

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S



The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

Doug Goheen

Adapted from the novel by Agatha Christie

BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

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The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

MYSTERY. Adapted from the novel by Agatha Christie. Detective Hercule Poirot is forced out of retirement when his friend, Roger Ackroyd, is found brutally murdered. There's a locked door, an open window, and a chair that moves itself. To all three, Poirot asks, "Why?" but finds no answer. Assisting Poirot in the investigation, Dr. James Sheppard provides Poirot with one of the most valuable clues in solving the case. However, with every suspect hiding a secret, the truth proves elusive...for a while. Considered one of the best crime novels ever written, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* contains one of the most famous plot twists ever written in detective fiction.

Performance Time: Approximately 120 minutes.

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Agatha Christie, circa 1925

About the Story

Agatha Christie was born in southwest England to a wealthy family. Growing up, Christie enjoyed reading mystery novels by Wilkie Collins and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is Christie's third novel featuring the famous Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, who became one of Christie's most famous characters. In 1926, Christie's mother died and her husband, Colonel Archibald Christie, asked her for a divorce. Distressed, Christie mysteriously disappeared and was discovered days later at a hotel under the name of the woman her husband wished to marry. Considered one of the best crime novels ever written, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* contains one of the most famous plot twists ever written in detective fiction. The author of 66 detective novels and 15 short story collections, Christie is best known for her bestselling novel *And Then There Were None* and her play *The Mousetrap*.

Characters

(9 M, 5 F)

HERCULE POIROT: Famous Belgian detective who has retired to King's Abbott; friend of Roger Ackroyd; male.

ROGER ACKROYD: The wealthy widower and owner of Fernly Park; stepfather of Ralph Paton; male.

MRS. CECIL ACKROYD: Roger Ackroyd's sister-in-law; a widow who has been living at Fernly Park with her daughter, Flora; female.

FLORA ACKROYD: Roger Ackroyd's niece and Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd's daughter; requests Poirot's assistance in the investigation of Roger's murder; engaged to Ralph Paton but does not know he is already married to Ursula Bourne; female.

RALPH PATON: Roger Ackroyd's irresponsible stepson who is the prime suspect in his murder; engaged to Flora Ackroyd but is secretly married to Ursula Bourne; male.

URSULA BOURNE: Parlor maid at Fernly Park who is secretly married to Ralph Paton; female.

DR. JAMES SHEPPARD: Doctor in King's Abbott who assists Poirot in investigating Roger Ackroyd's murder; male.

CAROLINE SHEPPARD: Dr. Sheppard's older sister who is confined to a wheelchair; the town's gossip; female.

INSPECTOR RAGLAN: Chief police inspector in charge of investigating Roger Ackroyd's murder; male.

MAJOR HECTOR BLUNT: A big-game hunter and friend of Roger Ackroyd who is a guest at Fernly Park; male.

ELIZABETH RUSSELL: Housekeeper at Fernly Park; female.

CHARLES KENT: Elizabeth Russell's illegitimate son; referred to as the "mysterious stranger" by Dr. Sheppard; wears a long coat and a hat; male.

JOHN PARKER: Butler at Fernly Park; male.

GEOFFREY RAYMOND: Roger Ackroyd's personal secretary who handles all his finances; male.

Setting

King's Abbot, a small village in northern England, early autumn, 1920.

Set

The main playing area is the estate of Fernly Park. In addition, there are two smaller playing areas DSL and DSR where locales are suggested with simple set pieces. (See set diagram by Mike Callaway, pg. 8)

Fernly Park. Roger Ackroyd's estate. It is dominated by a study SR and a drawing room SL. These two rooms are separated by a center hallway, which runs from USC to DSC. An additional main hallway runs upstage from USR to USL.

Drawing room at Fernly Park. Contains a couch, a chair, and several small tables. Centered on the upstage wall is a silver table with a hinged top, flanked on each side by two matching chairs. Hanging directly above the silver table is a large big-game animal head. French doors on the SL wall open to a suggested courtyard. There is a partial representation of an open arch on the SR wall of the drawing room. This arch opens to the center hallway. The drawing room's wall SR is a cutaway, partial wall that extends about halfway downstage for sightline purposes.

Roger Ackroyd's study at Fernly Park. At SR this room is smaller than the drawing room. There is a window on the SR wall. Bookshelves line the upstage wall. The interior SL wall is a cutaway wall, like that of the drawing room. Instead of an open archway, it includes a door that can be opened and closed. Two chairs are downstage, as if in front of an unseen fireplace. A grandfather chair rests against the

SL wall between the bookshelves and the door. A desk and chair are in the USR corner of the room, facing out.

Center hallway at Fernly Park. The hallway has an open arch connecting it to the main hallway. Thus, the two intersecting hallways form a T-shaped corridor, skewed slightly toward SR. A second animal head is visible hanging in the main hallway, centered in the archway. In the center hallway, a small set of 3-4 stairs runs against the SR wall (adjoining the study). It leads to a landing about 3'-4' high. Though not visible, the stairway continues up and off SR to Ackroyd's bedroom. The visible stairs begin just upstage of the door adjoining the center hallway and the study. The main entrance to the estate (unseen) is played at the SR area of the main hallway.

Sheppard's workroom. At DSL, Sheppard's workroom is represented by a desk, a phone, and a couple of chairs.

Abstract area. At DSR, there is an area used for the summer garden house area, Poirot's residence (The Larches), and the police interview room. Each of these three locales is suggested by simple set pieces.

Synopsis of Scenes

ACT I

Scene 1: The workroom of Dr. James Sheppard and Fernly Park, Friday morning.

Scene 2: Fernly Park, immediately following.

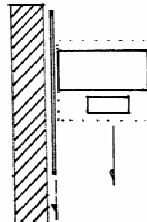
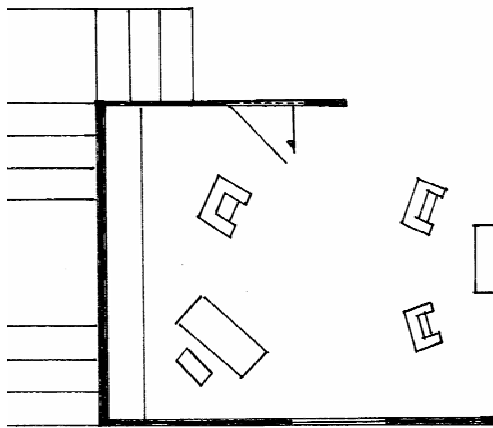
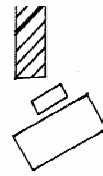
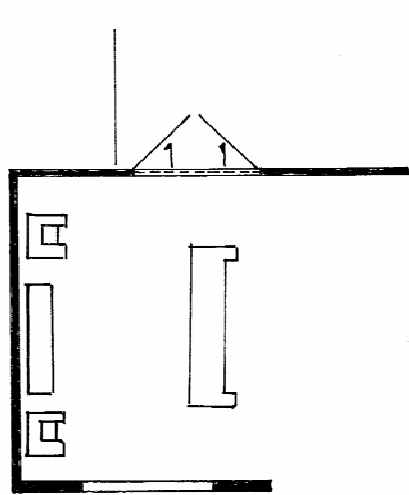
Intermission

ACT II

Scene 1: Sheppard's workroom and Fernly Park, Tuesday morning.

Scene 2: Drawing room at Fernly Park, Friday evening.

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Props

| | |
|--|---|
| Wheelchair, for Caroline | Necklace with a wedding ring strung on it |
| Marrow squash (zucchini) | Large medical needle and/or syringe |
| Notebook, for Dr. Sheppard | Dagger |
| Medical bag, for Dr. Sheppard | Handkerchief, for Raglan |
| Coat and hat, for Dr. Sheppard | Small towel |
| Vase of flowers | Goose quill |
| African copper figurine | Small scrap of white cloth |
| Sherry decanter and sherry glasses | Gold wedding ring |
| Engagement ring, for Flora | Will |
| Tea set | Notebook, for Poirot |
| Salver (a butler's silver tray on which calling cards and letters are carried) | Sheet of paper |
| Letters | Newspaper |
| Blue envelope | Crumpled piece of newspaper |
| Letter | Telegram |
| Money | Pill bottle |
| Papers | "Pills" (candy) |
| | Glass of water |

Special Effects

Knock at the door

Sound of phone ringing (Sheppard's office)

Door chimes, for main entrance at Fernly Park

Sound of a distant church clock chiming nine o'clock

Sound of bell for bell cord (to summon servants)

Clock chiming eight o'clock

*"The truth,
however ugly in itself,
is always curious and beautiful
to the seeker."*

—Hercule Poirot

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ACT I

Scene 1

(AT RISE: *The workroom of Dr. James Sheppard, DSL. Friday morning, September 17, 1920. There is a desk, a couple of chairs, a candlestick phone, and several papers and notebooks. Sheppard is sitting at his desk writing. After a few moments, he stops and directly addresses the audience.*)

SHEPPARD: (*To audience.*) I suppose it was inevitable that the residents of King's Abbott would return to their previous obsession after the Great War finally came to an end. The events of the past week have served as testament to that. The past week...is it possible that only seven days have elapsed? King's Abbott is a small village, very much like any other in the northern English countryside. As we plunge into a new decade, able-bodied men are apt to abandon the place early in life, but we are rich in unmarried ladies and retired military officers. Our hobbies and recreation can best be summed up in one word: gossip.

CAROLINE: (*Offstage, calls.*) James? Is that you, James?

SHEPPARD: (*To audience.*) Perhaps best exemplified by my sister, Caroline.

(*Caroline enters in her wheelchair.*)

CAROLINE: Well?

SHEPPARD: A sad business. Nothing to be done. Must have died in her sleep.

CAROLINE: I know that, James.

SHEPPARD: And how is that possible? I didn't know myself until I arrived at King's Paddock this morning, and I haven't told a soul.

CAROLINE: Don't be so provincial, James. The milkman told me.

SHEPPARD: A reputable source, if ever there was one.

CAROLINE: And he heard it directly from the Ferrarses' cook. Now, what did Mrs. Ferrars die of...heart failure?

SHEPPARD: Didn't the milkman tell you?

CAROLINE: (*Missing the sarcasm.*) He didn't know.

SHEPPARD: Mrs. Ferrars died of an overdose of Veronal. She's been taking it lately for sleeplessness...must have taken too much.

CAROLINE: Nonsense, she took it on purpose.

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SHEPPARD: And why on earth should Mrs. Ferrars wish to commit suicide? A widow...still young, very well off, good health, and nothing to do but enjoy life. It's absurd.

CAROLINE: No, James. It's remorse.

SHEPPARD: Remorse?

CAROLINE: Yes. You would never believe me when I told you she poisoned her husband.

SHEPPARD: Ashley Ferrars died of acute gastritis, helped on by the habitual overindulgence of alcoholic beverages.

CAROLINE: Nonsense. He was poisoned. I'm more than ever convinced of it now.

SHEPPARD: Surely, if a woman committed a crime like murder, she'd be sufficiently cold-blooded to enjoy its fruits without any weak-minded sentimentality such as repentance.

CAROLINE: One would think. But even you, James, have commented on her hag-ridden appearance of late over the last six months. She was the sort of person who simply couldn't endure suffering of any kind. And there's no doubt that the wife of a man like Ashley Ferrars must have had to suffer a great deal.

SHEPPARD: Granted.

CAROLINE: And ever since she did the deed, she was haunted by what she did.

SHEPPARD: To the point where she felt compelled to take her own life?

CAROLINE: Yes. Remorse, James. For some, its clutches are simply impossible to escape.

SHEPPARD: Rubbish.

CAROLINE: You'll see. Ten to one, she's left a letter confessing everything.

SHEPPARD: She left no such letter of any kind.

CAROLINE: Oh! So you inquired about that, did you?

SHEPPARD: One always has to consider the possibility of suicide in such cases.

CAROLINE: Will there be an inquest?

SHEPPARD: It depends. If I'm able to declare myself absolutely satisfied that the overdose was taken accidentally, an inquest might be dispensed with.

CAROLINE: And are you absolutely satisfied?

(Knock at the front door.)

SHEPPARD: Door.

CAROLINE: I thought you fixed that bell, James.

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SHEPPARD: Haven't had time.

CAROLINE: Well, what good is it to have a mechanically inclined man living in your house if he never fixes anything? *(Starts to exit.)* Besides, who could that be at this hour of the morning? You haven't any appointments, have you?

SHEPPARD: I finished with my only appointment for the day a few minutes ago. Given last night's events, perhaps it's your fellow gossipmonger, Miss Gannett, come round to engage in further sensationalism.

CAROLINE: Hush, you old humbug. *(Exits.)*

SHEPPARD: *(To audience.)* As I said, we are ready enough to gossip in our village. There were no two more enthusiastic participants than my sister and her conspirator in crime, Miss Gannett. The two of them were the first to notice that Mrs. Ferrars, since moving with her husband to King's Abbott a year ago, got on very well with Roger Ackroyd. Roger's own wife was a dipsomaniac and had drunk herself into her grave a mere four years after their marriage. Six years his senior, she was a widow, who brought with her a seven year-old son, Ralph Paton, now 25. Roger has always regarded Ralph as his own son, though he has proven a wild lad and a great source of worry to his stepfather.

(Caroline enters.)

CAROLINE: It's Miss Russell, from Fernly. She wishes to see you about her knee, she says.

SHEPPARD: Very well. Show her in.

CAROLINE: But what of your regular rounds, James? You're getting a late enough start as it is.

SHEPPARD: I'll manage, Caroline, thank you. Please, show Miss Russell in. *(Miffed, Caroline exits. To audience.)* Caroline is not fond of Miss Russell, the housekeeper at Fernly Park for the last five years. But for the advent of Mrs. Ferrars, Ackroyd could hardly have escaped. That and the unexpected arrival of a widowed sister-in-law with her daughter from Canada. Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, according to Caroline, made short shrift, indeed, of returning Miss Russell to her proper place at Fernly.

(Caroline enters with Elizabeth Russell.)

CAROLINE: *(Announcing.)* Miss Russell.

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(Sheppard rises.)

