

I would have catechized him further, for I did not quite understand his meaning, but at that moment the door opened and Geoffrey Raymond was announced.

He came in fresh and debonair as ever, and greeted us both.

“How are you, doctor? M. Poirot, this is the second time I’ve been here this morning. I was anxious to catch you.”

“Perhaps I’d better be off,” I suggested rather awkwardly.

“Not on my account, doctor. No, it’s just this,” he went on, seating himself at a wave of invitation from Poirot, “I’ve got a confession to make.”

“*En vérité?*” said Poirot, with an air of polite interest.

“Oh, it’s of no consequence, really. But, as a matter of fact, my conscience has been pricking me ever since yesterday afternoon. You accused us all of keeping back something, M. Poirot. I plead guilty. I’ve had something up my sleeve.”

“And what is that, M. Raymond?”

“As I say, it’s nothing of consequence—just this. I was in debt—badly, and that legacy came in the nick of time. Five hundred pounds puts me on my feet again with a little to spare.”

He smiled at us both with that engaging frankness that made him such a likable youngster.

“You know how it is. Suspicious looking policeman—don’t like to admit you were hard up for money—think it will look bad to them. But I was a fool, really, because Blunt and I were in the billiard room from a quarter to ten onwards, so I’ve got a watertight alibi and nothing to fear. Still, when you thundered out that stuff about concealing things, I felt a nasty prick of conscience, and I thought I’d like to get it off my mind.”

He got up again and stood smiling at us.

“You are a very wise young man,” said Poirot, nodding at him

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. ACKROYD

AFTER the evening talk I have just chronicled, the affair seemed to me to enter on a different phase. The whole thing can be divided into two parts, each clear and distinct from the other. Part I. ranges from Ackroyd’s death on the Friday evening to the following Monday night. It is the straight-forward narrative of what occurred, as presented to Hercule Poirot. I was at Poirot’s elbow the whole time. I saw what he saw. I tried my best to read his mind. As I know now, I failed in this latter task. Though Poirot showed me all his discoveries—as, for instance, the gold wedding-ring—he held back the vital and yet logical impressions that he formed. As I came to know later, this secrecy was characteristic of him. He would throw out hints and suggestions, but beyond that he would not go.

As I say, up till the Monday evening, my narrative might have been that of Poirot himself. I played Watson to his Sherlock. But after Monday our ways diverged. Poirot was busy on his own account. I got to hear of what he was doing, because, in King’s Abbot, you get to hear of everything, but he did not take me into his confidence beforehand. And I, too, had my own preoccupations.

On looking back, the thing that strikes me most is the piecemeal character of this period. Every one had a hand in the elucidation of the mystery. It was rather like a jig-saw puzzle to which every one contributed their own little piece of knowledge or discovery. But their task ended there. To Poirot alone belongs the renown of fitting those pieces into their correct place.

Some of the incidents seemed at the time irrelevant and

unmeaning. There was, for instance, the question of the black boots. But that comes later.... To take things strictly in chronological order, I must begin with the summons from Mrs. Ackroyd.

She sent for me early on Tuesday morning, and since the summons sounded an urgent one, I hastened there, expecting to find her *in extremis*.

The lady was in bed. So much did she concede to the etiquette of the situation. She gave me her bony hand, and indicated a chair drawn up to the bedside.

“Well, Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said, “and what’s the matter with you?”

I spoke with that kind of spurious geniality which seems to be expected of general practitioners.

“I’m prostrated,” said Mrs. Ackroyd in a faint voice. “Absolutely prostrated. It’s the shock of poor Roger’s death. They say these things often aren’t felt at the *time*, you know. It’s the reaction afterwards.”

It is a pity that a doctor is precluded by his profession from being able sometimes to say what he really thinks.

I would have given anything to be able to answer “Bunkum!”

Instead, I suggested a tonic. Mrs. Ackroyd accepted the tonic. One move in the game seemed now to be concluded. Not for a moment did I imagine that I had been sent for because of the shock occasioned by Ackroyd’s death. But Mrs. Ackroyd is totally incapable of pursuing a straight-forward course on any subject. She always approaches her object by tortuous means. I wondered very much why it was she had sent for me.

“And then that scene—yesterday,” continued my patient. She paused as though expecting me to take up a cue. “What scene?”

“Doctor, how can you? Have you forgotten? That dreadful little Frenchman—or Belgian—or whatever he is. Bullying us all like he did. It has quite upset me. Coming on top of Roger’s death.”

