

**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.

**ROGER ACKROYD.** Did you ever suspect...that he might have been poisoned?

**SHEPPARD.** To tell you the truth, Roger. At the time I had no suspicion whatever. But since then...I have considered it.

**ROGER ACKROYD.** Listen to me. He *WAS* poisoned.

**SHEPPARD.** What? By whom?

**ROGER ACKROYD.** His wife. She told me herself.

**SHEPPARD.** When?

**ROGER ACKROYD.** Yesterday. My God, only yesterday! It seems like years ago.

**SHEPPARD.** Tell me everything.

**ROGER ACKROYD.** I loved her, always have. And when Arthur died, I asked her to marry me. She agreed, but wanted a proper year of mourning before announcing it. Yesterday, I told her that the year had passed. She broke down completely and told me everything. Her hatred of her husband, her love for me, and the dreadful means she had taken to rid herself of her Arthur. Poison!

**SHEPPARD.** How ghastly.

**ROGER ACKROYD.** There's more. There is one person who has known all along. Someone has been blackmailing her for huge sums. The strain was driving her mad.

**SHEPPARD.** Who was the man?

**ROGER ACKROYD.** She wouldn't say. She never even said it was a man.

Unless I misunderstood, I think she implied the person in question might actually be a member of my own household, can you imagine? Yesterday, she made me promise to wait twenty-four hours more. But my God! It never entered my mind what she meant to do! Suicide!

**SHEPPARD.** It's not your fault, my friend.

**ROGER ACKROYD.** Now it will all come out. And the scoundrel who blackmailed her will go free. Unless...

**SHEPPARD.** Unless?

**ROGER ACKROYD.** I have a friend. Someone in town, in fact. Perhaps he's the only person who can help.

**SHEPPARD.** Does this person resemble a hairdresser, by any chance?

*(There is a noise from the hallway.)*

**ROGER ACKROYD.** Hush now. Who's there?

*(PARKER creeps in with a blue envelope on a tray.)*

Parker, what on earth were you doing out there?

**PARKER.** It's the post, sir. It finally arrived and I forgot to give it to you, is all.

**ROGER ACKROYD.** Is that so? You're excused, Parker! I said you may go!

*(PARKER exits. ROGER ACKROYD opens the blue envelope.)*

Oh my God. It's her writing, Sheppard. She must have gone out and posted it last night. Before...before.

*(He opens the letter, then stops. He checks behind the curtains.)*

All this evening, I've had a queer feeling of being spied upon. Is someone on the terrace?

*(SHEPPARD checks. Nothing there.)*

**SHEPPARD.** No, we're alone. Read it.

**ROGER ACKROYD.** Listen: "My dear, my very dear Roger... A life calls for a life. I see that now. So I am taking the only road open to me."

*(He pauses.)*

Sheppard, forgive me. But I must read this alone. It was meant for my eyes only.

**SHEPPARD.** At least read to me the name of the man who blackmailed her.

**ROGER ACKROYD.** No, my friend. I will face this by myself. Thank you. Tell Parker I don't wish to be disturbed.

*(ROGER ACKROYD steps into the writing room.)*

**SHEPPARD.** You may have concluded this already, but Ackroyd is essentially pigheaded, the dear man. The more you urge him to do a thing, the more determined he is to not do it.

*(SHEPPARD closes the writing room doors. PARKER appears with Sheppard's hat.)*

Ah! Parker. Mr Ackroyd does not wish to be disturbed by anyone.

**PARKER.** Yes, sir.

*(PARKER exits.)*

**SHEPPARD.** The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. Remember that, please. Later on, I would find the timetable to be of the utmost importance, but I couldn't see it then. Funny how the pieces of a puzzle can all be laid before you, at times. But still, you can't see the forest for the trees. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left Ackroyd, the letter still unread. I felt for him, in that moment. His despair had been palpable. He had asked for my

help but I could offer none. And then, afterwards... I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, wondering if there was anything more I could have done. I could think of nothing.

When I was quite ready, I stepped into the night.

*(The stage becomes a wooded path.)*

The moon was overcast. Everything very dark and still. The village church. Nine o'clock. I stuck to the path towards the village, and then...

*(SHEPPARD pauses. He peers into the darkness.)*

Hello? Hello, is someone there?

*(It is quiet, save for the night air rustling through the branches. But...)*

It's Dr. Sheppard here. Is someone out there?

*(A figure of a MAN in a coat and hat appears in the darkness, face obscured. He stands still, like an animal before an attack.)*

Why, hello. You gave me quite a scare. Are you looking for Ferny Hall? It's that direction.

*(The FIGURE turns and heads quickly out of sight.)*

Yes, well, good evening to you, too.

*(SHEPPARD arrives at home and steps into the kitchen.)*

Ten minutes later I was at home.

*(He calls upstairs.)*

Caroline? Caroline? In her room. Turned in early, I suppose.