SHEPPARD: Thank you, Caroline. *(Caroline makes no move to leave.)* That will be all, Caroline. Thank you.

(Caroline exits. Miss Russell sits.)

MISS RUSSELL: Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Doctor.

SHEPPARD: Of course.

MISS RUSSELL: I should be much obliged if you would take a look at my knee.

(Sheppard sits.)

SHEPPARD: Flaring up again, is it?

MISS RUSSELL: It's bothersome.

SHEPPARD: *(Inspecting her knee.)* Yes, well, I don't suppose climbing all those stairs at Fernly is of much help.

MISS RUSSELL: Perhaps not.

SHEPPARD: *(Referring to her knee.)* Bend.

MISS RUSSELL: No way around that, Doctor.

SHEPPARD: *(Examining her knee.)* Hmm...doesn't seem too bad, though. Sometimes, I'm inclined to think we are better off simply to endure a bit of pain now and then rather than risk even greater anguish in attempting to rid ourselves of the original discomfort.

MISS RUSSELL: I quite agree, Doctor. We must all endure pain in our lives.

SHEPPARD: Nonetheless, I want you to take this bottle of liniment.

Apply it twice a day until it's gone. You'll keep an eye on it?

MISS RUSSELL: Of course. Not that I believe it will do the least good.

SHEPPARD: Well...

MISS RUSSELL: I don't believe in all these drugs. They do a lot of harm, I think. Look at the cocaine habit.

SHEPPARD: Yes, well, as far as that goes—

MISS RUSSELL: It's very prevalent in high society, you know.

SHEPPARD: I'm sure you know far more about high society than I, Miss Russell.

MISS RUSSELL: Really, Doctor, I didn't come here to be patronized.

SHEPPARD: No, no, of course not.

MISS RUSSELL: Just tell me this: Suppose you are nearly a slave of the habit. Is there any cure?

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SHEPPARD: It depends, of course, on the particular drug in question. There are measures that can be taken with varying degrees of success. But the cocaine habit is one not so prevalent in our own country, of course. Not like Canada, say, or the States. Thus, our own research into the matter here has been somewhat limited. But with a drug like Veronal, for instance, a softer substance, but one quite capable of doing great harm should it be abused—

MISS RUSSELL: Veronal? Mr. Ackroyd mentioned that with Mrs. Ferrars.

SHEPPARD: Well, certainly a suspicion, yes.

MISS RUSSELL: Unfortunate, that.

SHEPPARD: Quite.

(Miss Russell rises.)

MISS RUSSELL: Well, I must be getting back. Thank you, Doctor, for the liniment.

SHEPPARD: Of course. *(Miss Russell exits. To audience.)* It had crossed my mind that Miss Russell might have deliberately invented this affection of the knee in order to pump me on the subject of Mrs. Ferrars's death. It seems, however, that I'd misjudged her, yet again.

(Caroline enters, carrying a squash.)

CAROLINE: Well?

SHEPPARD: Well, I guess I shall be able to make my rounds, after all.

CAROLINE: That's not what I'm waiting to hear, James.

SHEPPARD: No?

CAROLINE: What did she want?

SHEPPARD: Who?

CAROLINE: Don't be coy. Miss Russell, of course.

SHEPPARD: Oh, nothing much. Her knee is acting up again.

CAROLINE: She didn't inquire about Mrs. Ferrars's death?

SHEPPARD: Only in passing, expressing her regrets.

CAROLINE: Her regrets? Ha! No doubt she'll set her sights on Ackroyd once again now that Mrs. Ferrars is out of the picture.

SHEPPARD: Really, Caroline, sometimes you're quite insufferable.

CAROLINE: And sometimes you're quite naïve. It's no secret, James, that she had aspirations with Ackroyd for years before the Ferrarses arrived on the scene a year ago.

SHEPPARD: Rubbish. *(Indicating squash.)* What on earth is that?

CAROLINE: Oh! A squash.

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SHEPPARD: I know it's a squash. Where did it come from?

CAROLINE: A marrow squash from the gentleman next door. He moved into The Larches some weeks back.

SHEPPARD: Oh?

CAROLINE: Peculiar name. Let's see... *(Thinks.)* ...Hercules Porrott.

SHEPPARD: Peculiar, indeed. Who would name a child Hercules?

CAROLINE: Pleasant enough fellow. I was tending the chrysanthemums when I noticed him across the way and asked to borrow a spade.

SHEPPARD: Finally created your own opportunity to meet him, then?

CAROLINE: He was most polite, but I couldn't get anything out of him.

SHEPPARD: So, the Intelligence Corps has proven a broken reed.

CAROLINE: He's foreign, of course. No doubt of that. Miss Gannett told me so. I asked him point blank whether he was a Frenchman. He said he wasn't, but nothing more. No mention of where he comes from, whether he's married, if there are children, and so on.

SHEPPARD: *(Sarcastically.)* The gall.

CAROLINE: Only that he's retired from, as he put it, "the most interesting work in the world."

SHEPPARD: And what might that be?

CAROLINE: Human nature, he said. The study of human nature.

SHEPPARD: Hmmm, rules out my suspicion of his being a hairdresser...or maybe not.

CAROLINE: A hairdresser? Really, James!

SHEPPARD: Look at that moustache of his.

CAROLINE: If the man was a hairdresser, he would have wavy hair, not straight. All hairdressers do.

SHEPPARD: Really?

CAROLINE: Of course. You are well aware of my judgment of character.

SHEPPARD: Quite.

CAROLINE: Well, he went on, Mr. Porrott, and do you know he inquired after Ralph Patton?

SHEPPARD: Ralph? Out of the blue? Just like that?

CAROLINE: Initially, he referred to him as "the young man with dark hair and eyes and a handsome face." So, of course, I immediately knew it to be Ralph, and I told him he was the adopted son of Mr. Roger Ackroyd of Fernly Park.

SHEPPARD: You volunteered this information?

CAROLINE: And what do you think but he knew? Mr. Porrott, I mean. He knew of Mr. Ackroyd from London.

SHEPPARD: Really?

CAROLINE: Seems they worked together for a spell.

SHEPPARD: Why hasn't Ackroyd mentioned anything?

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CAROLINE: Why should he? Perhaps he doesn't even know.

SHEPPARD: The Larches being vacant as long as it has...only to be taken several weeks ago by some foreigner. This is great news in King's Abbott, Caroline.

(Phone rings.)

CAROLINE: Telephone.

SHEPPARD: *(Into phone.)* Dr. Sheppard's office...Ackroyd...You've heard, then?...Yes, just returned this morning. I'm terribly sorry, Roger, I...Worse?...Of course...I'm afraid that's impossible. I've got my rounds and then my surgery patients this afternoon...Dinner? Yes, I can make that. What is it, Roger? Is it Ralph?...In London? Oh. All right. Yes, 7:30 tonight, then.

(Sheppard hangs up. Caroline waits expectantly.)

CAROLINE: Well?

SHEPPARD: Roger Ackroyd wishes me to dine at Fernly tonight. Some urgent business he wishes to discuss.

CAROLINE: Is it Ralph?

SHEPPARD: No. Curious how he should first occur to both of us.

CAROLINE: What then?

SHEPPARD: He wouldn't say. The parlor maid came in. Only that it was something terrible that required immediate attention.

CAROLINE: Oh, my!

SHEPPARD: When I first brought up Ralph, he denied his involvement and claimed he was off in London.

CAROLINE: London? That's impossible. Ralph Paton is staying at The Three Boars.

SHEPPARD: You've seen him, then?

CAROLINE: Well, not seen him, actually, no. Miss Gannett told me.

SHEPPARD: Of course.

CAROLINE: Two days ago, I was at the market. Time got away from me, and it had grown rather dark. Miss Gannett offered to wheel me home, by the shortcut through the woods. We were halfway through when we heard voices. One was Ralph Paton's. I knew it at once, as did Miss Gannett. Of course, we didn't mean to listen.

SHEPPARD: Of course not.

CAROLINE: But it was quite difficult not to overhear. The girl said something. I didn't quite catch what it was, and Ralph answered. He sounded very angry. "My dear girl," he said. "Don't you realize that it

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is quite on the cards the old man will cut me off with a shilling? He's been pretty fed up with me for the last few years. A little more would do it. And we need the dibs, my dear. I shall be a very rich man when the old fellow pops off. He's mean as they make 'em, but he's rolling in money really. I don't want him to go altering his will. You leave it to me, and don't worry." Those were his exact words. I remember them perfectly. Unfortunately, Miss Gannett then stepped on a dry twig, and they lowered their voices and moved away. We couldn't, of course, go rushing after them, so I wasn't able to see who the girl was.

SHEPPARD: Pity.

CAROLINE: But I'm almost certain it was Flora Ackroyd.

SHEPPARD: Flora Ackroyd? But why not go to Fernly if he wanted to see her?

CAROLINE: Secretly engaged. His own cousin.

SHEPPARD: Flora Ackroyd is no relation whatsoever to Ralph Paton. You know that, Caroline. It's only that Ralph has been looked upon so long as practically Ackroyd's own son that cousinship is taken for granted.

CAROLINE: Well, in any case, old Ackroyd won't hear of it, and they have to meet this way.

SHEPPARD: What to make of that? Nothing seen of Ralph in King's Abbott for nearly six months. Thought he had finally had it out with his stepfather. Then he's spotted twice in the last two days.

CAROLINE: Twice?

SHEPPARD: I came upon him myself yesterday morning, walking with Mrs. Ferrars.

CAROLINE: Mrs. Ferrars? Just yesterday? The same day that—

SHEPPARD: Yes.

CAROLINE: Oh, dear.

SHEPPARD: There seems little doubt that he's here, in spite of Ackroyd's thoughts to the contrary. Well, perhaps, I shall attain some clarity this evening.

CAROLINE: Oh, do!

SHEPPARD: By the way, why didn't you tell me of your own encounter with Ralph?

CAROLINE: The same might be asked of you, James. Really, what do you think I am...the town crier?

SHEPPARD: (*Exasperated.*) I must get to my rounds. (*Rises.*) No dinner this evening, then.

CAROLINE: All right. Maybe I'll use Mr. Porrott's bounty for some nice squash soup.

SHEPPARD: Yes, do that, Caroline. (*Starts to exits.*)

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CAROLINE: Perhaps Miss Gannett will join me.

SHEPPARD: Delightful. Sorry I shan't be present.

(Sheppard exits. Caroline holds up the squash and stares at it. She then checks to make sure Sheppard has gone. She begins perusing the notebook on his desk as the lights cross-fade to Fernly Park. Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd is seen in the drawing room staring at some objects inside the silver table, the hinged top of which is in the raised position. She removes one of the objects and examines it closely. At the far DSR exterior corner of the house, Major Blunt's figure can just be seen, loitering. Presently, Mrs. Ackroyd hears a noise from outside the French doors. She hurriedly returns the object to the silver table and quickly exits, forgetting to lower the lid on the table. At the main hall archway, she glances SR before exiting SL. As soon as she has passed through the archway, the French doors quietly open. Miss Russell enters surreptitiously, closing the doors behind her. As she does so, the main entrance chimes sound. Miss Russell freezes, wondering what to do. Parker, the butler, is seen passing through the main hall from USL to USR to answer the front door. Major Blunt now exits SR. After Parker arrives at the front door, Miss Russell continues to look around, exploring her options as the following exchange is heard offstage.)

PARKER: *(Offstage.)* Good evening, sir.

SHEPPARD: *(Offstage.)* Parker.

PARKER: *(Offstage.)* May I take your hat and coat?

SHEPPARD: *(Offstage.)* Please.

(Miss Russell moves to the SR arch, listening to their conversation. She is debating whether or not she can leave the drawing room unseen. Geoffrey Raymond, Ackroyd's secretary of two years, is seen crossing from USL to the archway UCS. Parker and Sheppard can now be seen as well. Sheppard is carrying his medical bag. Hearing their voices approach, Miss Russell retreats back into the drawing room.)

RAYMOND: Good evening, Dr. Sheppard. Coming to dine? Or is this a professional call?

PARKER: He'll be dining with us this evening, Mr. Raymond.

RAYMOND: Very good.

SHEPPARD: I'm expecting a summons to a confinement case at any moment and have come prepared for an emergency call.

PARKER: Might I take your bag as well, Dr. Sheppard?

SHEPPARD: I'll just keep a hold of it, thank you.

PARKER: Of course. Sherry before dinner, Doctor?

SHEPPARD: Sounds splendid.

PARKER: Very good. I'll send some in.

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(Parker exits with Sheppard's coat and hat SL. Raymond leads Sheppard into the center hall.)

RAYMOND: *(To Sheppard.)* You can wait here in the drawing room. The ladies will be down presently. I must take these papers to Mr. Ackroyd and tell him you're here.

SHEPPARD: Thank you.

(Raymond exits up the stairs leading to Ackroyd's bedroom. Sheppard approaches the drawing room arch but stops upon hearing a sound from within. It is Miss Russell, who has lowered the silver table top. Miss Russell then takes a vase of flowers from a nearby table and starts to exit. She and Sheppard meet each other in the archway.)

MISS RUSSELL: Dr. Sheppard.

SHEPPARD: I'm afraid I'm a few minutes early.

MISS RUSSELL: I...didn't know you were expected tonight. Mr. Ackroyd didn't mention it.

SHEPPARD: How's the knee?

MISS RUSSELL: Much the same, thank you, Doctor. I must be going now. Mrs. Ackroyd will be down in a moment. I...I only came in to see if the flowers were all right.

(Miss Russell exits, carrying the vase of flowers. Sheppard looks after her before entering the drawing room. He looks around before moving to the French doors. He sets his medical bag next to the silver table. He opens the French doors and looks out. Coming back into the room, he goes to the silver table, raises the lid, and studies its contents awhile before lowering the lid. Struck by the sound, he raises and lowers the lid a couple more times. He then extracts one of the table's objects and studies it as Flora Ackroyd enters, unnoticed.)

FLORA: *(Referring to the object Sheppard is holding.)* One of Major Blunt's specimens from the Dark Continent.

SHEPPARD: I thought as much. Good evening, Flora.

