

CAROLINE

A blue pill for you tonight, surely. Let me get it.

SHEPPARD

Wait. Is that all you talked about? You didn't talk about the murder?

CAROLINE

Of course we talked about it. I was able to set M. Poirot right upon several points, for which he was very grateful. He said I had the makings of a born detective in me—

SHEPPARD

Yes, he does that.

CAROLINE

I wish you would not be so horribly American, James. 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.

SHEPPARD

Caroline. Did you tell M. Poirot what you overheard in the wood that day?

CAROLINE

I did.

SHEPPARD

Caroline -

CAROLINE

Honestly, I'm surprised /

SHEPPARD

You know what -

CAROLINE

/ you hadn't.

SHEPPARD

You know what you've done? You're putting a halter round Ralph Paton's neck as surely as you're sitting in that chair.

CAROLINE

I have not.

SHEPPARD

Did Poirot ask you any other questions?

CAROLINE

Only about the patients you had that morning.

SHEPPARD
My patients?

CAROLINE
How many, /

SHEPPARD
Why would he /

CAROLINE
/ who they were...

SHEPPARD
/ be interested -

CAROLINE
And I told him about Miss Russell coming to see you. He was very interested in that.

SHEPPARD
Miss Russell has a knee problem.

CAROLINE
Knee problem, fiddlesticks

SHEPPARD
My patients /

CAROLINE
She was after something.

SHEPPARD
/ have a right to privacy.

CAROLINE
She was after something, James.

SHEPPARD
I let it drop. It is well at any price to have peace in the home. There was an official inquest the following day. I do not propose to give the proceedings in detail - to do so would only be to go over the same ground again and again, the absence of Ralph Paton at the proceedings caused quite a stir. My new friend was clearly frustrated.

POIROT
Any luck with Ursula Bourne's references?

SHEPPARD

The woman was not forthcoming.

POIROT

Ah, well. What do you say to a little reunion of the family?

SHEPPARD

Pardon?

POIROT

It is time we extract some truth, however ugly, and draw it into the light.

CHAPTER NINE

"The Dark"

Fernly Park Drawing Room

Mrs. Ackroyd, Blunt, and Flora sit in the drawing room at Fernly Park with Sheppard and Poirot standing center. Parker and Ursula Bournier stand near the door.

POIROT

Messieurs, mesdames, 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?

POIROT

Mademoiselle, you are engaged to Captain Ralph Paton. If any one is in his confidence, you are. I beg you, most earnestly, if you know of his whereabouts, to persuade him to come forward.

FLORA

I don't know -

POIROT

One little minute - say nothing more till you have well reflected. If you really believe in his innocence, persuade him to come forward before it is too late.

FLORA

Too late...?

POIROT

See now, mademoiselle. It is Papa Poirot who asks you this. The old Papa Poirot who has much knowledge and much experience. I would not seek to entrap you...

FLORA

(rising)

M. Poirot. I swear to you—swear solemnly—that I have no idea where Ralph is.

POIROT

Bien!

MRS. ACKROYD

Does that satisfy you?

POIROT

That is that. Now I appeal to the rest of you - Mrs. Ackroyd, Major Blunt, Dr. Sheppard.

He looks at Ursula Bourne, but does not name her.

POIROT

You are all friends and intimates of the missing man. If you know where Ralph Paton is hiding, speak out.

A long beat.

POIROT

I beg of you. Speak out.

A beat.

MRS. ACKROYD

I must say that Ralph's absence is most peculiar—most peculiar indeed. Not to come forward at such a time. 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 say.

FLORA

Stop -

MRS. ACKROYD

A divinity that shapes our ends, as Shakespeare's beautiful line runs.

FLORA

You believe him capable /

MRS. ACKROYD

My dear /

FLORA

/ of such of thing?

MRS. ACKROYD

I was only saying.

BLUNT

Is this interview concluded?

MRS. ACKROYD

It's all very upsetting. What would happen to the estate, I wonder, if Ralph were found guilty?

Blunt stands at this, disgusted.

FLORA

I will announce the engagement tomorrow!

BLUNT

Flora?

FLORA

I will send the announcement to the Morning Post and the Times.

(to Blunt)

You understand, don't you? As things are, I must stand by Ralph. Don't you see that I must?

It's obviously very painful to him, but Blunt nods.

BLUNT

I understand your motives, Miss Flora, but perhaps wait a day or two...

FLORA

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

MRS. ACKROYD

Mr. Poirot! Can you say nothing?

BLUNT

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

She reaches for Blunt's hand for comfort.

FLORA

Thank you, Major Blunt.

POIROT

Mademoiselle. Will you let an old man congratulate you on your courage and your loyalty? And will you not misunderstand me if I ask you—ask you most solemnly—to postpone the announcement you speak of for at least two days more?