

'Blackmail!' I exclaimed, very much startled.

'Is it an effort of Parker's imagination? Or is there something in it?'

'If Parker heard anything about blackmail,' I said slowly, 'he must have been listening outside this door with his ear glued against the keyhole.'

Davis nodded.

'Nothing more likely. You see, I've been instituting a few inquiries as to what Parker has been doing with himself this evening. To tell the truth, I didn't like his manner. The man knows something. When I began to question him, he got the wind up, and plumped out some garbled story of blackmail.' I took an instant decision.

'I'm rather glad you've brought the matter up,' I said. 'I've been trying to decide whether to make a clean breast of things or not. I'd already practically decided to tell you everything, but I was going to wait for a favourable opportunity. You might as well have it now.'

And then and there I narrated the whole events of the evening as I have set them down here. The inspector listened keenly, occasionally interjecting a question.

'Most extraordinary story I ever heard,' he said, when I had finished. 'And you say that letter has completely disappeared? It looks bad—it looks very bad indeed. It gives us what we've been looking for—a motive for the murder.'

I nodded.

'I realize that.'

'You say that Mr Ackroyd hinted at a suspicion he had that some member of his household was involved? Household's rather an elastic term.'

'You don't think that Parker himself might be the man we're after?' I suggested.

'It looks very like it. He was obviously listening at the door when you came out. Then Miss Ackroyd came across him later bent on entering the study. Say he tried again when she was safely out of the way. He stabbed Ackroyd, locked the door on the inside, opened the window, and got out that way, and went round to a side door which he had previously left open. How's that?'

'There's only one thing against it,' I said slowly. 'If Ackroyd went on reading that letter as soon as I left, as he intended to do, I don't see him continuing to sit on here and turn things over in his mind for another hour. He'd have had

Parker in at once, accused him then and there, and there would have been a fine old uproar. Remember, Ackroyd was a man of choleric temper.'

'Mightn't have had time to go on with the letter just then,' suggested the inspector. 'We know some one was with him at half-past nine. If that visitor turned up as soon as you left, and after he went, Miss Ackroyd came in to say good-night—well, he wouldn't be able to go on with the letter until close upon ten o'clock.'

'And the telephone call?'

'Parker sent that all right—perhaps before he thought of the locked door and open window. Then he changed his mind—or got in a panic—and decided to deny all knowledge of it. That was it, depend upon it.'

'Ye-es,' I said rather doubtfully.

'Anyway, we can find out the truth about the telephone call from the exchange. If it was put through from here, I don't see how any one else but Parker could have sent it. Depend upon it, he's our man. But keep it dark—we don't want to alarm him just yet, till we've got all the evidence. I'll see to it he doesn't give us the slip. To all appearances we'll be concentrating on your mysterious stranger.'

He rose from where he had been sitting astride the chair belonging to the desk, and crossed over to the still form in the arm-chair.

'The weapon ought to give us a clue,' he remarked, looking up. 'It's something quite unique—a curio, I should think, by the look of it.'

He bent down, surveying the handle attentively, and I heard him give a grunt of satisfaction. Then, very gingerly, he pressed his hands down below the hilt and drew the blade out from the wound. Still carrying it so as not to touch the handle, he placed it in a wide china mug which adorned the mantelpiece. 'Yes,' he said, nodding at it. 'Quite a work of art. There can't be many of them about.'

It was indeed a beautiful object. A narrow, tapering blade, and a hilt of elaborately intertwined metals of curious and careful workmanship. He touched the blade gingerly with his finger, testing its sharpness, and made an appreciative grimace.

'Lord, what an edge,' he exclaimed. 'A child could drive that into a man—as easy as cutting butter. A dangerous sort of toy to have about.'

'May I examine the body properly now?' I asked.

He nodded.

‘Go ahead.’

I made a thorough examination.

‘Well?’ said the inspector, when I had finished.

‘I’ll spare you the technical language,’ I said. ‘We’ll keep that for the inquest. The blow was delivered by a right-handed man standing behind him, and death must have been instantaneous. By the expression on the dead man’s face, I should say that the blow was quite unexpected. He probably died without knowing who his assailant was.’

‘Butlers can creep about as soft-footed as cats,’ said Inspector Davis. ‘There’s not going to be much mystery about this crime. Take a look at the hilt of that dagger.’

I took the look.

‘I dare say they’re not apparent to you, but I can see them clearly enough.’

He lowered his voice. ‘Fingerprints!’

He stood off a few steps to judge of his effect.