FLORA: Hello, Doctor. *(Taking the object.)* Some sort of figurine, copper, from the Belgian Congo.

SHEPPARD: The Major certainly gets around.

(Ursula Bourne, a maid, enters with sherry and begins to serve.)

FLORA: At least in Africa. But he's here now. Did you know?

SHEPPARD: Time for the annual migration, is it?

FLORA: Visits Uncle every two years.

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SHEPPARD: Interesting friendship, that.

FLORA: Oh! And you haven't congratulated me yet, Dr. Sheppard. Haven't you heard? *(Extending her hand to show him her engagement ring.)* I'm going to marry Ralph, you know. Uncle is very pleased. It keeps me in the family, you see.

(Ursula reacts to this pronouncement.)

SHEPPARD: *(Taking Flora's hands in his.)* My dear, I hope you'll be very happy.

FLORA: We've been engaged for a month, but it was only announced yesterday.

(Mrs. Ackroyd bustles in.)

MRS. ACKROYD: Dr. Sheppard! Lovely to see you. You've heard of Flora's engagement? So suitable in every way. The dear young things fell in love at first sight. I can't tell you, Doctor, the relief to a mother's heart.

SHEPPARD: Yes.

(Mrs. Ackroyd leads Sheppard away from Flora, who returns the copper figurine to the silver table.)

MRS. ACKROYD: Rather difficult for me in my position as poor Cecil's widow. So many tiresome things...settlements and all that. I know Roger intends to make good upon dear Flora. And you're such an old friend of his.

SHEPPARD: We do go back a ways.

MRS. ACKROYD: Yes. Why, even Flora and I have grown quite fond of you, Doctor.

(Blunt enters.)

BLUNT: Good evening.

MRS. ACKROYD: Major Blunt! You remember Doctor Sheppard, of course?

BLUNT: *(Shaking Sheppard's hand.)* How are you, Sheppard?

SHEPPARD: Quite well, Major. Nice to see you again.

FLORA: Major Blunt, I wish you'd tell me about these African things. I'm sure you know what they all are.

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(Blunt joins Flora near the silver table. Mrs. Ackroyd leads Sheppard to the sofa. Roger Ackroyd and Raymond are now seen descending the staircase leading to Roger's bedroom.)

MRS. ACKROYD: Well, Doctor, as I was saying, though Flora and I have only really known you for just over two years, I'm wondering if you might consider talking to Roger on the subject.

SHEPPARD: What subject?

MRS. ACKROYD: The settlement for Flora. He is, as you know, a little peculiar about money, and I just thought that you might discuss the subject a bit.

(Roger Ackroyd and Raymond have made their way downstairs and enter the drawing room.)

ACKROYD: Sheppard! So glad you've come!

SHEPPARD: *(Rising.)* Hello, Roger.

ACKROYD: We've all met, then?

FLORA: Yes, Uncle, we've all met, and we're quite ready for dinner.

ACKROYD: Good, good. Ursula? Some sherry, please.

(After serving Ackroyd some sherry, Ursula exits.)

MRS. ACKROYD: Isn't it lovely we'll all be dining together? I love an intimate dinner party.

FLORA: Really, Mother, you speak as though Uncle Roger never entertains at all.

ACKROYD: I've grown rather remiss in that department, I'm afraid.

RAYMOND: Mr. Ackroyd has had much on his mind of late.

(Parker enters.)

PARKER: Dinner is ready to be served, Mr. Ackroyd.

ACKROYD: Excellent. Thank you, Mr. Parker. *(To the others.)* Shall we?

(All file out of the drawing room and through the archway UCS. Mrs. Ackroyd is the last to exit. She closes the lid to the silver table as she exits. Lights cross-fade back to Sheppard's workroom DSL, where Caroline is talking on the phone.)

CAROLINE: *(Into phone.)* No, Margaret. I've told him otherwise, since the beginning really, but he insists that Mrs. Ferrars died from an overdose of Veronal...Veronal...No, he's not here. Went to Fernly for dinner. Wouldn't be talking to you otherwise, let me assure you...Oh,

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you know James, Margaret. Very secretive, you know, as if everyone doesn't know everything, anyway...Well, I don't know. Only that Mr. Ackroyd seemed quite upset about something and wanted him to come to dinner. And, of course, James will divulge very little, if anything at all, once he returns home...

(Lights fade back to Fernly. Dinner has been completed, and Ackroyd is leading Sheppard through the central hall archway toward the study.)

SHEPPARD: *(To Ackroyd.)* Excellent meal. Always been partial to venison.

(Ackroyd enters the study.)

ACKROYD: We'll talk in here, shall we? Once we've had coffee, we shan't be interrupted. I told Raymond to see to it that we shouldn't be disturbed. *(Crosses to the window SR and stares out anxiously.)*

SHEPPARD: Really, Roger. What's this all about? You were quite agitated throughout dinner.

ACKROYD: It was noticeable, was it?

SHEPPARD: Of course, it was. Were it not for Mrs. Ackroyd babbling away—

(Parker enters with tea, which he sets on a small table.)

ACKROYD: I've had a return of that pain after food lately. You must give me some more of those tablets of yours.

SHEPPARD: I thought as much. I brought some up with me. They're in my bag. I'll get them.

ACKROYD: Don't trouble yourself. Parker, bring in the Doctor's bag, will you? *(Consulting Sheppard.)* It's...in the drawing room?

SHEPPARD: By the silver table.

PARKER: *(To Ackroyd.)* Very good, sir. *(Exits to the drawing room to retrieve Sheppard's medical bag.)*

ACKROYD: Forgive me, James. I'm in such a state of nerves that I can hardly contain myself. Thank you so much for coming this evening.

SHEPPARD: Of course. But what is it...this urgent business of which you speak?

(Parker enters with Sheppard's medical bag.)

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ACKROYD: *(To Parker.)* Just set it down there, please. *(Parker sets the bag down.)* Yes, thank you, Parker. That will be all.

PARKER: Yes, sir. *(Starts to exit.)*

ACKROYD: Oh, and Parker? As I told Mr. Raymond, see that we are not interrupted further, will you?

PARKER: Very good, sir. *(Exits through the US arch.)*

ACKROYD: *(To Sheppard.)* Make sure the window's closed, will you? And put the latch across.

(Sheppard goes to his medical bag and places it on the desk.)

SHEPPARD: Now, what's the matter with you, Roger?

ACKROYD: I'm in hell, Sheppard. No, no, don't bother with those tablets. I only said that for Parker's sake. Servants are so curious. Come here and sit down. *(Sheppard approaches and sits.)* The door's closed, isn't it?

SHEPPARD: Yes.

ACKROYD: Sheppard, nobody knows what I've been through in the last 24 hours. If a man's house ever fell in ruin about him, mine has about me. This business of Ralph's is the last straw. But let's not discuss that now. It's the other...the other! I don't know what to do about it. And I've got to make up my mind soon.

SHEPPARD: What other?

ACKROYD: Sheppard, you attended Ashley Ferrars when he was last ill, didn't you?

SHEPPARD: Yes, I did.

ACKROYD: Did you ever suspect—? *(Slight pause.)* Did it ever enter your head that...well, that he might have been poisoned?

SHEPPARD: I'll tell you the truth. At the time, I had no suspicion whatsoever. But now, well, it was mere idle talk on my sister's part that first put the idea into my head. Ever since, I haven't been able to get it out again.

ACKROYD: Well, I tell you, he *was* poisoned!

SHEPPARD: By whom?

ACKROYD: His wife.

SHEPPARD: How do you know that?

ACKROYD: She told me so herself.

SHEPPARD: When?

ACKROYD: Yesterday. Only yesterday! It seems like ten years ago!

SHEPPARD: How did Mrs. Ferrars come to make this confession to you?

ACKROYD: Three months ago, I asked Mrs. Ferrars to marry me. She refused. I asked her again and she consented, but she wouldn't allow

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me to make the engagement public until her year of mourning was up. Yesterday, I called upon her, pointing out that a year and three weeks had elapsed since her husband's death. She broke down completely, told me everything—her hatred of her brute of a husband, her growing love for me, and the dreadful means she had taken. Poison! It was murder in cold blood!

SHEPPARD: My God!

ACKROYD: It seems that there is one person who has known all along, who has been blackmailing her for huge sums. It was the strain of that that drove her nearly mad.

SHEPPARD: Who?

ACKROYD: She wouldn't tell me his name, but something she said made me think that the person in question might actually be among my household.

SHEPPARD: What did you say to her?

ACKROYD: What could I say? I was stunned, you know, for she had made me an accessory after the fact, you see. She asked me for 24 hours, made me promise to do nothing for 24 hours, told me I would hear from her before that time elapsed. I swear to you, Sheppard, that it never entered my mind what she meant to do. Suicide! And I drove her to it!

SHEPPARD: No, Roger. The responsibility for her death doesn't lie at your door.

ACKROYD: And what am I to do now? How am I to get hold of that scoundrel who drove her to death as surely as if he'd killed her?

SHEPPARD: I see. You want to hunt him down, naturally. And I agree with you that the villain ought to be punished, but the cost has got to be reckoned. It will mean a lot of publicity, you know.

ACKROYD: Yes, I've thought of that. Look here, Sheppard, suppose we leave it like this: If no word comes from her, we'll let the dead things lie.

SHEPPARD: What do you mean by "no word coming from her"?

ACKROYD: I have the strongest impression that somehow she must have left a message for me...before she went. In fact, I'm convinced of it. By deliberately choosing death, she wanted the whole thing to come out, if only to avenge the man who drove her to desperation.

SHEPPARD: If, as you put it, word should come from her—

(Parker enters carrying a salver with various letters on it.)

PARKER: Forgive me, sir, the evening post. One letter is marked urgent. I thought perhaps it warranted an interruption.

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ACKROYD: Quite so, Parker. Thank you. *(Takes the stack of letters from the tray and begins sorting through them. Parker clears the cups and exits the room but remains outside the study door, eavesdropping. Ackroyd shuffles through the letters until coming upon a distinct blue envelope. He lets the other mail fall to the ground.)* My God...

SHEPPARD: What is it?

ACKROYD: *Her writing.* She must have gone out and posted it last night just before...before...

SHEPPARD: Will you open it?

ACKROYD: You're sure you shut the window?

SHEPPARD: Quite sure. Why?

ACKROYD: I've had a strange feeling since we came in here of being watched...spied upon.

SHEPPARD: *(Testing the door.)* Shut and locked.

(Ackroyd opens the blue envelope and extracts the letter.)

ACKROYD: *(Reads aloud.)* "My Dear Roger: A life calls for a life. I saw it in your face this afternoon. So I am taking the only road open to me. I leave to you the punishment of the person who has made my life a hell upon earth for the last year. I would not tell you the name this afternoon, but I propose to write it to you now. I have no children or near relations to be spared, so do not fear publicity. If you can, my very dear Roger, forgive me the wrong I meant to do you, since when the time came, I could not do it, after all." *(Pause.)* Sheppard, forgive me, but I must read this alone.

SHEPPARD: No, read it now. *(Slight pause.)* I beg your pardon. I do not mean read it aloud to *me*, but read it through while I'm here.

ACKROYD: No, I'd rather wait. It was meant for my eyes, and my eyes only.

SHEPPARD: At least read the name of the man.

ACKROYD: I cannot.

SHEPPARD: Very well. But before I go, I think perhaps some of those tablets will serve you well, after all.

(Sheppard goes to his medical bag. Parker crosses into the drawing room. Note: During the following scenes, he collects the sherry glasses and at some point explores the silver table. Lights fade on Fernly. A distant church clock chimes nine o'clock. Lights up on Caroline in Sheppard's workroom DSL. Caroline is on the phone.)

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CAROLINE: *(Into phone.)* No, Margaret, he's not. And there are the chimes, nine...Perhaps you're right. But one thing's for certain, I'm not retiring until Roger has returned from Fernly.

(Lights up very dimly on the DSR area. Note: The remaining segments of the scene occur very quickly, almost overlapping each other. Outside the house, Sheppard has crossed into the DSR area. A mysterious Stranger enters, dressed in a long coat with the collar upturned and a hat pulled down over his eyes. Stranger approaches Sheppard.)

STRANGER: This the way to Fernly Park, mister?

SHEPPARD: These are the lodge gates here.

STRANGER: Thank you, mister. I'm a stranger in these parts, you see.

(Stranger moves off. Sheppard watches him go before exiting. Lights fade DSR. Attention returns to Caroline on the phone.)

CAROLINE: *(Into phone.)* Yes! Ralph Paton, that lovely boy!...Well, I know that, Margaret. I was right there with you in the woods, wasn't I?...Yes, and James says he came across Ralph as well walking along, talking with Mrs. Ferrars just yesterday...Well, of course, it is. *(Dim lights come up in the gazebo area DSR, where Miss Russell is waiting anxiously.)* It's quite something. The very day on which— *(Hears something.)* Wait, he's just come in, I think. *(Calls.)* James? Is that you, James?

(Stranger steps into the gazebo light DSR.)

STRANGER: *(To Miss Russell.)* Of course, it's me. You were expecting someone else?

SHEPPARD: *(From off SL.)* Yes, I'm home, Caroline.

STRANGER: *(To Miss Russell.)* I found your little note, and I'm here.

CAROLINE: *(Into phone.)* I must go now, Margaret. He's home. *(Hangs up.)*

MISS RUSSELL: *(To Stranger.)* I can't stay long.

STRANGER: Why change now?

(Sheppard enters his workroom.)

CAROLINE: And did you attain clarity, James, at Fernly?

MISS RUSSELL: *(To Stranger.)* I'll give you what I have.

SHEPPARD: *(To Caroline.)* I'm afraid things are even more muddled than before.

