'One prefers to remain incognito. I am not anxious for notoriety. I have not even troubled to correct the local version of my name.'

'Indeed,' I said, not knowing quite what to say.

'Captain Ralph Paton,' mused Mr Porrott. 'And so he is engaged to Mr Ackroyd's niece, the charming Miss Flora.'

'Who told you so?' I asked, very much surprised.

'Mr Ackroyd. About a week ago. He is very pleased about it—has long desired that such a thing should come to pass, or so I understood from him. I even believe that he brought some pressure to bear upon the young man. That is never wise. A young man should marry to please himself—not to please a stepfather from whom he has expectations.'

My ideas were completely upset. I could not see Ackroyd taking a hairdresser into his confidence, and discussing the marriage of his niece and stepson with him. Ackroyd extends a genial patronage to the lower orders, but he has a very great sense of his own dignity. I began to think that Porrott couldn't be a hairdresser after all.

To hide my confusion, I said the first thing that came into my head.

'What made you notice Ralph Paton? His good looks?'

'No, not that alone—though he is unusually good-looking for an Englishman—what your lady novelists would call a Greek God. No, there was something about that young man that I did not understand.'

He said the last sentence in a musing tone of voice which made an indefinable impression upon me. It was as though he was summing up the boy by the light of some inner knowledge that I did not share. It was that impression that was left with me, for at that moment my sister's voice called me from the house.

I went in. Caroline had her hat on, and had evidently just come in from the village. She began without preamble.

'I met Mr Ackroyd.'

'Yes?' I said.

'I stopped him, of course, but he seemed in a great hurry, and anxious to get away.'

I have no doubt but that that was the case. He would feel towards Caroline much as he had felt towards Miss Ganett earlier in the day—perhaps more so. Caroline is less easy to shake off.

'I asked him at once about Ralph. He was absolutely astonished. Had no idea the boy was down here. He actually said he thought I must have made a mistake. I! A mistake!'

'Ridiculous,' I said. 'He ought to have known you better.'

'Then he went on to tell me that Ralph and Flora are engaged.'

'I know that too,' I interrupted, with modest pride.

'Who told you?'

'Our new neighbour.'

Caroline visibly wavered for a second or two, much as a roulette ball might coyly hover between two numbers. Then she declined the tempting red herring.

'I told Mr Ackroyd that Ralph was staying at the "Three Boars".'

'Caroline,' I said, 'do you never reflect that you might do a lot of harm with this habit of yours of repeating everything indiscriminately?'

'Nonsense,' said my sister. 'People ought to know things. I consider it my duty to tell them. Mr Ackroyd was very grateful to me.'

'Well?' I said, for there was clearly more to come.

'I think he went straight off to the "Three Boars", but if so he didn't find Ralph there.'

'No?'

'No. Because as I was coming back through the wood— '

'Coming back through the wood?' I interrupted.

Caroline had the grace to blush.

'It was such a lovely day,' she exclaimed. 'I thought I would make a little round. The woods with their autumnal tints are so perfect at this time of year.'

Caroline does not care a hang for woods at any time of year. Normally she regards them as places where you get your feet damp, and where all kinds of unpleasant things may drop on your head. No, it was good sound mongoose instinct which took her to our local wood. It is the only place adjacent to the village of King's Abbot where you can talk with a young woman unseen by the whole of the village. It adjoins the Park of Fernly.

'Well,' I said, 'go on.'

'As I say, I was just coming back through the wood when I heard voices.'

Caroline paused.

'Yes?'

'One was Ralph Paton's—I knew it at once. The other was a girl's. Of course I didn't mean to listen— '

'Of course not,' I interjected, with patent sarcasm—which was, however, wasted on Caroline.

