

(*A pause.*)

MISS RUSSELL. Well, what of it?

(*There is an uncomfortable silence.*)

I don't understand. Who is he?

POIROT. The man who came to Fernly the night of the murder. I intend to know who he came to see, too.

(*Another silence. POIROT's stare is intense and excruciating. Finally, MISS RUSSELL wilts.*)

MISS RUSSELL. He never touched Mr. Ackroyd. You must believe me.

POIROT. I do. But I needed to hear you say it.

MISS RUSSELL. Is he suspected of the crime?

POIROT. Yes. But you alone can save him. Why was he here?

MISS RUSSELL. He came to see me.

POIROT. In the boat house.

MISS RUSSELL. How did you know?

POIROT. It is the business of Poirot to know these things. Charles Kent, he is your son, is he not?

(*SHEPPARD gasps.*)

SHEPPARD. Her son?

MISS RUSSELL. Yes. No one has ever known. It was long ago, down in Kent. I wasn't married.

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

MISS RUSSELL. He was raised by my relatives. I was only allowed to see him on rare occasions while he was growing up, before they moved him to Canada. Charles was always a good boy but things turned out rather

badly for him. He drank, then took drugs. Somehow, he found out that I was his mother. He wrote asking for money and said he was coming to Fernly.

POIROT. So you chose to meet in the boat house.

MISS RUSSELL. I gave him all the money I had. Charles barely said a word, then left.

POIROT. What time was that?

MISS RUSSELL. Twenty, twenty-five minutes past nine. He left the way he came.

POIROT. Then, you came back to Fernly and saw Major Blunt walking the terrace, smoking.

MISS RUSSELL. Yes. Inspector Raglan will surely blame Charlie. He'll go to the gallows for something he didn't do! ...Please help him.

POIROT. I told you not to keep secrets. Now, things are more complicated... One last thing, has Miss Bourne left Fernly Hall yet?

MISS RUSSELL. Yes, a short while ago. Just after the late post arrived.

SHEPPARD. But where did she go?

POIROT. Don't you know, Doctor? She is no doubt at your house. Keep up.

(*Fernly and MISS RUSSELL disappear.*)

CAROLINE and URSULA BOURNE appear in the Sheppards' kitchen. URSULA has been crying. SHEPPARD and POIROT enter.)

CAROLINE. There, there, dear. I found her in such a state! I asked her to come in to collect herself.

URSULA. I needed to speak to you privately. Doctor. The newspaper says that Ralph Paton has been arrested. Arrested!

SHEPPARD. Come now, Miss Bourne.

POIROT. No, no, Doctor. You do not have it quite correct. You are not Miss Bourne, are you, my child? Your name is... Mrs. Ralph Paton.

URSULA. Yes. Yes it is.

(*URSULA tries to collect herself. She smiles, pitifully.*)

CAROLINE. Oh, my. That's quite a secret to keep in King's Abbot. Good for you, child. Well done.

URSULA. I suppose since Ralph's been arrested everything will come out now. I needn't pretend any longer.

POIROT. The truth is what we need now. The truth! There is no longer time for games and secret affairs. I cannot help you unless you wish to be helped!

(*URSULA begins to cry.*)

CAROLINE. Oh, hush now, Hercule. You need to work on your bedside manner a bit.

Ursula, listen to me. Make a clean breast of it. Tell me everything.

URSULA. I was struggling. Things were tight with my family and I couldn't find a job. So I became a parlourmaid. I enjoyed the work and I had plenty of time to myself at Fernly.

CAROLINE. And that's when you met and fell in love with Ralph.

URSULA. Yes. At first it was just a smile, a stolen glance every now and then. But he kept things to himself. Then, one day, I saw him in town at The Three Boars and he asked me to stay for a drink with him. We spoke for hours. I told him how I had lost an older brother during the war. Ralph just opened up to me. Told me everything he'd been through when he was a soldier

and how difficult it had been when he came home from the front. We both knew what it was like to feel out of place, I suppose. I loved him. I loved him. And he loved me in return. Before long, we were married. I didn't like the idea of a secret marriage but Ralph was badly in debt. Then, one day, out of the blue, Mr. Ackroyd told him he wished for Ralph to marry Flora, and if he did -

CAROLINE. His debts would be paid, I see. And Ralph accepted.

SHEPPARD. Ackroyd could keep the wealth within the family.

URSULA. Ralph came up from London to talk.

CAROLINE. It was you he argued with in the woods!

POIROT. And so the very next day you requested to speak to Mr. Ackroyd alone.

URSULA. He accused me of trying to "trap" Ralph.

POIROT. You and Paton met in the boat house.

URSULA. Yes. And I called him a coward. We parted on terrible terms. I went straight back to my room and locked myself in. Half an hour later, Mr. Ackroyd was dead and Ralph had vanished.

SHEPPARD. Can anyone prove your alibi?

URSULA. Prove? That I was in my room? No. But surely - no one would think - no one would ever think -

POIROT. That it was you who entered by the window and stabbed Mr. Ackroyd? Yes, someone may be inclined to think that very thing.

URSULA. Oh, my God.

CAROLINE. Only a fool would believe that. I can't say I think much of your husband, running off and leaving you to face -