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STRANGER: *(To Miss Russell.)* This was brought on by you, of course.
SHEPPARD: *(To Caroline.)* What's happened is quite regrettable.
MISS RUSSELL: *(To Stranger.)* I can't undo the past.
CAROLINE: *(To Sheppard.)* What do you mean?
STRANGER: *(To Miss Russell.)* And only you can make the present more bearable.
CAROLINE: *(To Sheppard.)* He wasn't at Fernly, was he? Ralph?
MISS RUSSELL: *(To Stranger.)* Just take it. *(Hands Stranger money.)* Take it and go.
SHEPPARD: *(To Caroline.)* No, I'm afraid Ackroyd has more serious problems than Ralph Paton at this point.
MISS RUSSELL: *(To Stranger.)* And, please, do not return to Fernly.
CAROLINE: *(To Sheppard.)* What do you mean? He's aware, is he not, that Ralph is in King's Abbott?
STRANGER: *(To Miss Russell.)* You needn't worry about that.

(Stranger laughs and vanishes. Miss Russell hurries back to Fernly Park. Lights dim DSR.)

SHEPPARD: *(To Caroline, searching through his desk.)* I told you he said on the phone that Ralph was in London. I don't suppose anyone has told him any differently, at least not from what I heard this evening.
CAROLINE: Well, that's not true. Miss Gannett and I—
SHEPPARD: Yes, I know, Caroline. You came upon him and Flora in the wood just two days ago.
CAROLINE: Indeed. And you, yourself—
SHEPPARD: Yes, Caroline. I'm quite aware of the dialogue between Mrs. Ferrars and Ralph. Really, now, I must enter my records from my visitations this afternoon. Have you seen my notebook? *(Caroline opens a desk side drawer, where she previously placed the notebook after perusing it. Taking out the notebook.)* Odd. I never put it there.

(Sheppard gives Caroline a suspicious look. Unnerved, Carline exits. The lights dim to half in the workroom as Sheppard consults his notes. Lights up in the garden house area DSR. Ursula Bourne, the parlor maid, and Ralph Paton are in the garden house.)

URSULA: *(To Ralph.)* So I'm to go on then, am I, even with the announcement?
RALPH: We must be patient just a little longer.
URSULA: I cannot *live* this lie any longer!

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RALPH: We have no choice in the matter. Father has refused to help in any way.

URSULA: And why not, when your debts continue to mount and you have yet to secure any type of employment?

RALPH: You must have faith in me, as before.

URSULA: Before, you told me it would only be a few weeks, a couple of months at most.

RALPH: And so are things progressing in that direction. When Father summoned me, I wasn't aware of what he was to request of me in any way.

(Faint light comes up in the Fernly hallway as Raymond enters through the UCS arch, carrying papers. He moves toward the door leading to the study as if to enter but is stopped short by the voice of Ackroyd from within.)

URSULA: A shock was it?

RALPH: A business arrangement. Nothing more. Don't you see this is our chance? My debts can finally be paid. I can start again with a clean sheet.

(Ursula turns away in disgust. From the hallway, Raymond listens to Ackroyd's voice in the study.)

ACKROYD: I cannot help you. The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late, that I fear it is impossible to accede to your request.

URSULA: *(To Ralph.)* And what of *her*?

RALPH: An opportunity for liberty, for money, for an enlarged horizon. Neither of us makes the slightest pretense of love. A few months, or even only weeks, and the engagement shall be broken off.

(Raymond exits through the UCS arch. Lights down on Fernly.)

URSULA: I don't believe you. Besides, it's too late.

RALPH: What do you mean?

URSULA: I spoke with your stepfather this afternoon. I told him the truth...about everything.

(From Ackroyd's bedroom upstairs, Flora cautiously descends, making sure no one is in the hallway.)

RALPH: What?!

URSULA: I had no choice.

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RALPH: (*Enraged.*) Stupid woman!

(*Ralph "strikes" Ursula, causing her to fall to the ground. Ralph exits DSR. As Flora nears the study door, she hears something in the drawing room. She quickly places her hand on the doorknob just as Parker emerges from the drawing room, carrying the tea set and sherry glasses.*)

FLORA: Oh, Parker. I've just said goodnight to Uncle. He's asked me to tell you that he doesn't want anything more tonight, and he's not to be disturbed under any circumstances.

PARKER: Very good, Miss.

FLORA: I'll be going to bed now. I'm rather tired tonight.

PARKER: Yes, Miss.

(*Flora and Parker exit through the UCS arch. Parker turns toward SR, while Flora moves off SL. Lights fade completely on Fernly. Ursula has now struggled to stand. She removes a necklace and unfastens a wedding ring attached to it. She stares at the ring before letting it slip from her hands and fall to the ground. She then slowly exits DSR. Lights fade completely DSR. Phone rings in Sheppard's workroom as lights come up full DSL.*)

SHEPPARD: (*Into phone.*) James Sheppard...Yes...Yes.

(*Caroline enters.*)

CAROLINE: Too late to be calling at this hour...

SHEPPARD: (*Holding up his hand to shush Caroline. Into phone.*)

What?...What?!...Certainly, I'll come at once! (*Hangs up.*)

CAROLINE: James? What is it? It's past ten.

SHEPPARD: It's Mr. Parker, from Fernly. They've just found Roger Ackroyd murdered.

(*Blackout.*)

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Scene 2

(AT RISE: Immediately following. From the main hallway, the door chimes sound. Parker crosses SL to SR to answer the door. Sheppard enters. Note: The initial dialogue is heard from the hall.)

SHEPPARD: (To Parker, offstage.) Where is he?

PARKER: (Offstage.) I beg your pardon, sir?

SHEPPARD: (Offstage.) Mr. Ackroyd. Don't stand there staring at me. Have you notified the police?

PARKER: (Offstage.) The police, sir?

SHEPPARD: (Offstage.) What's the matter with you, Parker? (Carrying his medical bag, he comes into view. He is followed on by Parker.) If, as you say, your master has been murdered –

PARKER: Murdered?! Master Ackroyd?! Impossible!

SHEPPARD: Did you not telephone me, not five minutes ago, and tell me that Mr. Ackroyd had been found murdered?

PARKER: No, indeed, sir. I did nothing of the kind.

SHEPPARD: Do you mean to say it's all a hoax...that there's nothing the matter with Ackroyd?

PARKER: Excuse me, sir, did the person telephoning use my name?

SHEPPARD: I'll tell you exactly what I heard: "Is that Dr. Sheppard? Parker, the butler at Fernly, speaking. Can you come at once, sir? Mr. Ackroyd has been murdered."

PARKER: A very wicked joke to play, Dr. Sheppard.

SHEPPARD: Where is Mr. Ackroyd?

PARKER: Still in the study, I expect, sir. Asked not to be disturbed. The ladies have gone to bed, and Major Blunt and Mr. Raymond are in the billiard room.

SHEPPARD: I must check on him at once. I know he asked not to be disturbed, but this has made me most uneasy.

PARKER: Quite so, sir. It makes me feel very uneasy myself.

(Parker and Sheppard proceed to the study. Sheppard tries the door, but it is locked.)

SHEPPARD: (Calls.) Ackroyd? Ackroyd! It's me, Sheppard. Open the door, won't you? Ackroyd!

PARKER: Allow me, sir. (Squats down and looks through the keyhole.) Key's in the lock all right, sir. On the inside. I'll get the master keys in the foyer.

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SHEPPARD: Hold on. *(From a side pocket of his medical bag, he extracts a needle and fiddles with the lock, springing it open. Sheppard enters the study, followed by Parker. Ackroyd is slumped over in the DSR chair, a dagger protruding from his neck. [Note: The grandfather chair, previously in the USL area of the drawing room and facing into the room now has been moved away from the wall, blocking a view of the desk USR.] Rushes to Ackroyd's body.)* Good God!

(Sheppard checks Ackroyd's wrist for a pulse.)

PARKER: Is he...?

SHEPPARD: Gone.

PARKER: Stabbed from behind. Horrible! *(Reaches for the dagger.)*

SHEPPARD: No! You mustn't touch that. Go at once and ring up the police station. Inform them of what has happened. Then tell Mr. Raymond and Major Blunt.

(Parker exits. Sheppard sets his bag on the desk, his back to the audience. He is busy with his bag for a few moments. He returns the grandfather chair to its original position, facing the center of the room. Miss Russell enters.)

MISS RUSSELL: Mr. Ackroyd, is everything—?

(Miss Russell sees Ackroyd's body and screams. Sheppard rushes over to her.)

SHEPPARD: There's been a murder, Miss Russell. Mr. Ackroyd is dead.

MISS RUSSELL: Murder? Dead? He's dead? *(Sheppard escorts Miss Russell to the DSL chair and seats her.)* Oh, dear God. Who would kill Mr. Ackroyd? When did it happen?

(Raymond enters, followed by Blunt.)

RAYMOND: My God! It's true, then.

(Blunt approaches Ackroyd's body and looks as if he is ready to lay hold of the dagger. Sheppard interrupts.)

SHEPPARD: *(To Blunt.)* Nothing must be moved. The police must see him exactly as he is now.

RAYMOND: This is terrible.

(Hearing Miss Russell whimpering, Raymond approaches and kneels beside her.)

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BLUNT: *(To Sheppard.)* A robbery, then, is it?

SHEPPARD: I don't know.

BLUNT: No chance of suicide, I suppose?

SHEPPARD: No man could stab himself in such a way. It's murder sure enough.

BLUNT: A burglar, then?

SHEPPARD: The door was locked from the inside. I managed to finagle it open.

(Door chimes ring. Blunt goes to the window.)

BLUNT: The window...it's unlocked.

RAYMOND: But what was the thief after? Nothing is disturbed nor missing.

BLUNT: Roger hadn't an enemy in the world...

(Police Inspector Raglan enters, followed by Parker, who stands in the doorway.)

RAGLAN: Good evening, gentlemen. Terribly sorry for this. A good, kind gentleman like Mr. Ackroyd. No possibility of accident or suicide, Doctor?

SHEPPARD: None whatsoever.

RAGLAN: A bad business. *(Approaches Ackroyd's body.)* Been moved at all?

SHEPPARD: Only to insure that life was extinct.

RAGLAN: Who found the body?

SHEPPARD: Well, that's difficult to say.

RAGLAN: What do you mean?

SHEPPARD: Shortly after ten o'clock this evening, I received a phone call from Mr. Parker—or a man I presumed to be Parker—informing me of Ackroyd's murder and requesting my presence.

PARKER: *(To Raglan.)* A message I never sent. I've not been near the telephone the whole evening. The others can bear me out that I haven't.

RAGLAN: Did it sound like Parker's voice, Doctor?

SHEPPARD: Well, I can't say I noticed. I took it for granted, you see.

RAGLAN: Very odd, that. And how long would you say he's been dead, Doctor?

SHEPPARD: Half an hour, at least. Perhaps longer.

RAGLAN: Parker says the door was locked from the inside. What of the window?

BLUNT: Unlocked.

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(Raglan approaches the window.)

RAGLAN: And you are...?

BLUNT: Blunt. Major Hector Blunt. Big-game hunter, Africa. Friend of Ackroyd's. Visiting here.

RAGLAN: *(Peering out the window.)* I see. Well, this is the way the intruder got in...and went out. *(To Sheppard.)* See here... *(Sheppard approaches the window.)* ...footprints clear as day. *(To Raymond.)* Any valuables missing?

RAYMOND: Not that we've discovered. Mr. Ackroyd never kept anything of particular value in this room. And all cash he kept upstairs in his bedroom in an old collar box.

RAGLAN: Hmm, no suspicious activity in the surrounding area recently? No strangers hanging about anywhere?

SHEPPARD: *(Remembers.)* Oh!

RAGLAN: What is it, Doctor?

SHEPPARD: I met a man this evening, just as I was turning out of the gate. He asked me the way to Fernly Park.

(Hearing this, Miss Russell grows very attentive.)

RAGLAN: What time would that be?

SHEPPARD: Just nine o'clock. I heard it chime the hour as I was turning out of the gate.

RAGLAN: Can you describe him?

SHEPPARD: Well, it was dark, you see. But he was dressed in a long coat with an upturned collar. And his hat was pulled down very far.

RAGLAN: *(To Parker.)* Anyone answering that description come to the front door?

PARKER: No, sir. No one has been to the house at all this evening, with the exception of Dr. Sheppard, of course.

RAGLAN: When was Mr. Ackroyd last seen alive?

SHEPPARD: Probably by me, when I left about ten minutes to nine. He told me he didn't wish to be disturbed, and I repeated the order to Parker.

PARKER: *(To Raglan.)* Just so, sir.

RAYMOND: *(To Raglan.)* Mr. Ackroyd was certainly alive at half past nine, for I heard his voice in here talking.

RAGLAN: To whom?

RAYMOND: That I don't know. At the time, I presumed it was Dr. Sheppard with him. But now it seems the Doctor had already left.

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SHEPPARD: *(To Raglan.)* Once I returned home, I didn't go out again until I received the call.

RAGLAN: Do you recall, Mr. Raymond, the nature of the conversation you overheard?

RAYMOND: Only a fragment of it, sir. Mr. Ackroyd was speaking and seemed rather impatient. "I cannot help you. The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late, that I fear it is impossible for me to accede to your request." It struck me as distinctly odd, presuming, as I did, that it was Dr. Sheppard to whom he was speaking. And Dr. Sheppard—

SHEPPARD: Does not ask for loans for himself or subscriptions for others.

RAGLAN: A demand for money, then. We have here a very important clue. Then who could have been with him at half past nine? It wasn't you, Mister...?

BLUNT: Blunt.

RAGLAN: Yes, sorry.

BLUNT: Never saw him after dinner.

RAYMOND: Major Blunt and I retired to the billiard room and remained there until Mr. Parker came.

RAGLAN: Well, one thing is clear: Mr. Ackroyd was alive and well at 9:30. That is the last moment at which he is known to have been alive.

PARKER: Excuse me, sir.

RAGLAN: Yes, Mr. Parker?

PARKER: Well, Miss Flora saw Mr. Ackroyd after 9:30.

RAGLAN: Miss Flora?

PARKER: Yes, sir. About a quarter to ten that would be. It was after that that she told me Mr. Ackroyd wasn't to be disturbed again.

RAGLAN: Did he send her to you with that message?

PARKER: No. I had just come from the drawing room with the tea service and sherry glasses when I encountered Miss Flora emerging from the study.

RAGLAN: *(To Raymond.)* I would like to have a word with Miss Ackroyd.