'But I simply couldn't help overhearing. The girl said something—I didn't quite catch what it was, and Ralph answered. He sounded very angry. "My dear girl," he said. "Don't you realize that it is quite on the cards the old man will cut me off with a shilling? He's been pretty fed up with me for the last few years. A little more would do it. And we need the dibs, my dear. I shall be a very rich man when the old fellow pops off. He's mean as they make 'em, but he's rolling in money really. I don't want him to go altering his will. You leave it to me, and don't worry." Those were his exact words. I remember them perfectly. Unfortunately, just then I stepped on a dry twig or something, and they lowered their voices and moved away. I couldn't, of course, go rushing after them, so wasn't able to see who the girl was.'

'That must have been most vexing,' I said. 'I suppose, though, you hurried on to the "Three Boars", felt faint, and went into the bar for a glass of brandy, and so were able to see if both the barmaids were on duty?'

'It wasn't a barmaid,' said Caroline unhesitatingly. 'In fact, I'm almost sure that it was Flora Ackroyd, only— '

'Only it doesn't seem to make sense,' I agreed.

'But if it wasn't Flora, who could it have been?'

Rapidly my sister ran over a list of maidens living in the neighbourhood, with profuse reasons for and against.

When she paused for breath, I murmured something about a patient, and slipped out.

I proposed to make my way to the 'Three Boars'. It seemed likely that Ralph Paton would have returned there by now.

I knew Ralph very well—better, perhaps, than any one else in King's Abbot, for I had known his mother before him, and therefore I understood much in him that puzzled others. He was, to a certain extent, the victim of heredity. He had not inherited his mother's fatal propensity for drink, but nevertheless he had in him a strain of weakness. As my new friend of this morning had declared, he was extraordinarily handsome. Just on six feet, perfectly proportioned, with the easy grace of an athlete,

My neighbour was regarding me with a strange expression which I could not fathom.

'It is Fate,' he said at last.

'What is Fate?' I asked irritably.

'That I should live next to a man who seriously considers Porcupine Oilfields, and also West Australian Gold Mines. Tell me, have you also a penchant for auburn hair?'

I stared at him open-mouthed, and he burst out laughing.

'No, no, it is not the insanity that I suffer from. Make your mind easy. It was a foolish question that I put to you there, for, see you, my friend of whom I spoke was a young man, a man who thought all women good, and most of them beautiful. But you are a man of middle age, a doctor, a man who knows the folly and the vanity of most things in this life of ours. Well, well, we are neighbours. I beg of you to accept and present to your excellent sister my best marrow.'

He stooped, and with a flourish produced an immense specimen of the tribe, which I duly accepted in the spirit in which it was offered.

'Indeed,' said the little man cheerfully, 'this has not been a wasted morning. I have made the acquaintance of a man who in some ways resembles my far-off friend. By the way, I should like to ask you a question. You doubtless know every one in this tiny village. Who is the young man with the very dark hair and eyes, and the handsome face. He walks with his head flung back, and an easy smile on his lips?'

The description left me in no doubt.

'That must be Captain Ralph Paton,' I said slowly.

'I have not seen him about here before?'

'No, he has not been here for some time. But he is the son—adopted son, rather—of Mr Ackroyd of Fernly Park.'

My neighbour made a slight gesture of impatience.

'Of course, I should have guessed. Mr Ackroyd spoke of him many times.'

'You know Mr Ackroyd?' I said, slightly surprised.

'Mr Ackroyd knew me in London—when I was at work there. I have asked him to say nothing of my profession down here.'

'I see,' I said, rather amused by this patent snobbery, as I thought it.

But the little man went on with an almost grandiloquent smirk.

to enable me to realize a dream. I have always wanted to travel, to see the world. Well, that was a year ago, as I said, and—I am still here.'

My little neighbour nodded.

'The chains of habit. We work to attain an object, and the object gained, we find that what we miss is the daily toil. And mark you, monsieur, my work was interesting work. The most interesting work there is in the world.'

'Yes?' I said encouragingly. For the moment the spirit of Caroline was strong within me.

'The study of human nature, monsieur!'

