance in print, so he gave in, after stipulating that he was, on no account, to bear the responsibility.'

I stared at Poirot. He smiled back at me.

'It beats me,' I said at last, 'what you expect to get out of that.'

'You should employ your little gray cells,' said Poirot gravely.

He rose and came across to the bench.

'It is that you have really the love of the machinery,' he said, after inspecting the débris of my labours.

Every man has his hobby. I immediately drew Poirot's attention to my home-made wireless. Finding him sympathetic, I showed him one or two little inventions of my own—trifling things, but useful in the house.

'Decidedly,' said Poirot, 'you should be an inventor by trade, not a doctor. But I hear the bell—that is your patient. Let us go into the surgery.'

Once before I had been struck by the remnants of beauty in the housekeeper's face. This morning I was struck anew. Very simply dressed in black, tall, upright and independent as ever, with her big dark eyes and an unwonted flush of colour in her usually pale cheeks, I realized that as a girl she must have been startlingly handsome.

Chapter 20

Miss Russell

Inspector Raglan had received a bad jolt. He was not deceived by Blunt's valiant lie any more than we had been. Our way back to the village was punctuated by his complaints.

'This alters everything, this does. I don't know whether you've realized it, Monsieur Poirot?'

'I think so, yes, I think so,' said Poirot. 'You see, me, I have been familiar with the idea for some time.'

Inspector Raglan, who had only had the idea presented to him a short half-hour ago, looked at Poirot unhappily, and went on with his discoveries.

'Those alibis now. Worthless! Absolutely worthless. Got to start again. Find out what every one was doing from nine-thirty onwards. Nine-thirty—that's the time we've got to hang on to. You were quite right about the man Kent—we don't release him yet awhile. Let me see now—nine-forty-five at the "Dog and Whistle". He might have got there in a quarter of an hour if he ran. It's just possible that it was his voice Mr Raymond heard talking to Mr Ackroyd—asking for money which Mr Ackroyd refused. But one thing's clear—it wasn't he who sent the telephone message. The station is half a mile in the other direction—over a mile and a half from the "Dog and Whistle", and he was at the "Dog and Whistle" until about ten minutes past ten. Dang that telephone call! We always come up against it.'

'We do indeed,' agreed Poirot. 'It is curious.'

'It's just possible that if Captain Paton climbed into his uncle's room and found him there murdered, he may have sent it. Got the wind up, thought he'd be accused, and cleared out. That's possible, isn't it?'

I felt it was time I put in a word to help on the good work.

'My sister told me the other night,' I said encouragingly, 'that Flora had never cared a penny piece for Ralph Paton, and never would. My sister is always right about these things.'

Blunt ignored my well-meant efforts. He spoke to Poirot.

'D'you really think— ' he began, and stopped.

He is one of those inarticulate men who find it hard to put things into words.

Poirot knows no such disability.

'If you doubt me, ask her yourself, monsieur. But perhaps you no longer care to—the affair of the money— '

Blunt gave a sound like an angry laugh.

'Think I'd hold that against her? Roger was always a queer chap about money. She got in a mess and didn't dare tell him. Poor kid. Poor lonely kid.'

Poirot looked thoughtfully at the side door.

'Mademoiselle Flora went into the garden, I think,' he murmured.

'I've been every kind of a fool,' said Blunt abruptly. 'Rum conversation we've been having. Like one of those Danish plays. But you're a sound fellow, M. Poirot. Thank you.'

He took Poirot's hand and gave it a grip which caused the other to wince in anguish. Then he strode to the side door and passed out into the garden.

'Not every kind of a fool,' murmured Poirot, tenderly nursing the injured member. 'Only one kind—the fool in love.'

'Good-morning, mademoiselle,' said Poirot. 'Will you be seated? Dr Sheppard is so kind as to permit me the use of his surgery for a little conversation I am anxious to have with you.'

Miss Russell sat down with her usual composure. If she felt any inward agitation, it did not display itself in any outward manifestation.

'It seems a queer way of doing things, if you'll allow me to say so,' she remarked.

'Miss Russell—I have news to give you.'

'Indeed!'