RAYMOND: I can alert her.

RAGLAN: Tell her only that there's been a burglary, and ask her if she would mind coming down to answer a few questions in the drawing room. *(Raymond exits into the main hall and off SL.)* We must get busy on those shoe tracks outside the window. But, first, let us retire to the drawing room. We'll leave this room exactly as it is. *(To Parker.)* You'll secure the window and the door, Mr. Parker?

PARKER: Of course.

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RAGLAN: And where does this secondary staircase lead, if I may ask?

PARKER: Only to Mr. Ackroyd's private bedroom and bathroom. The door at the top of the stairs is kept locked at all times.

RAGLAN: I see.

(Raglan moves across the hall toward the drawing room, followed by Blunt. Parker locks the window in the study. Sheppard helps Miss Russell, who heads toward the drawing room.)

SHEPPARD: *(To Miss Russell.)* Perhaps you should return to your room.

MISS RUSSELL: No, Miss Ackroyd will need support.

RAGLAN: *(To Blunt.)* Miss Flora is the niece of Mr. Ackroyd?

BLUNT: Yes, her mother was married to Roger's brother, Cecil. Worthless bloke. When he died, mother and daughter moved here from Canada two years ago.

RAGLAN: Hard up, were they?

BLUNT: Not the easiest of times for them, what I understand.

(During the previous dialogue, Parker walks around the study, exploring its contents. He slightly adjusts the grandfather chair before proceeding and coming upon Ackroyd's body. Parker studies it a few moments before exiting, locking the study door behind him. In the hallway, Parker meets Raymond, who has brought an anxious Flora from upstairs.)

FLORA: What is it, Mr. Parker? Has something happened?

(Parker, Raymond, and Flora move into the drawing room.)

RAGLAN: Good evening, Miss Ackroyd. We're afraid there's been an attempt at robbery, and we want you to help us.

FLORA: I don't quite understand. What's been stolen? What do you want me to tell you?

RAGLAN: It's just this, Miss Ackroyd: Parker, here, says you came out of your uncle's study at about a quarter to ten, is that right?

FLORA: Quite right. I had been in to say goodnight.

RAGLAN: Was your uncle alone, or was there someone with him?

FLORA: He was alone. Dr. Sheppard had gone.

RAGLAN: Did you happen to notice whether the window was open or closed?

FLORA: I can't say. The curtains were drawn.

RAGLAN: I see. Do you mind telling us exactly what passed between you?

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FLORA: I went in and said, "Goodnight, Uncle. I'm going to bed now. I'm tired tonight." He gave a sort of grunt, and then he told me to go away as he was busy.

RAGLAN: And did he ask specially not to be disturbed?

FLORA: (*Remembers.*) Oh, yes! I forgot. He said, "Tell Parker I don't want anything more tonight and that he's not to disturb me." I met Parker just outside the door and gave him Uncle's message.

PARKER: (*To Raglan.*) Quite so.

FLORA: (*To Raglan.*) Won't you tell me what it is that's been stolen?

RAGLAN: We're not quite certain.

FLORA: What is it? You're hiding something from me!

(*Blunt approaches Flora.*)

BLUNT: It's bad news, Flora. Bad news for all of us.

FLORA: Yes?

BLUNT: It will be a shock to you. (*Pause.*) Poor Roger's dead.

FLORA: Dead?! When?! When?!

BLUNT: Very soon after you left him, I'm afraid.

(*Flora faints, nearly falling to the floor before Blunt catches her. Raymond comes to his assistance.*)

PARKER: (*To Raglan.*) Miss Flora needs to be returned to her room.

RAGLAN: Of course. (*Raymond and Blunt carry Flora out and off SL in the main hall. Raglan, Sheppard, Parker, and Miss Russell remain in the drawing room.*) To be expected.

SHEPPARD: As Major Blunt said, "a shock to everyone."

RAGLAN: This stranger you encountered earlier...anything more definite to go upon?

SHEPPARD: I'm afraid not. So dark, you know.

RAGLAN: No one you know?

SHEPPARD: No, though his voice did not seem entirely unfamiliar to me. A rough, uneducated voice.

RAGLAN: (*Glances over at Miss Russell.*) Would you mind, Doctor, returning with me to the study? There are one or two things I want to ask you.

SHEPPARD: Of course.

RAGLAN: Oh, Mr. Parker, may I prevail upon you to borrow the set of master keys for the time being?

PARKER: The entire set, sir?

RAGLAN: Well, no, that won't be necessary. Just the key to the study.

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(Parker somewhat begrudgingly hands the key to Raglan.)

SHEPPARD: May as well return to your room, Miss Russell.

MISS RUSSELL: I...yes.

(Miss Russell rises, but does not move. Sheppard and Raglan cross into the study. Raglan unlocks the study door with the key. In the drawing room, Parker, somewhat miffed, looks at Miss Russell, who returns his stare. Raglan and Sheppard have now entered the study. Parker exits the drawing room as Raglan shuts the study door. Parker stares at the door.)

RAGLAN: *(To Sheppard.)* We don't want to be disturbed. *(In the direction of the door, louder.)* And we don't want any eavesdropping, either. *(Parker continues to exit through the archway of the main hall. Miss Russell, hearing the study door close and Parker exit, crosses to the silver table and studies it. To Sheppard.)* Now, what's all this about blackmail?

SHEPPARD: Blackmail?

RAGLAN: Is it an effort of Parker's imagination, or is there something in it?

SHEPPARD: If Parker heard something about blackmail, he must have been listening outside this door with his ear glued against the keyhole.

(Miss Russell exits the drawing room and crosses to outside the study, where she eavesdrops on their conversation.)

RAGLAN: To tell the truth, I didn't like his manner. The man knows something. When I began to question him, he got the wind up and plumped out some garbled story of blackmail.

SHEPPARD: You don't think that Parker himself might be the man we're after?

RAGLAN: It looks very much like it. He was obviously listening at the door when you came out.

(Miss Russell exits through the US arch.)

SHEPPARD: And the telephone call?

RAGLAN: Parker sent that, all right. We can find out for sure from the exchange. But keep it dark. We don't want to alarm him just yet. To all appearances, we'll be concentrating on your mysterious stranger. *(Approaches Ackroyd's body.)* This weapon ought to give us a clue. *(Gingerly, with a handkerchief, he extracts the blade from Ackroyd's neck. Indicating blade.)* Quite a work of art, this.

SHEPPARD: May I examine the body properly now?

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RAGLAN: Go ahead. *(As Sheppard examines the body, Raglan places the dagger in a small towel. He sets the dagger on a table top, goes to the window, and unlocks it. Gazing out the window.)* Distinctive enough footmarks. Rubber studs in the soles. *(To Sheppard.)* Well?

(Raymond enters from the center hallway and crosses toward the study.)

SHEPPARD: The blow was delivered by a right-handed man standing behind him. Death was instantaneous. He died without knowing who his assailant was.

RAYMOND: *(Knocks on the study door, calls.)* Inspector?

(Raglan goes to the door to admit Raymond.)

RAGLAN: Mr. Raymond.

RAYMOND: Miss Flora has been taken to her mother's room. Major Blunt is with them now.

RAGLAN: Very good. Incidentally, Mr. Raymond, can you tell us anything about this dagger?

RAYMOND: Why, I'm almost sure it's a curio given to Mr. Ackroyd by Major Blunt. It comes from Morocco. No, Tunis. So the crime was committed with that?

(Blunt appears from the main hallway.)

RAGLAN: Yes.

RAYMOND: What an extraordinary thing, yet there could hardly be two daggers the same.

RAGLAN: Hardly.

(Blunt enters.)

BLUNT: It's the Tunis dagger. Saw it the moment I came in the first time.

RAGLAN: You said nothing about it.

BLUNT: Wrong moment. Lots of harm done by blurting things out at the wrong time.

RAGLAN: *(To Raymond.)* Where was this curio usually kept? Can you tell me that, sir?

RAYMOND: In the silver table in the drawing room.

SHEPPARD: What?

RAGLAN: Yes, Doctor?

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SHEPPARD: Oh, excuse me. It's so trivial. Only that when I arrived last night for dinner, I heard the lid of the silver table being shut in the drawing room. I started in and encountered Miss Russell, who said she was checking on the flowers.

RAGLAN: Mr. Raymond, can you see if Miss Russell is available?

RAYMOND: Of course. *(Exits.)*

RAGLAN: *(To Sheppard.)* And was the dagger in its place when you entered the room, Dr. Sheppard?

SHEPPARD: I really can't say. I don't remember noticing it, but, of course, it may have been there all the time.

RAGLAN: Well, the fingerprints will help us out in that regard, nonetheless.

(Raymond enters with Miss Russell.)

RAYMOND: *(Indicating Miss Russell.)* Just in the pantry.

RAGLAN: Ah, Miss Russell. Sorry to impose at this time, but I'm wondering if you noticed anything peculiar, anything different, about the silver table earlier this evening.

MISS RUSSELL: I don't think I went near the silver table at all. I was checking to make sure that all of the flowers were fresh. *(Remembers.)* Oh, yes! I remember now. As I went to leave, I noticed the silver table was open, which it had no business to be, and I shut the lid down as I passed.

RAGLAN: I see. Can you tell me if this dagger was in its place then?

MISS RUSSELL: I can't say I'm sure. I didn't stop to look. I knew the family would be down any minute, and I wanted to get away.

RAGLAN: Thank you, Miss. *(Miss Russell stoically exits. To others.)* Well, I don't think we need go into the question much further today. *(Indicating dagger.)* I shall take it with me to headquarters. It's going to be an important piece of evidence in more ways than one. Goodnight. I suggest a good night's sleep for all of you. I shall be coming up in the morning with the chief constable. Until then, I'll retain the key to the study door. *(Sheppard, Raymond, and Blunt take the cue and move out into the hall. Raglan follows, locking the study door behind him.)* All right, then. Goodnight.

(Raglan exits, leaving the somewhat befuddled trio standing in the hall as the lights dim. Lights up in Sheppard's workroom area, where Caroline is once again on the phone.)

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

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CAROLINE: *(Into phone.)* Yes, Margaret. Roger Ackroyd...Well, I don't know. James got home so late last night I didn't get a chance to talk to him...I have no idea, Margaret. *(Hears something offstage.)* Oh, wait. Here he is now. I'll call you back when I know something. *(Exits SL. Off SL.)* Miss Flora! My goodness, I thought you were James!

FLORA: *(Offstage.)* No.

CAROLINE: *(Offstage.)* Well, no. Oh, I'm so sorry, dear, about your uncle.

FLORA: *(Offstage.)* Thank you. I've come to see the Doctor. Is he in?

CAROLINE: *(Offstage.)* Not right at the moment. But come in, come in.

(Caroline wheels into the workroom, followed by Flora.)

FLORA: Thank you.

CAROLINE: Please, sit down, dear. *(Flora sits.)* What a horrible event for you!

FLORA: Yes, it has been. The Doctor is due back soon?

CAROLINE: Why, yes. He's not out at all. He's sleeping.

FLORA: Oh.

CAROLINE: After last night, you know...

FLORA: Of course.

CAROLINE: Tell me, dear, do they know who committed the dreadful deed?

FLORA: Well...I...

CAROLINE: It's all right, dear. You needn't talk at all.

SHEPPARD: *(Calls.)* Caroline?

CAROLINE: *(To Flora.)* Oh! There he is now! *(Calls.)* In here, James.

SHEPPARD: Caroline, I thought I heard— *(Enters.)*

CAROLINE: It's Miss Ackroyd, James. She's come to see you.

SHEPPARD: Oh!

FLORA: Forgive me, Doctor. I haven't slept all night, but I must ask for your help.

CAROLINE: Of course, he'll help you, my dear.

FLORA: *(To Sheppard.)* I want you to come to The Larches with me.

SHEPPARD: The Larches?

CAROLINE: *(To Flora.)* To see that funny little man?

FLORA: Yes. You know who he is, don't you?

SHEPPARD: We fancied he might be a retired hairdresser.

FLORA: Why, he's Hercule Poirot, the private detective. A year ago, he retired and came to live down here. Uncle knew who he was, but he promised not to tell anyone because Monsieur Poirot wanted to live quietly without being bothered by people.

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SHEPPARD: *(To Caroline.)* "Hercules Porrott," indeed.
FLORA: You've heard of him?
SHEPPARD: Just. You want to go see him? Why?
CAROLINE: To ask him to investigate this murder, of course. Don't be so stupid, James.
SHEPPARD: *(To Flora.)* You haven't confidence in Inspector Raglan?
CAROLINE: Of course, she hasn't. I haven't, either.
SHEPPARD: *(To Flora.)* And how do you know he would take up the case? Apparently, he's retired from active work.
FLORA: That's just it. I've got to persuade him. And you being the doctor and having found the body, you'd be able to give all the details to Monsieur Poirot.
SHEPPARD: Flora, I'd advise you not to bring Mr. Poirot into the case.
FLORA: I know why you say that, but that's exactly why I'm so anxious to go. I know Ralph better than you do.
CAROLINE: Ralph?! What's Ralph got to do with it?
FLORA: Ralph may be weak. He may have done foolish things in the past, but he would never murder anyone!
SHEPPARD: No, no, Flora, I never thought of Ralph.
FLORA: Then why did you go to The Three Boars last night after Uncle's body was found? *(Sheppard is caught off-guard and says nothing.)* I've just come from there. I heard from the servants that Ralph was staying there.
SHEPPARD: You knew that Ralph was in King's Abbott?
FLORA: No, I was astounded. I went there—to The Three Boars—and asked about him. They told me the same as I suppose they told you, that he went out about nine o'clock yesterday evening and never came back.
CAROLINE: Oh, my.
FLORA: What's more, an Inspector Raglan had been there immediately before me. They told me of the questions he asked.
SHEPPARD: That's a change of mind from last night, then.
FLORA: A pair of his shoes was missing from his room. He must think Ralph did it.
CAROLINE: Well, of course, Ralph didn't do it. He's an extravagant boy, but he's quite dear, and he has the nicest manners.
SHEPPARD: *(To Flora.)* Very well. I shall accompany you next door to see Mr. Poirot, though I'm not at all certain it's the right thing to do.
CAROLINE: Of course, it's the right thing to do, James. *(To Flora.)* Don't worry, my dear. I'm sure Ralph is innocent. And as even James will admit, my judgment of character is unsurpassed.
SHEPPARD: Come along, Miss Flora.