“Yes,” I said. “Whom did she go out to meet? And why?” “You think she went to meet some one?”

“I do.”

Poirot nodded.

“So do I,” he said thoughtfully. There was a pause.

“By the way,” I said, “I’ve got a message for you from my sister. Ralph Paton’s boots were black, not brown.”

I was watching him closely as I gave the message, and I fancied that I saw a momentary flicker of discomposure. If so, it passed almost immediately.

“She is absolutely positive they are not brown?” “Absolutely.”

“Ah!” said Poirot regretfully. “That is a pity.” And he seemed quite crestfallen.

He entered into no explanations, but at once started a new subject of conversation.

“The housekeeper, Miss Russell, who came to consult you on that Friday morning—is it indiscreet to ask what passed at the interview—apart from the medical details, I mean?”

“Not at all,” I said. “When the professional part of the conversation was over, we talked for a few minutes about poisons, and the ease or difficulty of detecting them, and about drug-taking and drug-takers.”

“With special reference to cocaine?” asked Poirot. “How did you know?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

For answer, the little man rose and crossed the room to where newspapers were filed. He brought me a copy of the *Daily Budget*, dated Friday, 16th September, and showed me an article dealing with the smuggling of cocaine. It was a somewhat lurid article, written with an eye to picturesque effect.

“That is what put cocaine into her head, my friend,” he said.

understand the enigma of the boots. When the old lady with the Breton cap opened the door to me, I found myself asking if M. Poirot was in, quite automatically.

Poirot sprang up to meet me, with every appearance of pleasure.

“Sit down, my good friend,” he said. “The big chair? This small one? The room is not too hot, no?”

I thought it was stifling, but refrained from saying so. The windows were closed, and a large fire burned in the grate.

“The English people, they have a mania for the fresh air,” declared Poirot. “The big air, it is all very well outside, where it belongs. Why admit it to the house? But let us not discuss such banalities. You have something for me, yes?”

“Two things,” I said. “First—this—from my sister.” I handed over the pot of medlar jelly.

“How kind of Mademoiselle Caroline. She has remembered her promise. And the second thing?” “Information—of a kind.”

And I told him of my interview with Mrs. Ackroyd. He listened with interest, but not much excitement.

“It clears the ground,” he said thoughtfully. “And it has a certain value as confirming the evidence of the housekeeper. She said, you remember, that she found the silver table lid open and closed it down in passing.”

“What about her statement that she went into the drawing-room to see if the flowers were fresh?”

“Ah! we never took that very seriously, did we, my friend? It was patently an excuse, trumped up in a hurry, by a woman who felt it urgent to explain her presence—which, by the way, you would probably never have thought of questioning. I considered it possible that her agitation might arise from the fact that she had been tampering with the silver table, but I think now that we must look for another cause.”

“I’m very sorry, Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said.

“I don’t know what he meant—shouting at us like he did. I should hope I know my duty too well to *dream* of concealing anything. I have given the police *every* assistance in my power.”

Mrs. Ackroyd paused, and I said, “Quite so.” I was beginning to have a glimmering of what all the trouble was about.

“No one can say that I have failed in my duty,” continued Mrs. Ackroyd. “I am sure Inspector Raglan is perfectly satisfied. Why should this little upstart of a foreigner make a fuss? A most ridiculous-looking creature he is too—just like a comic Frenchman in a revue. I can’t think why Flora insisted on bringing him into the case. She never said a word to me about it. Just went off and did it on her own. Flora is too independent. I am a woman of the world and her mother. She should have come to me for advice first.”

I listened to all this in silence.

“What does he think? That’s what I want to know. Does he actually imagine I’m hiding something? He—he—positively *accused* me yesterday.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“It is surely of no consequence, Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said. “Since you are not concealing anything, any remarks he may have made do not apply to you.”

Mrs. Ackroyd went off at a tangent, after her usual fashion.

“Servants are so tiresome,” she said. “They gossip, and talk amongst themselves. And then it gets round—and all the time there’s probably nothing in it at all.”

“Have the servants been talking?” I asked. “What about?”

Mrs. Ackroyd cast a very shrewd glance at me. It quite threw me off my balance.

“I was sure *you’d* know, doctor, if any one did. You were with M. Poirot all the time, weren’t you?”

“I was.”