‘Yes,’ I said mildly. ‘I guessed that.’

I do not see why I should be supposed to be totally devoid of intelligence. After all, I read detective stories, and the newspapers, and am a man of quite average ability. If there had been toe marks on the dagger handle, now, that would have been quite a different thing. I would then have registered any amount of surprise and awe.

I think the inspector was annoyed with me for declining to get thrilled. He picked up the china mug and invited me to accompany him to the billiard room.

‘I want to see if Mr Raymond can tell us anything about this dagger,’ he explained.

Locking the outer door behind us again, we made our way to the billiard room, where we found Geoffrey Raymond. The inspector held up his exhibit.

‘Ever seen this before, Mr Raymond?’

‘Why—I believe—I’m almost sure that is a curio given to Mr Ackroyd by Major Blunt. It comes from Morocco—no, Tunis. So the crime was committed with that? What an extraordinary thing. It seems almost impossible, and yet there could hardly be two daggers the same. May I fetch Major Blunt?’

Without waiting for an answer, he hurried off.

## Chapter 6

### The Tunisian Dagger

I met the inspector just coming from the door which led into the kitchen quarters.

‘How’s the young lady, doctor?’

‘Coming round nicely. Her mother’s with her.’

‘That’s good. I’ve been questioning the servants. They all declare that no one has been to the back door to-night. Your description of that stranger was rather vague. Can’t you give us something more definite to go upon?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said regretfully. ‘It was a dark night, you see, and the fellow had his coat collar well pulled up and his hat squashed down over his eyes.’

‘H’m,’ said the inspector. ‘Looked as though he wanted to conceal his face. Sure it was no one you know?’

I replied in the negative, but not as decidedly as I might have done. I remembered my impression that the stranger’s voice was not unfamiliar to me. I explained this rather haltingly to the inspector.

‘It was a rough, uneducated voice, you say?’

I agreed, but it occurred to me that the roughness had been of an almost exaggerated quality. If, as the inspector thought, the man had wished to hide his face, he might equally well have tried to disguise his voice.

‘Do you mind coming into the study with me again, doctor? There are one or two things I want to ask you.’

I acquiesced. Inspector Davis unlocked the door of the lobby, we passed through, and he locked the door again behind him.

‘We don’t want to be disturbed,’ he said grimly. ‘And we don’t want any eavesdropping either. What’s all this about blackmail?’

'Nice young fellow that,' said the inspector. 'Something honest and ingenious about him.'

I agreed. In the two years that Geoffrey Raymond has been secretary to Ackroyd, I have never seen him ruffled or out of temper. And he has been, I know, a most efficient secretary.

In a minute or two Raymond returned, accompanied by Blunt.

'I was right,' said Raymond excitedly. 'It is the Tunisian dagger.'

'Major Blunt hasn't looked at it yet,' objected the inspector.

'Saw it the moment I came into the study,' said the quiet man.

'You recognized it then?'

Blunt nodded.

'You said nothing about it,' said the inspector suspiciously.

'Wrong moment,' said Blunt. 'Lot of harm done by blurring out things at the wrong time.'

He returned the inspector's stare placidly enough.

The latter grunted at last and turned away. He brought the dagger over to Blunt.

'You're quite sure about it, sir. You identify it positively?'

'Absolutely. No doubt whatever.'

'Where was this—er—curio usually kept? Can you tell me that, sir?'

It was the secretary who answered.

'In the silver table in the drawing-room.'

'What?' I exclaimed.

The others looked at me.

'Yes, doctor?' said the inspector encouragingly.

'It's nothing.'

'Yes, doctor?' said the inspector again, still more encouragingly.

'It's so trivial,' I explained apologetically. 'Only that when I arrived last night for dinner I heard the lid of the silver table being shut down in the drawing-room.'

I saw profound scepticism and a trace of suspicion on the inspector's countenance.

'How did you know it was the silver table lid?'

I was forced to explain in detail—a long, tedious explanation which I would infinitely rather not have had to make.

The inspector heard me to the end.

‘Was the dagger in its place when you were looking over the contents?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I can’t say I remember noticing it—but, of course, it may have been there all the time.’

‘We’d better get hold of the housekeeper,’ remarked the inspector, and pulled the bell.

A few minutes later Miss Russell, summoned by Parker, entered the room.

‘I don’t think I went near the silver table,’ she said, when the inspector had posed his question. ‘I was looking to see that all the flowers were fresh. Oh! yes, I remember now. The silver table was open—which it had no business to be, and I shut the lid down as I passed.’