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(Sheppard and Flora exit, crossing the stage to the DSR area, now representative of The Larches. Watching them go, Caroline immediately picks up the phone.)

CAROLINE: *(Into phone.)* Margaret?...You've no idea what's just happened!

(Lights fade on the DSL workroom area. Lights up on Poirot's room at The Larches DSR.)

SHEPPARD: How do you do, Monsieur Poirot? Allow me to introduce myself. I'm James Sheppard from next door, you know.

POIROT: Of course, Doctor Sheppard. I have made the acquaintance of your delightful sister, Caroline.

SHEPPARD: Yes. Thank you so much for the lovely marrow squash, monsieur.

POIROT: Ah! You enjoyed it, then?

SHEPPARD: Delicious.

POIROT: Is good, is good.

SHEPPARD: This is Miss Flora Ackroyd, niece of Mr. Roger Ackroyd, whose acquaintance I believe you made while in London.

POIROT: Ah, Monsieur Ackroyd. Indeed. A true gentleman. So happy to meet you, mademoiselle.

SHEPPARD: Perhaps you've heard of the tragedy which occurred last night?

POIROT: Certainly, I have heard. It is horrible. I offer mademoiselle all my sympathy. In what way can I serve you?

SHEPPARD: Miss Ackroyd wants you to...to...

FLORA: *(To Poirot.)* To find the murderer.

POIROT: But the police will do that, will they not?

FLORA: They might make a mistake. They're on their way to making a mistake now, I think. Please, Monsieur Poirot, won't you help us? If it's a question of money—

POIROT: Not that, I beg of you, mademoiselle. No, if I go into this, you must understand one thing clearly: I shall go through with it to the end.

FLORA: I want the truth.

POIROT: *All* the truth?

FLORA: All the truth.

POIROT: Then I accept. And I hope you will not regret those words. Now, tell me all the circumstances.

FLORA: Dr. Sheppard had better tell you. He knows more than I.

The Murder of Legger Ackroyd

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SHEPPARD: *(To Poirot.)* Well, it began last night, around ten o'clock. I received a phone call...

(Lights dim on The Larches DSR. Lights up on Caroline, still on the phone, in the workroom DSL.)

CAROLINE: *(Into phone.)* Well, I don't know. But now that dear boy Ralph Paton has apparently come under suspicion. Oh, it breaks my heart. To think of the great service he's done for England during the war...Well, of course, it did. He's a changed man, that's for sure. And now to come home to all this...

(The scene shifts back to The Larches.)

POIROT: *(To Sheppard.)* And you went to this inn, The Three Boars, last night on your way home? Now tell me, exactly, why was that?

SHEPPARD: I thought someone ought to inform the young man of his uncle's death. It occurred to me after I left Fernly that possibly no one but myself and Mr. Ackroyd were aware that he was staying in the village.

POIROT: It was not, shall we say, to reassure yourself about the young man?

SHEPPARD: Reassure myself?

POIROT: I suggest that it would have been a relief to you if you had found that Captain Paton had been at home all the evening.

SHEPPARD: Not at all.

POIROT: Well, what we have to look at is this: Captain Paton is missing, under circumstances which call for an explanation, n'est-ce pas? I will not hide from you that the matter looks grave. Still, it may have a perfectly simple explanation.

FLORA: That's just what I keep saying.

POIROT: Tell me, Mademoiselle Flora, might we take a little trip at this moment to your Fernly Park?

FLORA: Of course.

SHEPPARD: *(To Poirot.)* Inspector Raglan indicated last night he would return to Fernly this morning.

POIROT: Très bon. You will, then, accompany us, Dr. Sheppard?

SHEPPARD: If you'd like me to.

POIROT: Let us go, then, the three of us.

(The scene shifts to the workroom DSL.)

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CAROLINE: *(Into phone, correcting.)* It's Poirot, Margaret. *Poirot.* And his Christian name is Hercule...Yes, Hercule Poirot. French or something, I don't know. But it suits him, you know. Such a peculiar little man...

(Lights fade on the workroom and come up on the study at Fernly. Note: Ackroyd's body has been removed. Inspector Raglan, Poirot, and Sheppard are present.)

POIROT: *(To Raglan.)* It is true, Inspector, that I have retired from the world. I never intended to take up a case again. Above all things, I have a horror of publicity. I must beg, therefore, that in the case of my being able to contribute something to the solution of the mystery, my name may never be mentioned.

RAGLAN: I've heard of some very remarkable successes of yours.

POIROT: I have had much experience, but most of my successes have been obtained by the aid of the police. I admire enormously your English police. If Monsieur Inspector permits me to assist him, I shall be both honored and flattered.

RAGLAN: Well, we must put you wise to the latest developments, Mister Poirot.

POIROT: I thank you. Now, my friend, Dr. Sheppard, said something of the butler being suspected?

RAGLAN: That's all bunkum. These high-class servants get in such a funk that they act suspiciously at nothing at all.

SHEPPARD: The fingerprints?

RAGLAN: Nothing like Parker's. And yours and Mr. Raymond's don't fit either, Doctor.

POIROT: What about those of Captain Ralph Paton?

RAGLAN: We're going to take the young man's fingerprints as soon as we can lay hands upon him.

SHEPPARD: What have you got against him?

RAGLAN: Went out at nine o'clock last night. Was seen in the neighborhood of Fernly Park somewhere about 9:30. Not been seen since. Believed to be in serious money difficulties. I've got a pair of his shoes here, shoes with rubber studs in them. He had two pairs almost exactly alike.

POIROT: Doctor, the blue letter you spoke of...where was it when you left the room?

SHEPPARD: Mr. Ackroyd had laid it down here, on this little table.

POIROT: And except for that, everything was in its place?

SHEPPARD: Yes, I think so.

The Murder of Egger Ackroyd

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POIROT: Inspector, would you be so obliging as to sit down in this chair a minute? (*Indicates Ackroyd's chair.*) I thank you. Now, Doctor, will you kindly indicate to me the exact position of the dagger? (*Stands in the doorway.*)

SHEPPARD: Here... (*Indicates the dagger's position.*)

POIROT: The hilt of the dagger was then plainly visible from the door. Both you and Parker could see it at once?

SHEPPARD: Yes.

POIROT: (*Pulls the servants' bell cord.*) You will forgive me. I must ask the man whose business it is to observe such things. You permit one—

(*Parker enters.*)

PARKER: (*To Raglan.*) The bell rang, sir.

RAGLAN: Come in, Mr. Parker. (*Introducing.*) This gentleman is Mr. Hercule Poirot. He is helping with the case and wishes to ask you something.

POIROT: Monsieur Parker, you were Monsieur Ackroyd's personal manservant, is it not so?

PARKER: I remain so, sir.

POIROT: Of course. Now tell me...when you and Dr. Sheppard entered this room last night and found your master dead, was the room exactly as it is now?

PARKER: The curtains were drawn, sir.

POIROT: Anything else?

PARKER: Yes, sir. (*Indicating grandfather chair.*) This chair was drawn out some.

POIROT: Show me. (*Parker shifts the chair.*) Hmm, no one would want to sit in a chair in such a position, I fancy. Now, who pushed it back into place again, I wonder. Did you, mon ami?

(*Off SL, a phone rings twice.*)

PARKER: No, sir. I was too upset with seeing the master.

POIROT: Did you, Doctor?

SHEPPARD: No.

PARKER: It was back in position when I arrived with Inspector Raglan, sir. I'm sure of that.

POIROT: Curious...

(*Miss Russell enters.*)

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MISS RUSSELL: Excuse me, gentlemen. There is a phone call for Inspector Raglan.

RAGLAN: *(Starts to exit.)* Ah, thank you, Miss Russell.

(Raglan exits. Miss Russell looks over the situation in the drawing room suspiciously before she departs. Poirot turns inquisitively to Sheppard.)

SHEPPARD: Miss Russell, the housekeeper.

POIROT: Hmm, Monsieur Parker, would you be so kind as to ask Monsieur Raymond to join us for a little visit?

PARKER: *(Bowing slightly.)* As you wish. *(Exits.)*

SHEPPARD: *(To Poirot.)* Do you think Parker is speaking the truth?

POIROT: Ah, everyone has something to hide, n'est-ce pas, Doctor? But tell me, you left Mr. Ackroyd at...ten minutes to nine, was it not?

SHEPPARD: Yes, exactly, I should say.

POIROT: The window is then closed and bolted and the door unlocked.

At a quarter past ten when the body is discovered, the door is locked, but the window is open. Who opened it? Clearly, only Mr. Ackroyd himself could have done so. He admitted someone that way, and it must have been someone well known to him since he had previously shown himself uneasy on the subject of that same window.

SHEPPARD: It sounds very simple.

POIROT: Everything is simple, if you arrange the facts methodically. We are concerned now with the personality of the individual who was with him at 9:30 last night. Everything goes to show that that was the person admitted by the window, and though Mr. Ackroyd was seen alive later by Miss Flora, we cannot approach a solution of the mystery until we know who that visitor was. The window may have been left open after his departure and so afforded entrance to the murderer, or the same person may have returned a second time. Ah! Here is the Inspector, who returns.

(Raglan enters.)

RAGLAN: That telephone call has been traced at last. It did not come from here. It was put through to Dr. Sheppard at 10:15 last night from a public call office at King's Abbot Station.

POIROT: Extraordinary.

SHEPPARD: But why telephone at all? That is what I find so perplexing. There seems no rhyme or reason in the thing.

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POIROT: When we know that, we shall know everything. You say it was nine o'clock, Dr. Sheppard, when you met the stranger outside the gate?

SHEPPARD: Yes. I heard the church clock chime the hour.

POIROT: How long would it take him to reach the house...to reach this window, for instance?

SHEPPARD: Five minutes at the outside. Two or three minutes, if he took the path at the right of the drive and came straight here.

(Parker enters with Raymond.)

PARKER: *(Announcing.)* Mr. Raymond, sir.

POIROT: Ah, thank you, Monsieur Parker.

SHEPPARD: *(Introducing.)* Mr. Raymond, this is Mr. Hercule Poirot. He'll be assisting Inspector Raglan on the case.

RAYMOND: Very good, sir.

(Poirot approaches the grandfather chair and stands behind it.)

RAGLAN: *(To Poirot.)* Mr. Raymond has been Mr. Ackroyd's personal secretary for the past two years.

RAYMOND: *(Seeing Poirot near the grandfather chair.)* You wish me to sit in the chair while you take a blood test?

POIROT: *(Pulling out the grandfather chair.)* Monsieur Raymond, this chair was pulled out like so last night when Mr. Ackroyd was found killed. Someone moved it back again into place. Did you do so?

RAYMOND: No, indeed, I didn't. I don't remember that it was in that position, but it must have been if you say so.

POIROT: Ah. Well, it is of little consequence, anyway. What I really want to ask you, monsieur, is whether any stranger came to see Mr. Ackroyd during this past week?

RAYMOND: No, I can't remember anyone. Can you, Parker?

PARKER: *(To Poirot.)* There was the young man who came on Wednesday, sir. From Curtis and Troute, I understood he was.

RAYMOND: Oh, yes, I remember, but that's not the kind of stranger this gentleman means. *(To Poirot.)* Mr. Ackroyd had some idea of purchasing a Dictaphone. It would have enabled us to get through more work in a limited time. The firm in question sent down their representative, but nothing came of it.

PARKER: *(To Poirot.)* Excuse me, but Mr. Hammond, the attorney, is in the library. He wishes to visit with Mr. Raymond and some others regarding the will.

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POIROT: By all means. We are through here. Merci, messieurs. (*Parker and Raymond exit.*) An opened window. A locked door. A chair that moves itself. To all three I say, "Why?" and I find no answer.

RAGLAN: Anything more you want to see, Poirot?

POIROT: You would perhaps be so kind as to show me the silver table from which the weapon was taken? After that, I will trespass on your kindness no longer.

RAGLAN: Of course. (*Starts to exit, followed by Poirot and Sheppard.*) We're just across the way here. The table is filled with various historical curios, many of which were provided by Major Blunt from his African excursions.

POIROT: Ah, the Dark Continent. (*Approaching the silver table.*) I wish to return there someday. The most beautiful place I've ever seen. (*Raises and lowers the lid of the silver table several times.*) A most perplexing case, at any rate.

RAGLAN: Oh, not really, Poirot. It's all clear enough. Mr. Ackroyd was last seen alive at a quarter to ten by his niece, Miss Flora Ackroyd. At half past ten, the Doctor, here, says that Mr. Ackroyd had been dead at least half an hour. Correct, Doctor?

SHEPPARD: Half an hour or longer.

RAGLAN: Very good. That gives us exactly a quarter of an hour in which the crime must have been committed. Now, at 25 minutes past nine, Captain Paton is seen passing the lodge. At 9:30 or thereabouts, Mr. Geoffrey Raymond hears someone in here asking for money and Mr. Ackroyd refusing. What happens next? Captain Paton leaves the same way...through the window. He walks along the terrace, angry and baffled. He comes to the open drawing room window. Say it's now a quarter to ten. Miss Flora Ackroyd is saying goodnight to her uncle. Major Blunt, Mr. Raymond, and Mrs. Ackroyd are in the billiard room. The drawing room is empty. He steals in, takes the dagger from the silver table, and returns to the study window. He slips off his shoes, climbs in, and, well, I don't need to go into details. Afterward, he goes to the station, rings up from there—

POIROT: Why?

RAGLAN: It's difficult to say exactly why he did that. Murderers do funny things. Now, why don't you come along, and we'll go and check further on these shoes?

POIROT: But, surely, a great many people wear shoes with rubber studs in them?

RAGLAN: Of course. I shouldn't place so much stress on the footmarks if it wasn't for everything else.

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POIROT: A very foolish young man, Captain Ralph Paton, to leave so much evidence of his presence.

