

THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD

MISS RUSSELL. Look at the cocaine habit. It's very prevalent in high society, isn't it?

SHEPPARD. Afraid I don't know much about high society.

MISS RUSSELL. But, suppose you are bound to the drug habit. Is there any cure?

SHEPPARD. I'm not sure, Miss Russell. Drugs are a tricky business.

MISS RUSSELL. And there are some which can't be detected at all, I hear. Curare, for instance. I read about it in *The Mystery Of The Seven Deaths*. It's quite common, I understand. You probably have some here in your surgery, I'll wager.

SHEPPARD. Ah, no. Nothing so exciting here.

MISS RUSSELL. No. Of course not.

SHEPPARD. I never took you for detective novels, Miss Russell.

MISS RUSSELL. Yes, they're often a bit lurid for my tastes. But every now and then the right one can be a helpful distraction, I suppose. Oh, I shouldn't be going on like this. How foolish I sound. What must you think?

SHEPPARD. Is there something else on your mind, Helen?

MISS RUSSELL. Thanks for the liniment, Doctor. Do I owe you anything?

SHEPPARD. Not at all.

MISS RUSSELL. How kind. Good day.

(She exits. SHEPPARD addresses the audience.)

SHEPPARD. It was at that moment that a foreboding first swept over me. Do you know that feeling? Nothing tangible. Just a vague premonition. It all struck me as very disagreeable.

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(Fernly Hall is gradually revealed behind SHEPPARD as he speaks.)

I had a full day of rounds. In the early evening, I stopped in at The Three Boars for a whiskey. You would have, too. Had to steady myself, you understand. When I was done there, I made my way on foot to Ackroyd's, a little more than a five minute walk up the hill. A few minutes before half past seven, I arrived at Fernly Hall.

(SHEPPARD arrives in the large, comfortable drawing room of Fernly Hall. Up center, the writing room doors are open.)

(PARKER, the butler, dressed in tails, greets SHEPPARD.)

PARKER. Good evening, Dr. Sheppard.

SHEPPARD. Hello, Parker.

PARKER. May I?

(PARKER takes SHEPPARD's hat.)

SHEPPARD. Thank you, yes. I'll keep my bag.

PARKER. Making a house visit, sir?

SHEPPARD. No, I was invited for dinner.

PARKER. Were you? I wasn't aware.

SHEPPARD. Sorry to be a trouble.

PARKER. I didn't say it was a trouble, sir. The others will be down in a moment.

(SHEPPARD takes in the room, admiringly. He goes to the glass curio case. The lid is open.)

SHEPPARD. I can entertain myself.

PARKER. Ah, but you musn't open that cabinet, please, sir.

SHEPPARD. I didn't. The lid was open already.

PARKER. How extraordinary. I passed through here a short while ago and the case was closed. Mr. Ackroyd is very particular about these items.

SHEPPARD. Yes, I've always wondered -

PARKER. A rather delicate collection. Not to be touched, please.

SHEPPARD. I wouldn't dream of it.

PARKER. Thank you.

SHEPPARD. Looks to be a jade figurine, ancient carving utensils and what's this?

PARKER. A baby shoe once belonging to King Charles the First, I believe.

SHEPPARD. You don't say?

PARKER. I do, sir. Now if you don't mind -

(MISS RUSSELL enters from the garden's French doors, breathing heavily and carrying a bundle of papers.)

MISS RUSSELL. Dr. Sheppard?

SHEPPARD. Miss Russell, you all right?

MISS RUSSELL. Of course. Just a bit winded.

SHEPPARD. You must stay off your feet.

MISS RUSSELL. Are you making a house visit?

PARKER. The doctor has been invited for dinner, ma'am. A fact of which I was not informed.

MISS RUSSELL. Nor was I. Curious. Mr. Ackroyd usually tells me of everything pertaining to his schedule.

(URSULA, the maid, enters.)

URSULA. You wanted to see me ma'am?

MISS RUSSELL. Ah, Ursula. I understand you and Mr. Ackroyd spoke earlier?

URSULA. Yes, Ma'am.

MISS RUSSELL. And I'm told you've come to an agreement about your position?

URSULA. Yes, ma'am.

MISS RUSSELL. Very well. One more thing. Mr. Ackroyd has repeatedly asked if the post had arrived. He's been expecting a letter.

URSULA. He asked three times already. Am I being accused of losing the mail, now?

MISS RUSSELL. No need for theatrics. Inform me when it's delivered.

URSULA. I said I would and I will.

(She exits.)

MISS RUSSELL. Such a petulant child.

SHEPPARD. It seems to me the post office has been behind all week, hasn't it?

PARKER. I'm sure I wouldn't know, sir. I'm only the butler.

(He exits.)

MISS RUSSELL. Mr. Ackroyd is in his quarters in the west wing of the house. I'll tell him you're here.

SHEPPARD. Sorry to surprise you.

MISS RUSSELL. This is Fernly, Doctor. There are always surprises when you work for a man like Roger Ackroyd.

(Ackroyd's niece, FLORA, enters. She is a vision, strong willed and smartly dressed.)