She looked at him aggressively.

‘I see,’ said the inspector. ‘Can you tell me if this dagger was in its place then?’

Miss Russell looked at the weapon composedly.

‘I can’t say, I’m sure,’ she replied. ‘I didn’t stop to look. I knew the family would be down any minute, and I wanted to get away.’

‘Thank you,’ said the inspector.

There was just a trace of hesitation in his manner, as though he would have liked to question her further, but Miss Russell clearly accepted the words as a dismissal, and glided from the room.

‘Rather a Tartar, I should fancy, eh?’ said the inspector, looking after her.

‘Let me see. This silver table is in front of one of the windows, I think you said, doctor?’

Raymond answered for me.

‘Yes, the left-hand window.’

‘And the window was open?’

‘They were both ajar.’

‘Well, I don’t think we need go into the question much further. Somebody—I’ll just say somebody—could get that dagger any time he liked, and exactly when he got it doesn’t matter in the least. I’ll be coming up in the morning with the chief constable, Mr Raymond. Until then, I’ll keep the key of that door. I want Colonel Melrose to see everything exactly as it is.

‘Yes?’

‘It will be a shock to you. Bound to be. Poor Roger’s dead.’

Flora drew away from him, her eyes dilating with horror.

‘When?’ she whispered. ‘When?’

‘Very soon after you left him, I’m afraid,’ said Blunt gravely.

Flora raised her hand to her throat, gave a little cry, and I hurried to catch her as she fell. She had fainted, and Blunt and I carried her upstairs and laid her on her bed. Then I got him to wake Mrs Ackroyd and tell her the news. Flora soon revived, and I brought her mother to her, telling her what to do for the girl. Then I hurried downstairs again.

'It's just this, Miss Ackroyd. Parker here says you came out of your uncle's study at about a quarter to ten. Is that right?'

'Quite right. I had been to say good-night to him.'

'And the time is correct?'

'Well, it must have been about then. I can't say exactly. It might have been later.'

'Was your uncle alone, or was there any one with him?'

'He was alone. Dr Sheppard had gone.'

'Did you happen to notice whether the window was open or shut?'

Flora shook her head.

'I can't say. The curtains were drawn.'

'Exactly. And your uncle seemed quite as usual?'

'I think so.'

'Do you mind telling us exactly what passed between you?'

Flora paused a minute, as though to collect her recollections.

'I went in and said, "Good-night, uncle, I'm going to bed now. I'm tired to-night." He gave a sort of grunt, and—I went over and kissed him, and he said something about my looking nice in the frock I had on, and then he told me to run away as he was busy. So I went.'

'Did he ask specially not to be disturbed?'

'Oh! yes, I forgot. He said: "Tell Parker I don't want anything more to-night, and that he's not to disturb me." I met Parker just outside the door and gave him uncle's message.'

'Just so,' said the inspector.

'Won't you tell me what it is that has been stolen?'

'We're not quite—certain,' said the inspector hesitatingly.

A wide look of alarm came into the girl's eyes. She started up.

'What is it? You're hiding something from me?'

Moving in his usual unobtrusive manner, Hector Blunt came between her and the inspector. She half stretched out her hand, and he took it in both of his, patting it as though she were a very small child, and she turned to him as though something in his stolid, rocklike demeanour promised comfort and safety.

'It's bad news, Flora,' he said quietly. 'Bad news for all of us. Your Uncle Roger—'

I happen to know that he's dining out the other side of the county, and, I believe, staying the night...'

We watched the inspector take up the jar.

'I shall have to pack this carefully,' he observed. 'It's going to be an important piece of evidence in more ways than one.'

A few minutes later as I came out of the billiard room with Raymond, the latter gave a low chuckle of amusement.

I felt the pressure of his hand on my arm, and followed the direction of his eyes. Inspector Davis seemed to be inviting Parker's opinion of a small pocket diary.

'A little obvious,' murmured my companion. 'So Parker is the suspect, is he? Shall we oblige Inspector Davis with a set of our fingerprints also?'

He took two cards from the card tray, wiped them with his silk handkerchief, then handed one to me and took the other himself. Then, with a grin, he handed them to the police inspector.

'Souvenirs,' he said. 'No. 1, Dr Sheppard; No. 2, my humble self. One from Major Blunt will be forthcoming in the morning.'