'Charles Kent has been arrested at Liverpool.'

Not a muscle of her face moved. She merely opened her eyes a trifle wider, and asked, with a tinge of defiance:

'Well, what of it?'

But at that moment it came to me—the resemblance that had haunted me all along, something familiar in the defiance of Charles Kent's manner. The two voices, one rough and coarse, the other painfully ladylike—were strangely the same in timbre. It was of Miss Russell that I had been reminded that night outside the gates of Fernly Park.

I looked at Poirot, full of my discovery, and he gave me an imperceptible nod.

In answer to Miss Russell's question, he threw out his hands in a thoroughly French gesture.

'I thought you might be interested, that is all,' he said mildly.

'Well, I'm not particularly,' said Miss Russell. 'Who is this Charles Kent anyway?'

'He is a man, mademoiselle, who was at Fernly on the night of the murder.'

'Really?'

'Fortunately for him, he has an alibi. At a quarter to ten he was at a public-house a mile from here.'

'Lucky for him,' commented Miss Russell.

'But we still do not know what he was doing at Fernly—who it was he went to meet, for instance.'

'I'm afraid I can't help you at all,' said the housekeeper politely. 'Nothing came to my ears. If that is all— '

She made a tentative movement as though to rise. Poirot stopped her.

'It is not quite all,' he said smoothly. 'This morning fresh developments have arisen. It seems now that Mr Ackroyd was murdered, not at a quarter to ten, but before. Between ten minutes to nine, when Dr Sheppard left, and a quarter to ten.'

I saw the colour drain from the housekeeper's face, leaving it dead white. She leaned forward, her figure swaying.

'But Miss Ackroyd said—Miss Ackroyd said— '

'Miss Ackroyd has admitted that she was lying. She was never in the study at all that evening.'

'Then—?'

'Then it would seem that in this Charles Kent we have the man we are looking for. He came to Fernly, can give no account of what he was doing there— '

'I can tell you what he was doing there. He never touched a hair of old Ackroyd's head—he never went near the study. He didn't do it, I tell you.'

She was leaning forward. That iron self-control was broken through at last. Terror and desperation were in her face.

'M. Poirot! M. Poirot! Oh, do believe me.'

Poirot got up and came to her. He patted her reassuringly on the shoulder.

'But yes—but yes, I will believe. I had to make you speak, you know.'

For an instant suspicion flared up in her.

'Is what you said true?'

'That Charles Kent is suspected of the crime? Yes, that is true. You alone can save him, by telling the reason for his being at Fernly.'

'He came to see me.' She spoke in a low, hurried voice. 'I went out to meet him— '

'In the summer-house, yes, I know.'

'How do you know?'

'Mademoiselle, it is the business of Hercule Poirot to know things. I know that you went out earlier in the evening, that you left a message in the summer-house to say what time you would be there.'

'Yes, I did. I had heard from him—saying he was coming. I dared not let him come to the house. I wrote to the address he gave me and said I would meet him in the summer-house, and described it to him so that

He made a kind of jerky bow, then turning abruptly, he left the room.

Poirot was after him in a flash. He caught the other up in the hall.

'Monsieur—a moment, I beg of you, if you will be so good.'

'Well, sir?'

Blunt was obviously impatient. He stood frowning down on Poirot.

'It is this,' said Poirot rapidly: 'I am not deceived by your little fantasy. No, indeed. It was truly Miss Flora who took the money. All the same it is well imagined what you say—it pleases me. It is very good what you have done there. You are a man quick to think and to act.'

'I'm not in the least anxious for your opinion, thank you,' said Blunt coldly.

He made once more as though to pass on, but Poirot, not at all offended, laid a detaining hand on his arm.

'Ah! but you are to listen to me. I have more to say. The other day I spoke of concealments. Very well, all along have I seen what you are concealing. Mademoiselle Flora, you love her with all your heart. From the first moment you saw her, is it not so? Oh! let us not mind saying these things—why must one in England think it necessary to mention love as though it were some disgraceful secret? You love Mademoiselle Flora. You seek to conceal that fact from all the world. That is very good—that is as it should be. But take the advice of Hercule Poirot—do not conceal it from mademoiselle herself.'