'Just so,' I said kindly.

Clearly a retired hairdresser. Who knows the secrets of human nature better than a hairdresser?

'Also, I had a friend—a friend who for many years never left my side. Occasionally of an imbecility to make one afraid, nevertheless he was very dear to me. Figure to yourself that I miss even his stupidity. His naïveté, his honest outlook, the pleasure of delighting and surprising him by my superior gifts—all these I miss more than I can tell you.'

'He died?' I asked sympathetically.

'Not so. He lives and flourishes—but on the other side of the world. He is now in the Argentine.'

'In the Argentine,' I said enviously.

I have always wanted to go to South America. I sighed, and then looked up to find Mr Porrott eyeing me sympathetically. He seemed an understanding little man.

'You will go there, yes?' he asked.

I shook my head with a sigh.

'I could have gone,' I said, 'a year ago. But I was foolish—and worse than foolish—greedy. I risked the substance for the shadow.'

'I comprehend,' said Mr Porrott. 'You speculated?'

I nodded mournfully, but in spite of myself I felt secretly entertained. This ridiculous little man was so portentously solemn.

'Not the Porcupine Oilfields?' he asked suddenly.

I stared.

'I thought of them, as a matter of fact, but in the end I plumped for a gold mine in Western Australia.'

he was dark, like his mother, with a handsome, sunburnt face always ready to break into a smile. Ralph Paton was of those born to charm easily and without effort. He was self-indulgent and extravagant, with no veneration for anything on earth, but he was lovable nevertheless, and his friends were all devoted to him.

Could I do anything with the boy? I thought I could.

On inquiry at the 'Three Boars' I found that Captain Paton had just come in. I went up to his room and entered unannounced.

For a moment, remembering what I had heard and seen, I was doubtful of my reception, but I need have had no misgivings.

'Why, it's Sheppard! Glad to see you.'

He came forward to meet me, hand outstretched, a sunny smile lighting up his face.

'The one person I am glad to see in this infernal place.'

I raised my eyebrows.

'What's the place been doing?'

He gave a vexed laugh.

'It's a long story. Things haven't been going well with me, doctor. But have a drink, won't you?'

'Thanks,' I said, 'I will.'

He pressed the bell, then, coming back, threw himself into a chair.

'Not to mince matters,' he said gloomily, 'I'm in the devil of a mess. In fact, I haven't the least idea what to do next.'

'What's the matter?' I asked sympathetically.

'It's my confounded stepfather.'

'What has he done?'

'It isn't what he's done yet, but what he's likely to do.'

The bell was answered, and Ralph ordered the drinks. When the man had gone again, he sat hunched in the arm-chair, frowning to himself.

'Is it really—serious?' I asked.

He nodded.

'I'm fairly up against it this time,' he said soberly.

The unusual ring of gravity in his voice told me that he spoke the truth. It took a good deal to make Ralph grave.

'In fact,' he continued, 'I can't see my way ahead…I'm damned if I can.'

'If I could help— ' I suggested diffidently.

But he shook his head very decidedly.

'Good of you, doctor. But I can't let you in on this. I've got to play a lone hand.'

He was silent a minute and then repeated in a slightly different tone of voice:—

'Yes—I've got to play a lone hand…'

a Frenchman, and he said he wasn't—and somehow I didn't like to ask him any more.'

I began to be more interested in our mysterious neighbour. A man who is capable of shutting up Caroline and sending her, like the Queen of Sheba, empty away must be something of a personality.

'I believe,' said Caroline, 'that he's got one of those new vacuum cleaners— '

I saw a meditated loan and the opportunity of further questioning gleaming from her eye. I seized the chance to escape into the garden. I am rather fond of gardening. I was busily exterminating dandelion roots when a shout of warning sounded from close by and a heavy body whizzed by my ear and fell at my feet with a repellent squelch. It was a vegetable marrow!