Youth is very buoyant. Even the brutal murder of his friend and employer could not dim Geoffrey Raymond's spirits for long. Perhaps that is as it should be. I do not know. I have lost the quality of resilience long since myself.

It was very late when I got back, and I hoped that Caroline would have gone to bed. I might have known better.

She had hot cocoa waiting for me, and whilst I drank it, she extracted the whole history of the evening from me. I said nothing of the blackmailing business, but contented myself with giving her the facts of the murder.

'The police suspect Parker,' I said, as I rose to my feet and prepared to ascend to bed. 'There seems a fairly clear case against him.'

'Parker?' said my sister. 'Fiddlesticks! That inspector must be a perfect fool. Parker indeed! Don't tell me.'

With which obscure pronouncement we went up to bed.

Parker interposed deferentially.

'If you'll excuse me, sir. If you were to lock the door into the main hall, nobody could gain access to this part. That staircase leads only to Mr Ackroyd's bedroom and bathroom. There is no communication with the other part of the house. There once was a door through, but Mr Ackroyd had it blocked up. He liked to feel that his suite was entirely private.'

To make things clear and explain the position, I have appended a rough sketch of the right-hand wing of the house. The small staircase leads, as Parker explained, to a big bedroom (made by two being knocked into one) and an adjoining bathroom and lavatory.

The inspector took in the position at a glance. We went through into the large hall and he locked the door behind him, slipping the key into his pocket. Then he gave the constable some low-voiced instructions, and the latter prepared to depart.

'We must get busy on those shoe tracks,' explained the inspector. 'But first of all, I must have a word with Miss Ackroyd. She was the last person to see her uncle alive. Does she know yet?'

Raymond shook his head.

'Well, no need to tell her for another five minutes. She can answer my questions better without being upset by knowing the truth about her uncle. Tell her there's been a burglary, and ask her if she would mind dressing and coming down to answer a few questions.'

It was Raymond who went upstairs on this errand.

'Miss Ackroyd will be down in a minute,' he said, when he returned. 'I told her just what you suggested.'

In less than five minutes Flora descended the staircase. She was wrapped in a pale pink silk kimono. She looked anxious and excited.

The inspector stepped forward.

'Good-evening, Miss Ackroyd,' he said civilly. 'We're afraid there's been an attempt at robbery, and we want you to help us. What's this room—the billiard room? Come in here and sit down.'

Flora sat down composedly on the wide divan which ran the length of the wall, and looked up at the inspector.

'I don't quite understand. What has been stolen? What do you want me to tell you?'

The inspector went into a kind of day-dream for some minutes.

‘One thing’s clear,’ he said at length, rousing himself from his absorption. ‘Mr Ackroyd was alive and well at nine-thirty. That is the last moment at which he is known to have been alive.’

Parker gave vent to an apologetic cough which brought the inspector’s eyes on him at once.

‘Well?’ he said sharply.

‘If you’ll excuse me, sir, Miss Flora saw him after that.’

‘Miss Flora?’

‘Yes, sir. About a quarter to ten that would be. It was after that that she told me Mr Ackroyd wasn’t to be disturbed again to-night.’

‘Did he send her to you with that message?’

‘Not exactly, sir. I was bringing a tray with soda and whisky when Miss Flora, who was just coming out of this room, stopped me and said her uncle didn’t want to be disturbed.’

The inspector looked at the butler with rather closer attention than he had bestowed on him up to now.

‘You’d already been told that Mr Ackroyd didn’t want to be disturbed, hadn’t you?’

Parker began to stammer. His hands shook.

‘Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Quite so, sir.’

‘And yet you were proposing to do so?’

‘I’d forgotten, sir. At least I mean, I always bring the whisky and soda about that time, sir, and ask if there’s anything more, and I thought—well, I was doing as usual without thinking.’

It was at this moment that it began to dawn upon me that Parker was most suspiciously flustered. The man was shaking and twitching all over.

‘H’m,’ said the inspector. ‘I must see Miss Ackroyd at once. For the moment we’ll leave this room exactly as it is. I can return here after I’ve heard what Miss Ackroyd has to tell me. I shall just take the precaution of shutting and bolting the window.’

This precaution accomplished, he led the way into the hall and we followed him. He paused a moment, as he glanced up at the little staircase, then spoke over his shoulder to the constable.

‘Jones, you’d better stay here. Don’t let any one go into that room.’

## Chapter 7

### I Learn my Neighbour’s Profession



IN the following morning I hurried unforgivably over my round. My excuse can be that I had no very serious cases to attend. On my return Caroline came into the hall to greet me.