RAGLAN: Yes. Shall we?

POIROT: Please, go on ahead. You, too, Dr. Sheppard. I would like to take a little walk. The air is pleasant today.

(Raglan and Sheppard exit the drawing room through the French doors to outside. They turn upstage and disappear from sight. Poirot exits in the same manner; however, he turns downstage and crosses in front of the estate with the intention of making his way to the garden house DSR. Before he can do so, the lights come up DSR to reveal Flora and Blunt seated in the garden house, talking. Poirot hangs back and eavesdrops on their conversation.)

FLORA: *(To Blunt.)* Are you going on another expedition shooting things?

BLUNT: Expect so. Usually do, you know, shoot things, I mean.

FLORA: You shot that head in the hall, didn't you?

BLUNT: *(Nodding.)* Care for some decent pelts? If so, I could get 'em for you.

FLORA: Oh, please do! Will you really? You won't forget?

BLUNT: I won't forget. Time I went, anyway. I'm no good in this sort of life...haven't got the manners for it. I'm a rough fellow. No use in society. Never remember the things one's expected to say. Time I went.

FLORA: But you're not going at once, not while we're in all this trouble. Oh, please!

BLUNT: You want me to stay?

FLORA: We all want—

BLUNT: I meant you personally.

FLORA: I want you to stay, if that makes any difference.

BLUNT: It makes all the difference.

(Pause.)

FLORA: It's such a lovely morning. You know, I can't help feeling happy, in spite of everything. That's awful, I suppose?

BLUNT: Quite natural. Never saw your uncle until two years ago, did you? Can't be expected to grieve very much.

FLORA: There's something awfully consoling about you. You make things seem so simple.

BLUNT: Things are simple, as a rule.

FLORA: Not always.

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BLUNT: You mustn't worry...about that young chap, I mean.

FLORA: I'm...I'll tell you why I feel so happy this morning. However heartless you think me, I'd rather tell you. It's because the lawyer has been here...Mr. Hammond. He told us about the will. Uncle Roger has left me 20,000 pounds! Think of it!

BLUNT: Does it mean so much to you?

FLORA: It means everything: freedom, life, no more scheming and scraping and lying –

BLUNT: Lying?

FLORA: You know what I mean. Pretending to be thankful for all the cast-off things rich relations give you.

BLUNT: Miss Ackroyd, can I do anything...about Paton, I mean. I know how anxious you must be.

FLORA: Thank you. There's really nothing to be done. Ralph will be all right. I've got hold of the most wonderful detective in the world, and he's going to find out all about it.

POIROT: (*Presenting himself.*) I demand pardon. I cannot allow mademoiselle thus extravagantly to compliment me and not draw attention to my presence. I must join you and apologize.

FLORA: Major Blunt, this is Monsieur Hercule Poirot. I expect you've heard of him?

POIROT: I know Major Blunt by reputation. I am glad to have encountered you, monsieur. I am in need of some information that you can give me.

BLUNT: I'll do my best.

POIROT: When did you last see Monsieur Ackroyd alive?

BLUNT: At dinner.

POIROT: And you neither saw nor heard anything of him after that?

BLUNT: Didn't see him. Heard his voice.

POIROT: Pardon me. What time was that?

BLUNT: About half past nine. I was walking up and down smoking in front of the drawing room. I thought I caught a glimpse of a woman disappearing into the bushes. Just a gleam of white, you know. Anyway, I followed a bit and wound up just outside the study. It was then I heard Ackroyd's voice speaking to that secretary of his.

POIROT: Speaking to Mr. Raymond?

BLUNT: Yes. That's what I supposed at the time. Seems I was wrong.

POIROT: Mr. Ackroyd didn't address him by name?

BLUNT: No.

POIROT: Then why did you think –?

BLUNT: Took it for granted it was Raymond because he had said just before I went out that he had some papers to deliver to Mr. Ackroyd.

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POIROT: One more thing, monsieur: Did you move a chair back against the wall when you went into the study after the body was discovered?

BLUNT: A chair? No. Why should I?

POIROT: No matter. And, mademoiselle, we should not ignore you, mon ami. Tell me, when you were examining the things in the silver table with Dr. Sheppard, was the dagger in its place, or was it not?

FLORA: Inspector Raglan has been asking me that. I've told him, and I'll tell you. I'm perfectly certain the dagger was *not* there. He thinks it was and that Ralph sneaked it later in the evening. But the Inspector thinks I'm saying it only to shield Ralph.

POIROT: Do not trouble yourself so, mademoiselle. The truth will come out. It always does.

BLUNT: Nearly lunch time. We'd better be getting back to the house.

FLORA: You'll lunch with us, Monsieur Poirot? I should like you to meet Mother. She's very fond of Ralph.

POIROT: I shall be delighted to join you momentarily.

(Blunt and Flora exit to the house. Poirot watches them leave before exploring the garden house. He crosses to the edge and picks up a small goose quill. He smells it and examines it before putting it in his pocket. He resumes his exploration and discovers a second object: a small scrap of white cloth. As he is studying it closely, Sheppard appears.)

SHEPPARD: Well, the shoes and the footmarks are indeed an exact match.

POIROT: Just as our inspector suspected.

(Poirot holds up the scrap of material for Sheppard to see. Sheppard takes the scrap.)

SHEPPARD: *(Indicating scrap of material.)* Discover something interesting?

POIROT: What do you make of it, mon ami?

SHEPPARD: A scrap of white cambric. Torn from a handkerchief?

POIROT: Perhaps you are right. *(Takes back the scrap of material.)* But a good laundry does not starch a handkerchief.

SHEPPARD: Came upon something of my own.

POIROT: Did you, now?

SHEPPARD: Caught a glint of it on my way down here from the house. *(Produces a small gold ring and hands it to Poirot, who inspects it carefully.)* A woman's wedding ring.

POIROT: *(Reading the inscription inside the ring.)* "From R. 13 March."

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(Poirot and Sheppard exchange looks as the lights dim in the garden area and come up in the drawing room, where Mrs. Ackroyd, Raglan, and Raymond are gathered.)

MRS. ACKROYD: *(To Raglan.)* I don't understand that Mr. Hammond in the least. Why can he not tell us the terms of the will simply without all the legal phraseology?

RAGLAN: I don't believe Mr. Hammond intentionally strove for confusion, Mrs. Ackroyd. Your daughter seemed to understand perfectly.

MRS. ACKROYD: Well, then, lay it out for me one more time, won't you? And no legal terms this time round.

RAYMOND: *(To Raglan.)* Permit me, sir. *(From will, reads.)* "A thousand pounds to his housekeeper, Miss Russell; 50 pounds to the cook, Emma Cooper; 500 pounds to his secretary, Mr. Geoffrey Raymond. Then to various hospitals—"

MRS. ACKROYD: The charitable bequests are of no interest, Mr. Raymond.

(Sheppard and Poirot enter the center hall, cross to the archway, and head into the drawing room.)

RAYMOND: *(From will, reads.)* "The income on 10,000 pounds worth of shares to be paid to Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd during her lifetime. Miss Flora Ackroyd inherits 20,000 pounds outright. The residue—including this property and the shares in Ackroyd and Son—to his adopted son, Ralph Paton."

MRS. ACKROYD: Mr. Roger Ackroyd possessed a large fortune.

RAGLAN: A very large fortune. Captain Paton will be an exceedingly wealthy young man.

POIROT: If only we might locate him, hmmm?

RAGLAN: Poirot! I've been waiting for you. Might I visit with you for a few moments?

POIROT: Mais oui, monsieur.

RAGLAN: Let us go into the study, shall we?

POIROT: Very good.

(Raglan and Poirot exit the drawing room and head into the study. Sheppard enters the drawing room.)

RAYMOND: Just reviewing the terms of the will, Dr. Sheppard. *(To Mrs. Ackroyd.)* Do you now understand, madame?

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MRS. ACKROYD: Yes, I suppose so, but I can't help feeling a little hurt. Hurt, I mean, by Roger's lack of confidence in me. That 20,000 pounds ought to have been left to *me*, not to Flora. A mother could be trusted to safeguard the interests of her child. A lack of trust, I call it.

SHEPPARD: You forget, Mrs. Ackroyd, Flora was Roger's own niece, a blood relation. It would have been different had you been his sister instead of his sister-in-law.

MRS. ACKROYD: As poor Cecil's widow, I think my feelings ought to have been considered, but Roger was always most peculiar about money matters. It has been a most difficult position for both Flora and myself. He did not even give the poor child an allowance. He'd pay her bills, you know, but with a great deal of reluctance. Flora resented it very strongly, though devoted to her uncle, of course. And then, to leave all that money—a thousand pounds—to that woman!

SHEPPARD: What woman?

(Poirot and Raglan exit the study and move to the drawing room.)

MRS. ACKROYD: That Russell woman...something very strange about her, so I've always said. But Roger wouldn't hear a word against her. Said she was a woman of great force of character and that he admired and respected her. She was certainly doing her best to marry Roger. But I soon put a stop to that. She always hated me. Naturally, I saw through her.

RAGLAN: An inquest is in order, Mrs. Ackroyd, say Monday, day after tomorrow?

MRS. ACKROYD: Inquest? Is that really necessary?

RAGLAN: Afraid so, under the circumstances.

MRS. ACKROYD: But, surely, Dr. Sheppard can arrange—

SHEPPARD: There are limits to my powers of arrangement.

MRS. ACKROYD: But if his death was an accident—

POIROT: Monsieur Ackroyd was murdered, mademoiselle.

RAGLAN: No theory of accident will hold water for a second. I really don't think there is anything to dread, Mrs. Ackroyd. You will be spared all the unpleasantness. Now, as to the question of money, have you all you need for the present? I mean, ready money. Cash, you know. If not, I can arrange to let you have whatever you need.

RAYMOND: Mr. Ackroyd cashed a check for a hundred pounds yesterday.

RAGLAN: A hundred pounds?

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RAYMOND: Yes, for wages and other expenses due today. I saw him put it away last night just before dinner. At the moment, it is still intact.

RAGLAN: Where is this money...in his desk in the study?

RAYMOND: No, he always kept his cash in the bedroom in an old collar box.

RAGLAN: I think, perhaps, we ought to make sure the money is still there before I leave.

RAYMOND: Of course. This way, Inspector.

(Raymond leads Raglan out SR and up the stairwell outside of Ackroyd's study.)

MRS. ACKROYD: Oh, dear! My poor nerves! I am a wreck this morning, a positive wreck. Such a dreadful thing to happen. I can't help feeling that it must have been an accident of some kind. Roger was so fond of handling odd curios. His hand must have slipped or something.

POIROT: I am afraid it was no accident, mademoiselle.

MRS. ACKROYD: But why would anyone want to harm poor Roger?

POIROT: Why, indeed? That is the reason we are here.

MRS. ACKROYD: I can't help thinking of dear Cecil now. It upsets me so. First him and now his brother. Well, perhaps they are together.

POIROT: Perhaps so.

(Raymond and Raglan have descended from Ackroyd's bedroom and enter the drawing room.)

RAYMOND: *(To others, anxiously.)* It's gone!

SHEPPARD: What?

RAGLAN: The hundred pounds.

RAYMOND: I can't understand it.

POIROT: You personally saw Mr. Ackroyd put this money away last night when he was dressing for dinner? You're sure he had not spent it already?

RAYMOND: I'm certain. He even said, "I don't want to take a hundred pounds down to dinner with me. Too bulgy."

POIROT: Then the affair is very simple: either he paid out the money sometime last evening, or it has been stolen.

RAGLAN: *(To Mrs. Ackroyd.)* Which of the servants would have gone into Ackroyd's room yesterday evening?

MRS. ACKROYD: I suppose the housemaid would turn down the bed.

RAGLAN: Who is she? What do you know about her?

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MRS. ACKROYD: She's not been here very long. But she's a nice, ordinary, country girl.
RAGLAN: The other servants are all right as far as you know?
MRS. ACKROYD: Oh, I think so.
RAGLAN: Never missed anything before?
MRS. ACKROYD: No.
RAGLAN: None of them leaving or anything like that?
MRS. ACKROYD: The parlor maid is leaving.
RAGLAN: When?
MRS. ACKROYD: She gave notice yesterday, I believe.
RAGLAN: To you?
MRS. ACKROYD: Oh, no. I have nothing to do with the servants. Miss Russell attends to the household matters.
RAGLAN: I think I'd like to have a talk with Miss Russell.
RAYMOND: I'll get her. She's in the kitchen, I believe. *(Exits.)*
POIROT: *(To Mrs. Ackroyd.)* Miss Russell...she has been here how long?
MRS. ACKROYD: About five years, I'd say. Thinks she runs the place, too. She's always hated me. Blames me for interfering with her plans to reel in Roger.
POIROT: Reel him in?
MRS. ACKROYD: Quite apparent to me. But I put a stop to that, you can be sure.

(Miss Russell enters, followed by Raymond.)

MISS RUSSELL: *(To Raglan.)* Mr. Raymond said you wished to speak with me?
RAGLAN: Yes, Miss Russell. Can you tell us the character of Fernly's parlor maid?
MISS RUSSELL: A most superior girl. Ursula Bourne. Very quiet and ladylike. An excellent worker.
RAGLAN: Then why is she leaving?
MISS RUSSELL: Perhaps you should ask her yourself.

(Poirot nods to Raymond, indicating he should find Ursula. Raymond nods and exits.)

RAGLAN: Perhaps so. You know nothing about the situation?
MISS RUSSELL: It was none of my doing. I understand Mr. Ackroyd found fault with her yesterday afternoon. It was her day to do the study, and she messed some of the papers on his desk, I believe. He

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was very annoyed about it, and she gave notice. At least, that's what I understood from her.

(Looking anxious, Ursula enters without Raymond.)

POIROT: Ah, mademoiselle! Merci. You are Ursula Bourne?

URSULA: Yes, sir.

POIROT: I understand you are leaving?

URSULA: Yes, sir.

POIROT: And why is that?

URSULA: I disarranged some papers on Mr. Ackroyd's desk. He was very angry about it. I said I had better leave. He told me to go as soon as possible.