Blunt had shown several signs of restlessness whilst Poirot was speaking, but the closing words seemed to rivet his attention.

'What d'you mean by that?' he said sharply.

'You think that she loves the Capitaine Ralph Paton—but I, Hercule Poirot, tell you that that is not so. Mademoiselle Flora accepted Captain Paton to please her uncle, and because she saw in the marriage a way of escape from her life here which was becoming frankly insupportable to her. She liked him, and there was much sympathy and understanding between them. But love—no! It is not Captain Paton Mademoiselle Flora loves.'

'What the devil do you mean?' asked Blunt.

I saw the dark flush under his tan.

'You have been blind, monsieur. Blind! She is loyal, the little one. Ralph Paton is under a cloud, she is bound in honor to stick by him.'

'M. Poirot is right. I took that money. I stole. I am a thief—yes, a common, vulgar little thief. Now you know! I am glad it has come out. It's been a nightmare, these last few days!' She sat down suddenly and buried her face in her hands. She spoke huskily through her fingers. 'You don't know what my life has been since I came here. Wanting things, scheming for them, lying, cheating, running up bills, promising to pay—oh! I hate myself when I think of it all! That's what brought us together, Ralph and I. We were both weak! I understood him, and I was sorry—because I'm the same underneath. We're not strong enough to stand alone, either of us. We're weak, miserable, despicable things.'

She looked at Blunt and suddenly stamped her foot.

'Why do you look at me like that—as though you couldn't believe? I may be a thief—but at any rate I'm real now. I'm not lying any more. I'm not pretending to be the kind of girl you like, young and innocent and simple. I don't care if you never want to see me again. I hate myself, despise myself—but you've got to believe one thing, if speaking the truth would have made things better for Ralph, I would have spoken out. But I've seen all along that it wouldn't be better for Ralph—it makes the case against him blacker than ever. I was not doing him any harm by sticking to my lie.'

'Ralph,' said Blunt. 'I see—always Ralph.'

'You don't understand,' said Flora hopelessly. 'You never will.'

She turned to the inspector.

'I admit everything; I was at my wit's end for money. I never saw my uncle that evening after he left the dinner-table. As to the money, you can take what steps you please. Nothing could be worse than it is now!'

Suddenly she broke down again, hid her face in her hands, and rushed from the room.

'Well,' said the inspector in a flat tone, 'so that's that.'

He seemed rather at a loss what to do next.

Blunt came forward.

'Inspector Raglan,' he said quietly, 'that money was given to me by Mr Ackroyd for a special purpose. Miss Ackroyd never touched it. When she says she did, she is lying with the idea of shielding Captain Paton. The truth is as I said, and I am prepared to go into the witness box and swear to it.'

he would be able to find it. Then I was afraid he might not wait there patiently, and I ran out and left a piece of paper to say I would be there about ten minutes past nine. I didn't want the servants to see me, so I slipped out through the drawing-room window. As I came back, I met Dr Sheppard, and I fancied that he would think it queer. I was out of breath, for I had been running. I had no idea that he was expected to dinner that night.'

She paused.

'Go on,' said Poirot. 'You went out to meet him at ten minutes past nine. What did you say to each other?'

'It's difficult. You see— '

'Mademoiselle,' said Poirot, interrupting her, 'in this matter I must have the whole truth. What you tell us need never go beyond these four walls. Dr Sheppard will be discreet, and so shall I. See, I will help you. This Charles Kent, he is your son, is he not?'

She nodded. The colour had flamed into her cheeks.

'No one has ever known. It was long ago—long ago—down in Kent. I was not married…'

'So you took the name of the county as a surname for him. I understand.'

'I got work. I managed to pay for his board and lodging. I never told him that I was his mother. But he turned out badly, he drank, then took to drugs. I managed to pay his passage out to Canada. I didn't hear of him for a year or two. Then, somehow or other, he found out that I was his mother. He wrote asking me for money. Finally, I heard from him back in this country again. He was coming to see me at Fernly, he said. I dared not let him come to the house. I have always been considered so—so very respectable. If any one got an inkling—it would have been all up with my post as housekeeper. So I wrote to him in the way I have just told you.'