‘Flora Ackroyd is here,’ she announced in an excited whisper.

‘What?’

I concealed my surprise as best I could.

‘She’s very anxious to see you. She’s been here half an hour.’

Caroline led the way into our small sitting-room, and I followed.

Flora was sitting on the sofa by the window. She was in black and she sat nervously twisting her hands together. I was shocked by the sight of her face. All the colour had faded away from it. But when she spoke her manner was as composed and resolute as possible.

‘Dr Sheppard, I have come to ask you to help me.’

‘Of course he’ll help you, my dear,’ said Caroline.

I don’t think Flora really wished Caroline to be present at the interview. She would, I am sure, have infinitely preferred to speak to me privately. But she also wanted to waste no time, so she made the best of it.

‘I want you to come to The Larches with me.’

‘The Larches?’ I queried, surprised.

‘To see that funny little man?’ exclaimed Caroline.

‘Yes. You know who he is, don’t you?’

‘We fancied,’ I said, ‘that he might be a retired hairdresser.’

Flora’s blue eyes opened very wide.

'Why, he's Hercule Poirot! You know who I mean—the private detective. They say he's done the most wonderful things—just like detectives do in books. A year ago he retired and came to live down here. Uncle knew who he was, but he promised not to tell any one, because M. Poirot wanted to live quietly without being bothered by people.'

'So that's who he is,' I said slowly.

'You've heard of him, of course?'

'I'm rather an old fogey, as Caroline tells me,' I said, 'but I have just heard of him.'

'Extraordinary!' commented Caroline.

I don't know what she was referring to—possibly her own failure to discover the truth.

'You want to go and see him?' I asked slowly. 'Now why?'

'To get him to investigate this murder, of course,' said Caroline sharply. 'Don't be so stupid, James.'

I was not really being stupid. Caroline does not always understand what I am driving at.

'You haven't got confidence in Inspector Davis?' I went on.

'Of course she hasn't,' said Caroline. 'I haven't either.'

Any one would have thought it was Caroline's uncle who had been murdered. 'And how do you know he would take up the case?' I asked. 'Remember he has retired from active work.'

'That's just it,' said Flora simply. 'I've got to persuade him.'

'You are sure you are doing wisely?' I asked gravely.

'Of course she is,' said Caroline. 'I'll go with her myself if she likes.'

I'd rather the doctor came with me if you don't mind, Miss Sheppard,' said Flora.

She knows the value of being direct on certain occasions. Any hints would certainly have been wasted on Caroline.

'You see,' she explained, following directness with tact, 'Dr Sheppard being the doctor, and having found the body, he would be able to give all the details to M. Poirot.'

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

I took a turn or two up and down the room.

he had said he wanted to talk to Dr Sheppard without being disturbed, and I went away again. But now it seems that the doctor had already left?

I nodded.

'I was at home by a quarter-past nine,' I said. 'I didn't go out again until I received the telephone call.'

'Who could have been with him at half-past nine?' queried the inspector.

'It wasn't you, Mr—er—'

'Major Blunt,' I said.

'Major Hector Blunt?' asked the inspector, a respectful tone creeping into his voice.

Blunt merely jerked his head affirmatively.

'I think we've seen you down here before, sir,' said the inspector. 'I didn't recognize you for the moment, but you were staying with Mr Ackroyd a year ago last May.'

'June,' corrected Blunt.

'Just so, June it was. Now, as I was saying, it wasn't you with Mr Ackroyd at nine-thirty this evening?'

Blunt shook his head.

'Never saw him after dinner,' he volunteered.

The inspector turned once more to Raymond.

'You didn't overhear any of the conversation going on, did you, sir?'

'I did catch just a fragment of it,' said the secretary, 'and, supposing as I did that it was Dr Sheppard who was with Mr Ackroyd, that fragment struck me as distinctly odd. As far as I can remember, the exact words were these. Mr Ackroyd was speaking. "The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late"—that is what he was saying—"of late, that I fear it is impossible for me to accede to your request..." I went away again at once, of course, so did not hear any more. But I rather wondered because Dr Sheppard—'

'—Does not ask for loans for himself or subscriptions for others,' I finished. 'A demand for money,' said the inspector musingly. 'It may be that here we have a very important clew.' He turned to the butler. 'You say, Parker, that nobody was admitted by the front door this evening?'

'That's what I say, sir.'

'Then it seems almost certain that Mr Ackroyd himself must have admitted this stranger. But I don't quite see—'