RAGLAN: Were you in Mr. Ackroyd's bedroom at all last night...tidying up or anything?

URSULA: No, sir. That is Elsie's work. I never went near that part of the house.

RAGLAN: I must tell you, my girl, that a large sum of money is missing from Mr. Ackroyd's room.

URSULA: I know nothing about any money. If you think I took it, and that that is why Mr. Ackroyd dismissed me, you are wrong.

POIROT: You are not being accused of taking it, mademoiselle.

URSULA: You can search my things, if you like. But you won't find anything.

POIROT: It was yesterday afternoon when Mr. Ackroyd dismissed you, or you dismissed yourself, was it not? *(Ursula nods.)* How long did the encounter last?

URSULA: The encounter?

POIROT: The encounter between you and Mr. Ackroyd.

URSULA: Twenty minutes, I suppose.

POIROT: No longer?

URSULA: No longer than half an hour, certainly.

POIROT: Merci, mademoiselle.

RAGLAN: That'll do, Miss Bourne. *(Ursula exits. To Miss Russell.)*

Where did Miss Bourne come from prior to arriving at Fernly?

MISS RUSSELL: Marby Grange. A Mrs. Richard Folliott. Excellent reference.

(Parker enters.)

PARKER: Excuse the interruption. Dinner is ready.

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RAGLAN: Thank you, Mr. Parker. Afraid I shan't be joining you this afternoon. I must return to headquarters.

MRS. AKROYD: What of you, Monsieur Poirot? Dr. Sheppard?

POIROT: Of course! Always the time for a little nourishment, n'est-ce pas?

MRS. AKROYD: Excellent! Perhaps my spirits can be raised a bit.

(All exit through the upstage arch, except Poirot, who grabs Sheppard by the elbow and pulls him back into the room.)

POIROT: Tell me, Monsieur le Docteur, what did you think of that girl?

SHEPPARD: Which girl? The parlor maid?

POIROT: Yes. The parlor maid, Ursula Bourne.

SHEPPARD: She seemed a nice girl.

POIROT: She *seemed* a nice girl, yes. Tell me, Doctor, do you really wish to aid me...to take part in this investigation?

SHEPPARD: Yes, indeed. There's nothing I should like better. You don't know what a dull old fogey's life I lead. Reduced to tinkering about with alarm clocks and doorbells. Never anything out of the ordinary.

POIROT: Bon. We will be colleagues, then. Now, where exactly is Marby Grange?

SHEPPARD: It's on the other side of Cranchester.

POIROT: How far away?

SHEPPARD: Oh, 14 miles perhaps.

POIROT: And would it be possible for you to go there? Tomorrow, say?

SHEPPARD: Tomorrow? Let's see...that's Sunday. Yes, I could arrange it. What do you want me to do there?

POIROT: See this Mrs. Folliott. Find out all you can about Ursula Bourne.

SHEPPARD: Very well, but I don't much care for the job.

POIROT: A man's life may hang in the balance.

SHEPPARD: Poor Ralph. You believe him to be innocent, though?

POIROT: You want the truth?

SHEPPARD: Of course.

POIROT: Then, mon ami, you shall have it. Everything points to the assumption that he is guilty.

SHEPPARD: What?!

POIROT: Oui. That stupid inspector has everything pointing Ralph's way. But I seek the truth, and the truth leads me every time to Ralph Paton: motive, opportunity, means. But I will leave no stone unturned. I promised Mademoiselle Flora. And she was very sure, that little one. But, come. Bon appétit!

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(Poirot and Sheppard exit as the lights fade on Fernly Park. Lights up in Sheppard's workroom, where Caroline is on the phone.)

CAROLINE: *(Into phone.)* Yes, that funny little man I told you about earlier...Poirot, Margaret. It's Poirot...Well, he wanted to see me...Yes, me, not the doctor...No, he wasn't here, just me and the little detective. Quite intriguing, actually. And do you know he brought me another squash?...Oh, I don't know. You know James. Said he had to go off to Marby Grange for some reason or other...Well, I suppose it relates to the case, but I didn't— *(Hears Sheppard approaching.)* Oh, there he is now. I must go. James gets quite irritable when I'm on the telly too much...Yes. Goodbye. Oh, and Margaret? Do put in a good word for me at church, won't you? *(Hangs up.)*

SHEPPARD: Good afternoon, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Well, quite an interesting afternoon, I should say.

SHEPPARD: Oh? Miss Gannett drop in for tea?

CAROLINE: *(With great relish.)* Monsieur Hercule Poirot!

SHEPPARD: Poirot? What did he want?

CAROLINE: To see me, of course. He said that knowing my brother so well, he hoped he might be permitted to make the acquaintance of his charming sister, *your* charming sister, *me*.

POIROT: What did he talk about?

CAROLINE: He talked a lot about the little grey cells of the brain and of their functions. His own, he says, are of first quality.

SHEPPARD: He would say so. Modesty is certainly not his middle name.

CAROLINE: You seem very grumpy, James. It must be your liver. A blue pill, I think, tonight.

SHEPPARD: Has the irony ever occurred to you, my dear sister, that I, a doctor of medicine, am prescribed drugs and treatment by none other than yourself?

CAROLINE: Perhaps a blue pill *and* a red one.

SHEPPARD: Did you talk about the murder at all?

CAROLINE: Well, naturally, James. What else is there to talk about? I was able to set Monsieur Poirot straight upon several points. He was very grateful. He said I had the makings of a born detective in me and a wonderful psychological insight into human nature.

SHEPPARD: A born detective?

CAROLINE: And he thought it very important that Ralph should be found as soon as possible and induced to come forward and give an account of himself. He says that his disappearance will produce a very unfortunate impression at the inquest tomorrow morning.

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SHEPPARD: Caroline, did you tell Poirot what you overheard in the wood that day?

CAROLINE: I did.

SHEPPARD: You realize what you're doing, I hope? You're putting a halter round Ralph Paton's neck as surely as you're sitting in that chair.

CAROLINE: Not at all. I don't believe Ralph did it, and so the truth can't hurt him, and we ought to provide Monsieur Poirot all the help we can. Why, think, very likely Ralph was out with that identical girl on the night of the murder, and if so, he's got a perfect alibi.

SHEPPARD: Then why doesn't he come forward and say so?

CAROLINE: Might get the girl into trouble.

SHEPPARD: Did Poirot ask you any more questions?

CAROLINE: Only about the patients you had that morning.

SHEPPARD: My patients?

CAROLINE: Yes. That steward fellow, and that boy from the farm with the bad finger, and George Evans with his ulcer. *(Slight pause.)* And of course, Miss Russell.

SHEPPARD: Miss Russell?

CAROLINE: Yes, James. And monsieur was most intrigued.

SHEPPARD: Intrigued with what? Why shouldn't Miss Russell consult me about her bad knee?

CAROLINE: Bad knee? Fiddlesticks! No more bad knee than you or I. She was after something else, and Monsieur Poirot thought so, too.

SHEPPARD: Did he, now?

CAROLINE: Something fishy about that woman...

SHEPPARD: Precisely the remark Mrs. Ackroyd made to me yesterday...that there was something fishy about Miss Russell.

CAROLINE: Ah! Mrs. Ackroyd. There's another!

SHEPPARD: Another what?

CAROLINE: Really, James. Come in now. Time for dinner. I'm tired of all this gossip.

(Caroline exits as Sheppard stares after her, contemplating.)

SHEPPARD: *(To audience.)* The joint inquest was held the next morning, a Monday. Little new information of any great significance was presented. I gave evidence as to the cause of Ackroyd's death and probable time. Inspector Raglan displayed various enlarged photographs of the fingerprints on the dagger, none of which corresponded to any member of the household. Two suspects remained, according to the Inspector. The first was Ralph Paton, whom the Inspector had spotted several times in and around

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Cranchester, nine miles from King's Abbott. The second was the mysterious stranger I had encountered as I left Fernly Park that night. Poirot then added a third after the inquest had been completed. The fingerprints on the dagger belonged to Ackroyd himself, planted there by the murderer after the blow was struck. Wearing gloves, he picked up the victim's hand and closed it round the dagger handle. A plausible theory, which seemed to catch Inspector Raglan off guard. Thirty minutes after the inquest concluded, Monsieur Poirot called for, as he put it, a "little reunion" of the family.

(Lights fade on the workroom. Lights up in the drawing room at Fernly, where Flora, Major Blunt, and Mrs. Ackroyd have gathered. Parker is serving tea.)

MRS. ACKROYD: *(Declining.)* No, Parker. I'm too upset right now.
(Changing her mind.) Well, yes. Perhaps it'll help, after all.

(Parker pours Mrs. Ackroyd a cup of tea.)

FLORA: Where's Dr. Sheppard? Is he to attend? And Monsieur Poirot?

(Poirot enters.)

POIROT: Is present, mademoiselle. Excusez-moi, a small bit of business to attend to.

MRS. ACKROYD: Exactly what is it we're to accomplish here, Mr. Poirot?

POIROT: Patience, madame. All shall soon be revealed.

PARKER: Tea, sir?

POIROT: No. Merci, monsieur. *(Doorbell. Parker exits.)* Ah, perhaps our friend, the good doctor, has arrived.

FLORA: Is that horrid inspector attending as well?

POIROT: Non, mademoiselle. Monsieur Raglan returned to headquarters after the inquest concluded.

(Sheppard enters the drawing room, accompanied by Raymond.)

RAYMOND: Not too late to join the party, I hope?

POIROT: *(Motioning for Sheppard and Raymond to have a seat.)* S'il vous plaît. *(Raymond and Sheppard sit.)* Mesdames, messieurs, I have called you together for a certain purpose. To begin with, I want to make a very special plea to mademoiselle.

FLORA: To me?

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POIROT: Mademoiselle, you are engaged to Captain Ralph Paton. If anyone is in his confidence, you are. I beg you, most earnestly, if you know of his whereabouts, to persuade him to come forward. (*Flora starts to speak.*) Say nothing until you have well reflected. Mademoiselle, daily his position grows more dangerous. The Captain's description has been wired to every port and railway station in England. Police everywhere are on the alert. If he had come forward at once, no matter how damning the facts, he might have had a chance of explaining them away. But this silence—this flight—what can it mean? Miss Flora, if you really believe in his innocence, persuade him to come forward before it is too late.

FLORA: (*To herself, softly.*) Too late.

POIROT: See now, mademoiselle, I would not seek to entrap you. Will you not trust me and tell me where Ralph Paton is hiding?

FLORA: Monsieur Poirot, I swear to you that I have no idea where Ralph is and that I have neither seen him nor heard from him either on the day of...of the murder, or since.

POIROT: Bien! That is that. Now, I appeal to the others who are gathered in this room: Mrs. Ackroyd, Major Blunt, Dr. Sheppard, Mr. Raymond. You are all friends and intimates of the missing man. If you know where Ralph Paton is hiding, speak out.

(*Pause.*)

MRS. ACKROYD: I must say that Ralph's absence is most peculiar, not to come forward at such a time. It looks, you know, as though there was something behind it. I can't help thinking, Flora, dear, that it was a very fortunate thing your engagement was never formally announced.

FLORA: Mother!

MRS. ACKROYD: Providence! I have a devout belief in Providence, a divinity that shapes our ends. You have been saved a terrible amount of notoriety and unpleasantness. Not for a moment do I think dear Ralph had anything to do with poor Roger's death. But, then, I have a trusting heart; I've always had. But, of course, one must remember that Ralph was in several air raids as a young boy. The results are sometimes apparent long after, they say. People are not responsible for their actions in the least. They lose control, you know, without being able to help it.

FLORA: Mother, you don't think Ralph did it?!

BLUNT: Come, Mrs. Ackroyd.

MRS. ACKROYD: I don't know what to think. It's all very upsetting. What would happen to the estate, I wonder, if Ralph were found

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guilty? I daresay, Roger kept him very short of money...with the best intentions, of course. I can see you are all against me, but I do think it is very odd that Ralph has not come forward, and I must say, I am thankful Flora's engagement was never formally announced.

FLORA: It will be tomorrow.

MRS. ACKROYD: Flora!

FLORA: *(To Raymond.)* Will you send the announcement to "The Morning Post"? And to "The Times," please, Mr. Raymond?

RAYMOND: If you are sure that is wise, Miss Ackroyd.

FLORA: What else can I do? As things are, I must stand by Ralph. Don't you see that I must?

RAYMOND: We appreciate your motives, Miss Ackroyd, but don't you think you're being rather precipitate? Wait a day or two.

FLORA: Tomorrow. It's no good, Mother, going on like this. Whatever else I am, I'm not disloyal to my friends.

MRS. ACKROYD: Mr. Poirot, can't you say anything at all?

BLUNT: Nothing to be said. She's doing the right thing.

FLORA: Thank you, Major.

POIROT: Mademoiselle, will you allow an old man to congratulate you on your courage and your loyalty? And will you not misunderstand me if I ask you to postpone the announcement you speak of for at least two more days? *(Slight pause.)* I ask it in Ralph Paton's interests as much as in yours. You have put the case in my hands. You must not hamper me now.

(Pause.)

FLORA: I shall do what you ask.

POIROT: Merci. And now, mesdames et messieurs, I will continue with what I have to say. Understand this: I mean to arrive at the truth. The truth, however ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to the seeker. I am much aged; my powers may not be what they were. In all probability, this is the last case I shall ever investigate. But Hercule Poirot does not end with a failure. I tell you, I mean to know. And I shall know, in spite of you all.

RAYMOND: What do you mean, "in spite of us all"?

POIROT: Just that, monsieur. Every one of you in this room is concealing something from me. It may be something unimportant, something trivial, which is supposed to have no bearing on the case, but there it is. Each one of you has something to hide. Come now, am I right? *(Silence.)* I am answered. I appeal to you all: Tell me the truth, the

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whole truth. *(Silence.)* Will no one speak? *(Silence.)* Ah. C'est dommage.

(Poirot exits. Mrs. Ackroyd, Flora, Blunt, Sheppard, and Raymond remain, anxiously looking at each other. Lights fade slowly. Curtain. Intermission.)

[END OF FREEVIEW]