“Then of course you know. It was that girl, Ursula Bourne, wasn’t it? Naturally—she’s leaving. She *would* want to make all the trouble she could. Spiteful, that’s what they are. They’re all alike. Now, you being there, doctor, you must know exactly what she did say? I’m most anxious that no wrong impression should get about. After all, you don’t repeat every little detail to the police, do you? There are family matters sometimes—nothing to do with the question of the murder. But if the girl was spiteful, she may have made out all sorts of things.”

I was shrewd enough to see that a very real anxiety lay behind these outpourings. Poirot had been justified in his premises. Of the six people round the table yesterday, Mrs. Ackroyd at least had had something to hide. It was for me to discover what that something might be.

“If I were you, Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said brusquely, “I should make a clean breast of things.”

She gave a little scream.

“Oh! doctor, how can you be so abrupt. It sounds as though—as though——And I can explain everything so simply.” “Then why not do so,” I suggested.

Mrs. Ackroyd took out a frilled handkerchief, and became tearful.

“I thought, doctor, that you might put it to M. Poirot—explain it, you know—because it’s so difficult for a foreigner to see our point of view. And you don’t know—nobody could know—what I’ve had to contend with. A martyrdom—a long martyrdom. That’s what my life has been. I don’t like to speak ill of the dead—but there it is. Not the smallest bill, but it had all to be gone over—just as though Roger had had a few miserly hundreds a year instead of being (as Mr. Hammond told me yesterday) one of the wealthiest men in these parts.”

Mrs. Ackroyd paused to dab her eyes with the frilled

“To The Larches, of course.”

“My dear Caroline,” I said, “what for?”

“Mr. Raymond wanted to see him very particularly,” said Caroline. “You might hear what it’s all about.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Curiosity is not my besetting sin,” I remarked coldly. “I can exist comfortably without knowing exactly what my neighbors are doing and thinking.”

“Stuff and nonsense, James,” said my sister. “You want to know just as much as I do. You’re not so honest, that’s all. You always have to pretend.”

“Really, Caroline,” I said, and retired into my surgery.

Ten minutes later Caroline tapped at the door and entered. In her hand she held what seemed to be a pot of jam.

“I wonder, James,” she said, “if you would mind taking this pot of medlar jelly across to M. Poirot? I promised it to him. He has never tasted any home-made medlar jelly.”

“Why can’t Annie go?” I asked coldly.

“She’s doing some mending. I can’t spare her.” Caroline and I looked at each other.

“Very well,” I said, rising. “But if I take the beastly thing, I shall just leave it at the door. You understand that?”

My sister raised her eyebrows.

“Naturally,” she said. “Who suggested you should do anything else?” The honors were with Caroline.

“If you *do* happen to see M. Poirot,” she said, as I opened the front door, “you might tell him about the boots.”

It was a most subtle parting shot. I wanted dreadfully to

CHAPTER XV

GEOFFREY RAYMOND

I WAS to have a further proof that day of the success of Poirot's tactics. That challenge of his had been a subtle touch born of his knowledge of human nature. A mixture of fear and guilt had wrung the truth from Mrs. Ackroyd. She was the first to react.

That afternoon when I returned from seeing my patients, Caroline told me that Geoffrey Raymond had just left.

"Did he want to see me?" I asked, as I hung up my coat in the hall. Caroline was hovering by my elbow.

"It was M. Poirot he wanted to see," she said. "He'd just come from The Larches. M. Poirot was out. Mr. Raymond thought that he might be here, or that you might know where he was."

"I haven't the least idea."

"I tried to make him wait," said Caroline, "but he said he would call back at The Larches in half an hour, and went away down the village. A great pity, because M. Poirot came in practically the minute after he left."

"Came in here?"

"No, to his own house." "How do you know?"

"The side window," said Caroline briefly.

It seemed to me that we had now exhausted the topic. Caroline thought otherwise.

"Aren't you going across?" "Across where?"

handkerchief. "Yes," I said encouragingly. "You were talking about bills?"

"Those dreadful bills. And some I didn't like to show Roger at all. They were things a man wouldn't understand. He would have said the things weren't necessary. And of course they mounted up, you know, and they kept coming in——"

She looked at me appealingly, as though asking me to condole with her on this striking peculiarity.

"It's a habit they have," I agreed.

"And the tone altered—became quite abusive. I assure you, doctor, I was becoming a nervous wreck. I couldn't sleep at nights. And a dreadful fluttering round the heart. And then I got a letter from a Scotch gentleman—as a matter of fact there were two letters—both Scotch gentlemen. Mr. Bruce MacPherson was one, and the other were Colin MacDonald. Quite a coincidence."