I looked up angrily. Over the wall, to my left, there appeared a face. An egg-shaped head, partially covered with suspiciously black hair, two immense moustaches, and a pair of watchful eyes. It was our mysterious neighbour, Mr Porrott.

He broke at once into fluent apologies.

'I demand of you a thousand pardons, monsieur. I am without defence. For some months now I cultivate the marrows. This morning suddenly I enrage myself with these marrows. I send them to promenade themselves—alas! not only mentally but physically. I seize the biggest. I hurl him over the wall. Monsieur, I am ashamed. I prostrate myself.'

Before such profuse apologies, my anger was forced to melt. After all, the wretched vegetable hadn't hit me. But I sincerely hoped that throwing large vegetables over walls was not our new friend's hobby. Such a habit could hardly endear him to us as a neighbour.

The strange little man seemed to read my thoughts.

'Ah! no,' he exclaimed. 'Do not disquiet yourself. It is not with me a habit. But can you figure to yourself, monsieur, that a man may work towards a certain object, may labour and toil to attain a certain kind of leisure and occupation, and then find that, after all, he yearns for the old busy days, and the old occupations that he thought himself so glad to leave?'

'Yes,' I said slowly. 'I fancy that that is a common enough occurrence. I myself am perhaps an instance. A year ago I came into a legacy—enough

Flora Ackroyd is, of course, no relation whatever really to Ralph Paton, but Ralph has been looked upon for so long as practically Ackroyd's own son, that cousinship is taken for granted.

'Flora Ackroyd,' said my sister.

'But why not go to Fernly if he wanted to see her?'

'Secretly engaged,' said Caroline, with immense enjoyment. 'Old Ackroyd won't hear of it, and they have to meet this way.'

I saw a good many flaws in Caroline's theory, but I forbore to point them out to her. An innocent remark about our new neighbour created a diversion.

The house next door, The Larches, has recently been taken by a stranger. To Caroline's extreme annoyance, she has not been able to find out anything about him, except that he is a foreigner. The Intelligence Corps has proved a broken reed. Presumably the man has milk and vegetables and joints of meat and occasional whitings just like everybody else, but none of the people who make it their business to supply these things seem to have acquired any information. His name, apparently, is Mr Porrott—a name which conveys an odd feeling of unreality. The one thing we do know about him is that he is interested in the growing of vegetable marrows.

But that is certainly not the sort of information that Caroline is after. She wants to know where he comes from, what he does, whether he is married, what his wife was, or is, like, whether he has children, what his mother's maiden name was—and so on. Somebody very like Caroline must have invented the questions on passports, I think.

'My dear Caroline,' I said. 'There's no doubt at all about what the man's profession has been. He's a retired hairdresser. Look at that moustache of his.'

Caroline dissented. She said that if the man was a hairdresser, he would have wavy hair—not straight. All hairdressers did.

I cited several hairdressers personally known to me who had straight hair, but Caroline refused to be convinced.

'I can't make him out at all,' she said in an aggrieved voice. 'I borrowed some garden tools the other day, and he was most polite, but I couldn't get anything out of him. I asked him point blank at last whether he was

Chapter 4

Dinner at Fernly

It was just a few minutes before half-past seven when I rang the front door bell of Fernly Park. The door was opened with admirable promptitude by Parker, the butler.

The night was such a fine one that I had preferred to come on foot. I stepped into the big square hall and Parker relieved me of my overcoat. Just then Ackroyd's secretary, a pleasant young fellow by the name of Raymond, passed through the hall on his way to Ackroyd's study, his hands full of papers.

'Good-evening, doctor. Coming to dine? Or is this a professional call?'

The last was in allusion to my black bag, which I had laid down on the oak chest.

I explained that I expected a summons to a confinement case at any moment, and so had come out prepared for an emergency call. Raymond nodded, and went on his way, calling over his shoulder:—

'Go into the drawing-room. You know the way. The ladies will be down in a minute. I must just take these papers to Mr Ackroyd, and I'll tell him you're here.'

