

**FLORA.** I thought I heard your voice down here! Admiring the family heirlooms, Doctor Sheppard?

**SHEPPARD.** Flora! My! You look lovely.

**FLORA.** Did I interrupt, Miss Russell?

(**MISS RUSSELL exits.** **FLORA greets SHEPPARD at the curio table.**)

Ooo. I think she positively hates me. Oh, this house can be suffocating. I've been holed up so long - like those trinkets in that case. You know, I don't believe Charles The First ever even wore baby shoes.

**SHEPPARD.** We'll never know!

**FLORA.** You haven't congratulated me yet. I'm sure you've heard. There are no secrets in King's Abbot, are there? Ralph and I are engaged to be married. It's going to be announced tomorrow.

**SHEPPARD.** Oh! How wonderful, Flora. You must be very happy.

**FLORA.** Yes, I must be. Uncle is pleased. It keeps me in the family. Perhaps he'll give us a house to live in. We can pretend to farm in the summer and hunt in the winter. What more could one ask?

(**GERTRUDE ACKROYD, Ackroyd's sister-in-law, enters.** *She's a bit ghoul-ish, in a long flowing dress.*)

**GERTRUDE.** Yes! What more could any mother ask for her daughter? And, looky looky who has come for dinner! Hallo! Dear, Dr. Sheppard!

**SHEPPARD.** Ah, Gertrude! Delighted to see you!

**GERTRUDE.** Oh, Doctor. Am I blushing? Give a little kiss. Such a dear. Isn't he a dear, Flora?

**FLORA.** Yes, Mother. A dear in headlamps.

**GERTRUDE.** Flora, stand up straight. Posture is everything!

**FLORA.** Everything to you, perhaps.

**GERTRUDE.** And where is your sister, Doctor? We missed Caroline at Mahjong last week.

**SHEPPARD.** I'm afraid I can't keep track of her.

**GERTRUDE.** Well, you must tell her hello. You know, Flora and I were only just talking about you. We wish for a teensy favor, you see.

**FLORA.** Mother!

**GERTRUDE.** Oh, hush now. Doctor, you are such a dear old friend of Roger's and we know how much he values your discretion. Perhaps you could talk to him on our behalf?

**SHEPPARD.** I don't follow.

**GERTRUDE.** I'm only the widow of Roger's brother, so it's difficult for me to speak to him about money matters, you see. When we lived in Montreal, we were quite independent. Then Cecil died and everything changed.

Well, Roger hasn't been forthcoming about his affairs now that Flora and Ralph are engaged. So, what am I to do? I imagine he will offer us some assistance but as you know, Roger has always been a *leeetle* peculiar about money. Might you sound him on the subject?

(**MAJOR HECTOR BLUNT enters, smartly dressed.** *He's a whirlwind of a man.*)

**MAJOR BLUNT.** Seven thirty, precisely. All ready for dinner?

**FLORA.** Ah! The cavalry's arrived.

**MAJOR BLUNT.** Flora, Gertrude. And who are you, sir? Do I know you? I don't think I know you.

**SHEPPARD.** You must be Major Blunt, the big game hunter. I've heard quite a bit about you, sir. I'm Dr. Sheppard.

**MAJOR BLUNT.** A doctor, eh? Good. I like doctors. They've usually seen their fair share and make for good dinner companions. You interested in hunting?

**SHEPPARD.** Don't know much about it, but I'm sure you have tales to tell.

**GERTRUDE.** He certainly does, Doctor. I've heard them all. Several times. They're so endlessly, endlessly interesting.

**MAJOR BLUNT.** I can tell you about my recent trip to Bora Bora, if you like.

**SHEPPARD.** Bora Bora, eh?

**GERTRUDE.** Oh, you must have felt right at home in Bora Bora, Major.

**SHEPPARD.** Been all over, have you?

**MAJOR BLUNT.** I'm a man of many worlds, Doctor. My parents were archaeologists! I was born in China, a youth spent throughout Africa, India and Europe, schooled in England, but I always say the world is my home. Roger and I traveled together in our younger days. Like an older brother to me! I saved his life once! A Bengalese tiger! Scared the tar out of us but we formed an unbreakable bond in the end.

**GERTRUDE.** Don't encourage him, Doctor.

**MAJOR BLUNT.** Is Roger down?

**FLORA.** Tell me, Major, are any of Uncle's little curios here actually worth anything? I've always doubted it.

**MAJOR BLUNT.** Oh, yes! Some are quite valuable! You'd be surprised, the treasures in houses like this, laying about in plain sight. Let me show you.

**GERTRUDE.** So, Doctor, may I count on you?

**SHEPPARD.** Well, I'm not sure, you see...

**FLORA.** Mother! Leave the poor man alone!

(**PARKER enters.**)

**PARKER.** Mr. Ackroyd requests the pleasure of your company in the dining room.

**GERTRUDE.** Forgive me, James... I'm sure I've quite embarrassed myself.

**SHEPPARD.** Oh, not at all.

**MAJOR BLUNT.** Come along, Flora!

**FLORA.** Why, thank you, Major.

**GERTRUDE.** I do hope you'll forgive me. Shall we?

**SHEPPARD.** After you!

(*They all exit, save SHEPPARD.*)

Dinner was a tense affair. Ackroyd looked wretched and ate next to nothing. Gertrude Ackroyd drank rather more than anyone else and prattled on about the latest fashions. Flora seemed affected by her uncle's depression, Major Blunt regaled us with tales of his time in the Limpopo - and I hardly said a word. After coffee, the guests split off and I was at last alone with Roger Ackroyd.

(**ROGER ACKROYD enters. He closes a hallway door and French doors leading to the terrace.**)

**ROGER ACKROYD.** Good. We can talk in here privately. Close the windows, I'll check the hallway. No one must overhear us.

(**SHEPPARD closes the window in the writing room.**)

**SHEPPARD.** What on earth's the matter with you, Ackroyd?

**ROGER ACKROYD.** Sheppard, you attended to Arthur Ferrars in his final illness, didn't you?

**SHEPPARD.** I did.