"Hardly that," I said dryly. "They are usually Scotch gentlemen, but I suspect a Semitic strain in their ancestry."

"Ten pounds to ten thousand on note of hand alone," murmured Mrs. Ackroyd reminiscently. "I wrote to one of them, but it seemed there were difficulties."

She paused.

I gathered that we were just coming to delicate ground. I have never known any one more difficult to bring to the point.

"You see," murmured Mrs. Ackroyd, "it's all a question of expectations, isn't it? Testamentary expectations. And though, of course, I expected that Roger would provide for me, I didn't *know*. I thought that if only I could glance over a copy of his will—not in any sense of vulgar prying—but just so that I could make my own arrangements."

She glanced sideways at me. The position was now very delicate indeed. Fortunately words, ingeniously used, will serve to mask the ugliness of naked facts.

"I could only tell this to you, dear Dr. Sheppard," said Mrs. Ackroyd rapidly. "I can trust you not to misjudge me, and to represent the matter in the right light to M. Poirot. It was on Friday afternoon——"

She came to a stop and swallowed uncertainly.

"Yes," I repeated encouragingly. "On Friday afternoon. Well?"

"Every one was out, or so I thought. And I went into Roger's study—I had some real reason for going there—I mean, there was nothing underhand about it. And as I saw all the papers heaped on the desk, it just came to me, like a flash: 'I wonder if Roger keeps his will in one of the drawers of the desk.' I'm so impulsive, always was, from a child. I do things on the spur of the moment. He'd left his keys—very careless of him—in the lock of the top drawer."

"I see," I said helpfully. "So you searched the desk. Did you find the will?"

Mrs. Ackroyd gave a little scream, and I realized that I had not been sufficiently diplomatic.

"How dreadful it sounds. But it wasn't at all like that really."

"Of course it wasn't," I said hastily. "You must forgive my unfortunate way of putting things."

"You see, men are so peculiar. In dear Roger's place, I should not have objected to revealing the provisions of my will. But men are so secretive. One is forced to adopt little subterfuges in self-defence."

"And the result of the little subterfuge?" I asked.

"That's just what I'm telling you. As I got to the bottom drawer, Bourne came in. Most awkward. Of course I shut the drawer and stood up, and I called her attention to a few specks of dust on the surface. But I didn't like the way she looked—quite respectful in manner, but a very nasty light in her eyes. Almost contemptuous, if you know what I mean. I never have liked that girl very much. She's a good servant, and she says Ma'am, and doesn't object to

coöperated loyally, at once giving Clara leave of absence, the matter was rushed through at express speed.

It was when we were sitting down to lunch that Caroline remarked, with would-be unconcern:—

"About those boots of Ralph Paton's." "Well," I said, "what about them?"

"M. Poirot thought they were probably brown. He was wrong. They're black."

And Caroline nodded her head several times. She evidently felt that she had scored a point over Poirot.

I did not answer. I was puzzling over what the color of a pair of Ralph Paton's boots had to do with the case.

uncle alive at a quarter to ten.”

She turned away, and her whole figure seemed to droop.

“A handsome girl,” I said to myself as I drove off. “An exceedingly handsome girl.”

Caroline was at home. She had had a visit from Poirot and was very pleased and important about it.

“I am helping him with the case,” she explained.

I felt rather uneasy. Caroline is bad enough as it is. What will she be like with her detective instincts encouraged?

“Are you going round the neighborhood looking for Ralph Paton’s mysterious girl?” I inquired.

“I might do that on my own account,” said Caroline. “No, this is a special thing M. Poirot wants me to find out for him.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“He wants to know whether Ralph Paton’s boots were black or brown,” said Caroline with tremendous solemnity.

I stared at her. I see now that I was unbelievably stupid about these boots. I failed altogether to grasp the point.

“They were brown shoes,” I said. “I saw them.”

“Not shoes, James, boots. M. Poirot wants to know whether a pair of boots Ralph had with him at the hotel were brown or black. A lot hangs on it.”

Call me dense if you like. I didn’t see.

“And how are you going to find out?” I asked.