On Raymond's appearance Parker had withdrawn, so I was alone in the hall. I settled my tie, glanced in a large mirror which hung there, and crossed to the door directly facing me, which was, as I knew, the door of the drawing-room.

I noticed, just as I was turning the handle, a sound from within—the shutting down of a window, I took it to be. I noted it, I may say, quite mechanically, without attaching any importance to it at the time.

I opened the door and walked in. As I did so, I almost collided with Miss Russell, who was just coming out. We both apologized.

For the first time I found myself appraising the housekeeper and thinking what a handsome woman she must once have been—indeed, as far as that goes, still was. Her dark hair was unstreaked with gray, and when she had a colour, as she had at this minute, the stern quality of her looks was not so apparent.

Quite subconsciously I wondered whether she had been out, for she was breathing hard, as though she had been running.

'I'm afraid I'm a few minutes early,' I said.

'Oh! I don't think so. It's gone half-past seven, Dr Sheppard.' She paused a minute before saying, 'I—didn't know you were expected to dinner to-night. Mr Ackroyd didn't mention it.'

I received a vague impression that my dining there displeased her in some way, but I couldn't imagine why.

'How's the knee?' I inquired.

'Much the same, thank you, doctor. I must be going now. Mrs Ackroyd will be down in a moment. I—I only came in here to see if the flowers were all right.'

She passed quickly out of the room. I strolled to the window, wondering at her evident desire to justify her presence in the room. As I did so, I saw what, of course, I might have known all the time had I troubled to give my mind to it, namely, that the windows were long French ones opening on the terrace. The sound I had heard, therefore, could not have been that of a window being shut down.

Quite idly, and more to distract my mind from painful thoughts than for any other reason, I amused myself by trying to guess what could have caused the sound in question.

Coals on the fire? No, that was not the kind of noise at all. A drawer of the bureau pushed in? No, not that.

Then my eye was caught by what, I believe, is called a silver table, the lid of which lifts, and through the glass of which you can see the contents. I crossed over to it, studying the things. There were one or two pieces of old silver, a baby shoe belonging to King Charles the First, some Chinese jade figures, and quite a number of African implements and curios. Wanting to examine one of the jade figures more closely, I lifted the lid. It slipped through my fingers and fell.

Chapter 3

The Man who Grew Vegetable Marrows

I told Caroline at lunch time that I should be dining at Fernly. She expressed no objection—on the contrary—

'Excellent,' she said. 'You'll hear all about it. By the way, what is the trouble with Ralph?'

'With Ralph?' I said, surprised; 'there's isn't any.' 'Then why is he staying at the "Three Boars" instead of at Fernly Park?'

I did not for a minute question Caroline's statement that Ralph Paton was staying at the local inn. That Caroline said so was enough for me.

'Ackroyd told me he was in London,' I said. In the surprise of the moment I departed from my valuable rule of never parting with information.

'Oh!' said Caroline. I could see her nose twitching as she worked on this.

'He arrived at the "Three Boars" yesterday morning,' she said. 'And he's still there. Last night he was out with a girl.'

That did not surprise me in the least. Ralph, I should say, is out with a girl most nights of his life. But I did rather wonder that he chose to indulge in the pastime in King's Abbot instead of in the gay metropolis.

'One of the barmaids?' I asked.

'No. That's just it. He went out to meet her. I don't know who she is.'

(Bitter for Caroline to have to admit such a thing.)

'But I can guess,' continued my indefatigable sister.

I waited patiently.

'His cousin.'

'Flora Ackroyd?' I exclaimed in surprise.

At once I recognized the sound I had heard. It was this same table lid being shut down gently and carefully. I repeated the action once or twice for my own satisfaction. Then I lifted the lid to scrutinize the contents more closely.

I was still bending over the open silver table when Flora Ackroyd came into the room.