'And in the morning you came to see Dr Sheppard?'

'Yes. I wondered if something could be done. He was not a bad boy—before he took to drugs.'

'I see,' said Poirot. 'Now let us go on with the story. He came that night to the summer-house?'

'Yes, he was waiting for me when I got there. He was very rough and abusive. I had brought with me all the money I had, and I gave it to him. We talked a little, and then he went away.'

'What time was that?'

'It must have been between twenty and twenty-five minutes past nine. It was not yet half-past when I got back to the house.'

'Which way did he go?'

'Straight out the same way he came, by the path that joined the drive just inside the lodge gates.'

Poirot nodded.

'And you, what did you do?'

'I went back to the house. Major Blunt was walking up and down the terrace smoking, so I made a detour to get round to the side door. It was then just on half-past nine, as I tell you.'

Poirot nodded again. He made a note or two in a microscopic pocket-book.

'I think that is all,' he said thoughtfully.

'Ought I— ' she hesitated. 'Ought I to tell all this to Inspector Raglan?'

'It may come to that. But let us not be in a hurry. Let us proceed slowly, with due order and method. Charles Kent is not yet formally charged with murder. Circumstances may arise which will render your story unnecessary.'

Miss Russell rose.

'Thank you very much, M. Poirot,' she said. 'You have been very kind—very kind indeed. You—you do believe me, don't you? That Charles had nothing to do with this wicked murder!'

'There seems no doubt that the man who was talking to Mr Ackroyd in the library at nine-thirty could not possibly have been your son. Be of good courage, mademoiselle. All will yet be well.'

Miss Russell departed. Poirot and I were left together.

'So that's that,' I said. 'Every time we come back to Ralph Paton. How did you manage to spot Miss Russell as the person Charles Kent came to meet? Did you notice the resemblance?'

'I had connected her with the unknown man long before we actually came face to face with him. As soon as we found that quill. The quill suggested dope, and I remembered your account of Miss Russell's visit to

'Mon ami,' said Poirot apologetically, 'as I told you at the time, one must say something.'

The inspector rose.

'There's only one thing for it,' he declared. 'We must tackle the young lady right away. You'll come up to Fernly with me, M. Poirot?'

'Certainly. Dr Sheppard will drive us up in his car.'

I acquiesced willingly.

On inquiry for Miss Ackroyd, we were shown into the billiard room. Flora and Major Hector Blunt were sitting on the long window seat.

'Good-morning, Miss Ackroyd,' said the inspector. 'Can we have a word or two alone with you?'

Blunt got up at once and moved to the door.

'What is it?' asked Flora nervously. 'Don't go, Major Blunt. He can stay, can't he?' she asked, turning to the inspector.

'That's as you like,' said the inspector dryly. 'There's a question or two it's my duty to put to you, miss, but I'd prefer to do so privately, and I dare say you'd prefer it also.'

Flora looked keenly at him. I saw her face grow whiter. Then she turned and spoke to Blunt.

'I want you to stay—please—yes, I mean it. Whatever the inspector has to say to me, I'd rather you heard it.'

Raglan shrugged his shoulders.

'Well, if you will have it so, that's all there is to it. Now, Miss Ackroyd, M. Poirot here has made a certain suggestion to me. He suggests that you weren't in the study at all last Friday night, that you never saw Mr Ackroyd to say good-night to him, that instead of being in the study you were on the stairs leading down from your uncle's bedroom when you heard Parker coming across the hall.'

Flora's gaze shifted to Poirot. He nodded back at her.

'Mademoiselle, the other day, when we sat round the table, I implored you to be frank with me. What one does not tell to Papa Poirot he finds out. It was that, was it not? See, I will make it easy for you. You took the money, did you not?'

'The money,' said Blunt sharply.

There was a silence which lasted for at least a minute.

Then Flora drew herself up and spoke.

'You mean—the money? Hang it all, you don't suggest that it was Miss Ackroyd who took that forty pounds?'