Caroline said there would be no difficulty about that. Our Annie’s dearest friend was Miss Ganett’s maid, Clara. And Clara was walking out with the boots at the Three Boars. The whole thing was simplicity itself, and by the aid of Miss Ganett, who

wearing caps and aprons (which I declare to you a lot of them do nowadays), and she can say ‘Not at home’ without scruples if she has to answer the door instead of Parker, and she doesn’t have those peculiar gurgling noises inside which so many parlormaids seem to have when they wait at table—Let me see, where was I?”

“You were saying, that in spite of several valuable qualities, you never liked Bourne.”

“No more I do. She’s—odd. There’s something different about her from the others. Too well educated, that’s my opinion. You can’t tell who are ladies and who aren’t nowadays.”

“And what happened next?” I asked.

“Nothing. At least, Roger came in. And I thought he was out for a walk. And he said: ‘What’s all this?’ and I said, ‘Nothing. I just came in to fetch *Punch*.’ And I took *Punch* and went out with it. Bourne stayed behind. I heard her asking Roger if she could speak to him for a minute. I went straight up to my room, to lie down. I was very upset.”

There was a pause.

“You will explain to M. Poirot, won’t you? You can see for yourself what a trivial matter the whole thing was. But, of course, when he was so stern about concealing things, I thought of this at once. Bourne may have made some extraordinary story out of it, but you can explain, can’t you?”

“That is all?” I said. “You have told me everything?”

“Ye-es,” said Mrs. Ackroyd. “Oh! yes,” she added firmly.

But I had noted the momentary hesitation, and I knew that there was still something she was keeping back. It was nothing less than a flash of sheer genius that prompted me to ask the question I did.

“Mrs. Ackroyd,” I said, “was it you who left the silver table open?”

I had my answer in the blush of guilt that even rouge and powder could not conceal.

"How did you know?" she whispered. "It was you, then?"

"Yes—I—you see—there were one or two pieces of old silver—very interesting. I had been reading up the subject and there was an illustration of quite a small piece which had fetched an immense sum at Christy's. It looked to me just the same as the one in the silver table. I thought I would take it up to London with me when I went—and—and have it valued. Then if it really was a valuable piece, just think what a charming surprise it would have been for Roger?"

I refrained from comments, accepting Mrs. Ackroyd's story on its merits. I even forbore to ask her why it was necessary to abstract what she wanted in such a surreptitious manner.

"Why did you leave the lid open?" I asked. "Did you forget?"

"I was startled," said Mrs. Ackroyd. "I heard footsteps coming along the terrace outside. I hastened out of the room and just got up the stairs before Parker opened the front door to you."

"That must have been Miss Russell," I said thoughtfully. Mrs. Ackroyd had revealed to me one fact that was extremely interesting. Whether her designs upon Ackroyd's silver had been strictly honorable I neither knew nor cared. What did interest me was the fact that Miss Russell must have entered the drawing-room by the window, and that I had not been wrong when I judged her to be out of breath with running. Where had she been? I thought of the summer-house and the scrap of cambric.

"I wonder if Miss Russell has her handkerchiefs starched!" I exclaimed on the spur of the moment.

Mrs. Ackroyd's start recalled me to myself, and I rose.

"You think you can explain to M. Poirot?" she asked anxiously. "Oh, certainly. Absolutely."

I got away at last, after being forced to listen to more

justifications of her conduct.

The parlormaid was in the hall, and it was she who helped me on with my overcoat. I observed her more closely than I had done heretofore. It was clear that she had been crying.

"How is it," I asked, "that you told us that Mr. Ackroyd sent for you on Friday to his study? I hear now that it was *you* who asked to speak to *him*?"

For a minute the girl's eyes dropped before mine. Then she spoke.

"I meant to leave in any case," she said uncertainly.

I said no more. She opened the front door for me. Just as I was passing out, she said suddenly in a low voice:—

"Excuse me, sir, is there any news of Captain Paton?" I shook my head, looking at her inquiringly.

"He ought to come back," she said. "Indeed—indeed he ought to come back."

She was looking at me with appealing eyes.

"Does no one know where he is?" she asked. "Do you?" I said sharply. She shook her head.

"No, indeed. I know nothing. But any one who was a friend to him would tell him this: he ought to come back."

I lingered, thinking that perhaps the girl would say more. Her next question surprised me.

"When do they think the murder was done? Just before ten o'clock?" "That is the idea," I said. "Between a quarter to ten and the hour." "Not earlier? Not before a quarter to ten?"

I looked at her attentively. She was so clearly eager for a reply in the affirmative.

"That's out of the question," I said. "Miss Ackroyd saw her