Quite a lot of people do not like Flora Ackroyd, but nobody can help admiring her. And to her friends she can be very charming. The first thing that strikes you about her is her extraordinary fairness. She has the real Scandinavian pale gold hair. Her eyes are blue—blue as the waters of a Norwegian fiord, and her skin is cream and roses. She has square, boyish shoulders and slight hips. And to a jaded medical man it is very refreshing to come across such perfect health.

A simple straight-forward English girl—I may be old-fashioned, but I think the genuine article takes a lot of beating.

Flora joined me by the silver table, and expressed heretical doubts as to King Charles I ever having worn the baby shoe.

'And anyway,' continued Miss Flora, 'all this making a fuss about things because some one wore or used them seems to me all nonsense. They're not wearing or using them now. The pen that George Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss* with—that sort of thing—well, it's only just a pen after all. If you're really keen on George Eliot, why not get *The Mill on the Floss* in a cheap edition and read it.'

'I suppose you never read such old out-of-date stuff, Miss Flora?'

'You're wrong, Dr Sheppard. I love *The Mill on the Floss*.'

I was rather pleased to hear it. The things young women read nowadays and profess to enjoy positively frighten me.

'You haven't congratulated me yet, Dr Sheppard,' said Flora. 'Haven't you heard?'

She held out her left hand. On the third finger of it was an exquisitely set single pearl.

'I'm going to marry Ralph, you know,' she went on. 'Uncle is very pleased. It keeps me in the family, you see.'

I took both her hands in mine.

'My dear,' I said, 'I hope you'll be very happy.'

'We've been engaged for about a month,' continued Flora in her cool voice, 'but it was only announced yesterday. Uncle is going to do up Cross-stones, and give it to us to live in, and we're going to pretend to farm. Really, we shall hunt all the winter, town for the season, and then go yachting. I love the sea. And, of course, I shall take a great interest in the parish affairs, and attend all the Mothers' Meetings.'

Just then Mrs Ackroyd rustled in, full of apologies for being late.

I am sorry to say I detest Mrs Ackroyd. She is all chains and teeth and bones. A most unpleasant woman. She has small pale flinty blue eyes, and however gushing her words may be, those eyes of hers always remain coldly speculative.

I went across to her, leaving Flora by the window. She gave me a handful of assorted knuckles and rings to squeeze, and began talking volubly.

Had I heard about Flora's engagement? So suitable in every way. The dear young things had fallen in love at first sight. Such a perfect pair, he so dark and she so fair.

'I can't tell you, my dear Dr Sheppard, the relief to a mother's heart.'

Mrs Ackroyd sighed—a tribute to her mother's heart, whilst her eyes remained shrewdly observant of me.

'I was wondering. You are such an old friend of dear Roger's. We know how much he trusts to your judgment. So difficult for me—in my position, as poor Cecil's widow. But there are so many tiresome things—settlements, you know—all that. I fully believe that Roger intends to make settlements upon dear Flora, but, as you know, he is just a leetle peculiar about money. Very usual, I've heard, amongst men who are captains of industry. I wondered, you know, if you could just sound him on the subject? Flora is so fond of you. We feel you are quite an old friend, although we have only really known you just over two years.'

Mrs Ackroyd's eloquence was cut short as the drawing-room door opened once more. I was pleased at the interruption. I hate interfering in other people's affairs, and I had not the least intention of tackling Ackroyd on the subject of Flora's settlements. In another moment I should have been forced to tell Mrs Ackroyd as much.

'You know Major Blunt, don't you, doctor?'

'Yes, indeed,' I said.

She said she must be getting back, and I saw her out at the surgery door just as the luncheon gong went.

I should never have suspected Miss Russell of a fondness for detective stories. It pleases me very much to think of her stepping out of the housekeeper's room to rebuke a delinquent housemaid, and then returning to a comfortable perusal of *The Mystery of the Seventh Death*, or something of the kind.