'I suggest nothing,' said Poirot. 'But I will remind you of this. Life was not very easy for that mother and daughter. There were bills—there was constant trouble over small sums of money. Roger Ackroyd was a peculiar man over money matters. The girl might be at her wit's end for a comparatively small sum. Figure to yourself then what happens. She has taken the money, she descends the little staircase. When she is half-way down she hears the chink of glass from the hall. She has not a doubt of what it is—Parker coming to the study. At all costs she must not be found on the stairs—Parker will not forget it, he will think it odd. If the money is missed, Parker is sure to remember having seen her come down those stairs. She has just time to rush down to the study door—with her hand on the handle to show that she has just come out, when Parker appears in the doorway. She says the first thing that comes into her head, a repetition of Roger Ackroyd's orders earlier in the evening, and then goes upstairs to her own room.'

'Yes, but later,' persisted the inspector, 'she must have realized the vital importance of speaking the truth? Why, the whole case hinges on it!'

'Afterwards,' said Poirot dryly, 'it was a little difficult for Mademoiselle Flora. She is told simply that the police are here and that there has been a robbery. Naturally she jumps to the conclusion that the theft of the money has been discovered. Her one idea is to stick to her story. When she learns that her uncle is dead she is panic-stricken. Young women do not faint nowadays, monsieur, without considerable provocation. Eh bien! there it is. She is bound to stick to her story, or else confess everything. And a young and pretty girl does not like to admit that she is a thief—especially before those whose esteem she is anxious to retain.'

Raglan brought his fist down with a thump on the table.

'I'll not believe it,' he said. 'It's—it's not credible. And you—you've known this all along?'

'The possibility has been in my mind from the first,' admitted Poirot. 'I was always convinced that Mademoiselle Flora was hiding something from us. To satisfy myself, I made the little experiment I told you of. Dr Sheppard accompanied me.'

'A test for Parker, you said it was,' I remarked bitterly.

you. Then I found the article on cocaine in that morning's paper. It all seemed very clear. She had heard from some one that morning—some one addicted to drugs, she read the article in the paper, and she came to you to ask a few tentative questions. She mentioned cocaine, since the article in question was on cocaine. Then, when you seemed too interested, she switched hurriedly to the subject of detective stories and untraceable poisons. I suspected a son or a brother, or some other undesirable male relation. Ah! but I must go. It is the time of the lunch.'

'Stay and lunch with us,' I suggested.

Poirot shook his head. A faint twinkle came into his eye.

'Not again to-day. I should not like to force Mademoiselle Caroline to adopt a vegetarian diet two days in succession.'

It occurred to me that there was not much which escaped Hercule Poirot.

'What I say. I should not release him yet.'

'You don't think he can have had anything to do with the murder, do you?'

'I think probably not—but one cannot be certain yet.'

'But haven't I just told you— '

Poirot raised a hand protestingly.

'Mais oui, mais oui. I heard. I am not deaf—nor stupid, thank the good God! But see you, you approach the matter from the wrong—the wrong—premises, is not that the word?'

The inspector stared at him heavily.

'I don't see how you make that out. Look here, we know Mr Ackroyd was alive at a quarter to ten. You admit that, don't you?'

Poirot looked at him for a moment, then shook his head with a quick smile.

'I admit nothing that is not—proved!'

'Well, we've got proof enough of that. We've got Miss Flora Ackroyd's evidence.'

'That she said good-night to her uncle? But me—I do not always believe what a young lady tells me—no, not even when she is charming and beautiful.'

'But hang it all, man, Parker saw her coming out of the door.'

'No.' Poirot's voice rang out with sudden sharpness. 'That is just what he did not see. I satisfied myself of that by a little experiment the other day—you remember, doctor? Parker saw her outside the door, with her hand on the handle. He did not see her come out of the room.'

'But—where else could she have been?'

'Perhaps on the stairs.'

'The stairs?'

'That is my little idea—yes.'

'But those stairs only lead to Mr Ackroyd's bedroom.'

'Precisely.'

And still the inspector stared.

'You think she'd been up to her uncle's bedroom? Well, why not? Why should she lie about it?'

'Ah! that is just the question. It depends on what she was doing there, does it not?'