

THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD

CAROLINE. Mrs. Ferrars is dead, isn't she? The parlourmaid told the Ferrars' cook and the cook told the milkman and the milkman told me.

SHEPPARD. A sad affair. Died in her sleep. An overdose of veronal.

CAROLINE. I recall she took veronal for restlessness.

SHEPPARD. She did. She must have taken too much.

CAROLINE. Nonsense, it was suicide.

SHEPPARD. Suicide? Really? Did the milkman tell you that, too?

CAROLINE. She had a guilty conscience! Come inside. I'll tell you all my theories over breakfast.

(She exits. SHEPPARD is alone in the garden.)

SHEPPARD. Before I go further, I should tell you about our little village, King's Abbot. We have a large railway station, a small post office.

We are rich in talkative old ladies and bloviating retired military men. And our chief hobby? Gossip.

The only house of any importance in town is Fernly Hall. A beautiful mansion up on the hill, the architectural pride and joy of King's Abbot. I can see it from the rear of my home. In fact, I often say you can see Fernly from every window in town. Always looming, always present. As if it had always been there and always would be.

It was now owned by Roger Ackroyd - a man more impossibly like a country squire than any real one. A businessman who preferred living in the country to London. And we in King's Abbot were happy to have him. He's a bit of a local preoccupation, you see. In fact, it's Roger Ackroyd upon whom this whole business rests. Allow me to explain.

THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD

In recent years, both Mrs. Ferrars and Roger Ackroyd had lost their spouses, but they had found each other. We expected wedding bells. Instead, tragedy.

(An emphatically annoyed grumbling is heard offstage.)

Ah, yes. There is also the house next door to mine which had recently been taken by a stranger. Mr. Por-rot. A bit of a mystery. My curious sister could only surmise that he was foreigner. Just looking at him, I had come to the conclusion he was a hair dresser! Of course, that was the first of my deductions to be proven wrong.

(A gathering of vegetables is heard onstage.)

In fact, he was something altogether...different. And remarkable. I am not going to pretend that I foresaw the events that were to occur. I emphatically did not.

But my instincts told me there were stirring times ahead.

(POIROT approaches.)

POIROT. HA! I demand of you a thousand pardons, monsieur! For some months now, I cultivate these vegetable marrows. This morning, I enrage myself with the marrows!

I realize that throwing large vegetables over the hedge from my garden to yours hardly endears me as a new neighbor.

SHEPPARD. Quite all right. It gives me the chance to finally introduce myself, sir. I'm -

POIROT. Dr. Sheppard, yes? It is my humble pleasure to meet you at last, being that we live not a vegetable's throw away.

SHEPPARD. I shall learn to duck whenever I see you gardening.

POIROT. Perhaps raising the vegetables is not a hobby for me, eh? I am a man desperately in search of a hobby! King's Abbot is beautiful, but quite different from the life I once knew.

SHEPPARD. Different?

POIROT. A man may work all his life to attain the leisure of retirement, and then find that he yearns for the busy old days, the former occupations that he thought himself so glad to leave behind...

SHEPPARD. Yes, I can relate! A year ago I came into a small legacy and thought perhaps I might travel the world. But, I'm still here. I got greedy and lost my little pile.

POIROT. You speculated?

SHEPPARD. I invested in an Australian goldmine, of all things. It wasn't meant to be! Ha!

POIROT. But you are able to laugh at the folly.

SHEPPARD. Well, perhaps it is for the best. After all, I am the town's chief and only doctor! Of course, I still long for just a little bit of adventure now and then. But, I have a purpose in my work!

POIROT. Yes. One can miss the daily toil. I loved my work, too. The most interesting work in the world. The study of human nature!

SHEPPARD. A philosopher?

POIROT. Of a sort.

SHEPPARD. As I say, a man needs a purpose. I do hope you'll find yours here in King's Abbot.

POIROT. You doubtless know everyone in this village. May I ask - who is the young man with the very dark hair whom I saw in town? He throws his hair about like this.

SHEPPARD. Ah! That would be Captain Ralph Paton, Roger Ackroyd's adopted son. I thought I spied him in town. Down from London, is he?

POIROT. Ralph Paton? Ah, yes. Very good-looking. For an Englishman.

SHEPPARD. Yes, we're all quite fond of him. And proud of him, too. He did his part, you know, during the war.

POIROT. Yes. Mr. Ackroyd has spoken of him often.

SHEPPARD. You know Mr. Ackroyd?

POIROT. We were friendly in London when I was at work there.

SHEPPARD. Ah!

POIROT. In fact, it was Mr. Ackroyd who recommended I retire to King's Abbot.

SHEPPARD. Quite a little town isn't it? You've no doubt been up to Fernly.

POIROT. Not as of yet. I am content to sit in its shadow. Mr. Ackroyd is always inviting me but I do not wish to be a bother to such a busy man. Of course, I am sorry for his recent loss.

SHEPPARD. You've heard about Mrs. Ferrars, then?

POIROT. The milkman told me.

SHEPPARD. Ah, yes, of course!

POIROT. Truly, this has not been a wasted morning. I have made a new friend! One need not go to Australia for riches, doctor. Often, the adventure you seek is in your very own garden. We are neighbors!

SHEPPARD. It's fate!

CAROLINE. (*Offstage.*) James? Your breakfast!