

Agatha Christie



# the pale horse

'The acknowledged queen of detective fiction.'

*Observer*

## The Pale Horse

Agatha Christie is known throughout the world as the Queen of Crime. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English with another billion in 100 foreign languages. She is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. She is the author of 80 crime novels and short stories, 14 plays, and six novels written under the name of Mary Westmacott.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was written towards the end of the First World War, in which she served as a VAD. In it she created Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian detective who was destined to become the most popular detective in crime-fiction since Sherlock Holmes. It was eventually published by The Bodley Head in 1920.

In 1926, after a long and successful career, Agatha Christie wrote her masterpiece. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was the first of her books to be published by Collins and marked the beginning of an author-publisher relationship which lasted for 50 years and well over 70 books. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was also the first of Agatha Christie's books to be dramatised – under the name *Alibi* – and to have a successful run in London's West End. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play of all, opened in 1952 and is the longest-running play in history.

Agatha Christie was made a Dame in 1971. She died in 1976, since when a number of books have been published posthumously: the bestselling novel *Sleeping Murder* appeared later that year, followed by her autobiography and the short story collections *Miss Marple's Final Cases*, *Problem at Pollensa Bay* and *While the Light Lasts*. In 1998 *Black Coffee* was the first of her plays to be novelised by another author, Charles Osborne.

## The Agatha Christie Collection

The Man In The Brown Suit  
The Secret of Chimneys  
The Seven Dials Mystery  
The Mysterious Mr Quin  
The Sittaford Mystery  
The Hound of Death  
The Listerdale Mystery  
Why Didn't They Ask Evans?  
Parker Pyne Investigates  
Murder Is Easy  
And Then There Were None  
Towards Zero  
Death Comes as the End  
Sparkling Cyanide  
Crooked House  
They Came to Baghdad  
Destination Unknown  
Spider's Web \*  
The Unexpected Guest \*  
Ordeal by Innocence  
The Pale Horse  
Endless Night  
Passenger To Frankfurt  
Problem at Pollensa Bay  
While the Light Lasts

### *Poirot*

The Mysterious Affair at Styles  
The Murder on the Links  
Poirot Investigates  
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd  
The Big Four  
The Mystery of the Blue Train  
Black Coffee \*  
Peril at End House  
Lord Edgware Dies  
Murder on the Orient Express  
Three-Act Tragedy  
Death in the Clouds  
The ABC Murders  
Murder in Mesopotamia  
Cards on the Table  
Murder in the Mews  
Dumb Witness  
Death on the Nile  
Appointment With Death  
Hercule Poirot's Christmas  
Sad Cypress  
One, Two, Buckle My Shoe  
Evil Under the Sun  
Five Little Pigs

\* novelised by Charles Osborne

The Hollow  
The Labours of Hercules  
Taken at the Flood  
Mrs McGinty's Dead  
After the Funeral  
Hickory Dickory Dock  
Dead Man's Folly  
Cat Among the Pigeons  
The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding  
The Clocks  
Third Girl  
Hallowe'en Party  
Elephants Can Remember  
Poirot's Early Cases  
Curtain: Poirot's Last Case

### *Marple*

The Murder at the Vicarage  
The Thirteen Problems  
The Body in the Library  
The Moving Finger  
A Murder is Announced  
They Do It With Mirrors  
A Pocket Full of Rye  
The 4.50 from Paddington  
The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side  
A Caribbean Mystery  
At Bertram's Hotel  
Nemesis  
Sleeping Murder  
Miss Marple's Final Cases  
*Tommy & Tuppence*  
The Secret Adversary  
Partners in Crime  
N or M?  
By the Pricking of My Thumbs  
Postern of Fate

### *Published as Mary Westmacott*

Giant's Bread  
Unfinished Portrait  
Absent in the Spring  
The Rose and the Yew Tree  
A Daughter's a Daughter  
The Burden

### *Memoirs*

An Autobiography  
Come, Tell Me How You Live

### *Play Collections*

The Mousetrap and Selected Plays  
Witness for the Prosecution and  
Selected Plays

*Agatha Christie*

## **The Pale Horse**

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To John and Helen Mildmay White  
with many thanks for the opportunity  
given me to see justice done



## **Foreword**

**by Mark Easterbrook**

There are two methods, it seems to me, of approaching this strange business of the Pale Horse. In spite of the dictum of the White King, it is difficult to achieve simplicity. One cannot, that is to say, 'Begin at the beginning, go on to the end, and then stop.' For where is the beginning?

To a historian, that always is the difficulty. At what point in history does one particular portion of history begin.

In this case, you can begin at the moment when Father Gorman set forth from his presbytery to visit a dying woman. Or you can start before that, on a certain evening in Chelsea.

Perhaps, since I am writing the greater part of this narrative myself, it is there that I should begin.





## **Chapter 1**

### **Mark Easterbrook's Narrative**

#### **I**

The Espresso machine behind my shoulder hissed like an angry snake. The noise it made had a sinister, not to say devilish, suggestion about it. Perhaps, I reflected, most of our contemporary noises carry that implication. The intimidating angry scream of jet planes as they flash across the sky; the slow menacing rumble of a tube train approaching through its tunnel; the heavy road transport that shakes the very foundations of your house . . . Even the minor domestic noises of today, beneficial in action though they may be, yet carry a kind of alert. The dish-washers, the refrigerators, the pressure cookers, the whining vacuum cleaners – ‘Be careful,’ they all seem to say. ‘I am a genie harnessed to your service, but if your control of me fails . . .’

A dangerous world – that was it, a dangerous world.

I stirred the foaming cup placed in front of me. It smelt pleasant.

## Agatha Christie

‘What else will you have? Nice banana and bacon sandwich?’

It seemed an odd juxtaposition to me. Bananas I connected with my childhood – or occasionally *flambé* with sugar and rum. Bacon, in my mind, was firmly associated with eggs. However, when in Chelsea, eat as Chelsea does. I agreed to a nice banana and bacon sandwich.

Although I lived in Chelsea – that is to say, I had had a furnished flat there for the last three months – I was in every other way a stranger in these parts. I was writing a book on certain aspects of Mogul architecture, but for that purpose I could have lived in Hampstead or Bloomsbury or Streatham or Chelsea and it would have been all the same to me. I was oblivious of my surroundings except for the tools of my trade, and the neighbourhood in which I lived was completely indifferent to me, I existed in a world of my own.

On this particular evening, however, I had suffered from one of those sudden revulsions that all writers know.

Mogul architecture, Mogul Emperors, the Mogul way of life – and all the fascinating problems it raised, became suddenly as dust and ashes. What did they matter? Why did I want to write about them?

I flicked back various pages, rereading what I had

written. It all seemed to me uniformly bad – poorly written and singularly devoid of interest. Whoever had said ‘History is bunk’ (Henry Ford?) had been absolutely right.

I pushed back my manuscript with loathing, got up and looked at my watch. The time was close on eleven p.m. I tried to remember if I had had dinner . . . From my inner sensations I thought not. Lunch, yes, at the Athenaeum. That was a long time ago.

I went and looked into the refrigerator. There was a small remnant of desiccated tongue. I looked at it without favour. So it was that I wandered out into the King’s Road, and eventually turned into an Espresso Coffee Bar with the name Luigi written in red neon light across its window, and was now contemplating a bacon and banana sandwich whilst I reflected on the sinister implications of present-day noises and their atmospheric effects.

All of them, I thought, had something in common with my early memories of pantomime. Davy Jones arriving from his locker in clouds of smoke! Trap doors and windows that exuded the infernal powers of evil, challenging and defying a Good Fairy Diamond, or some such name, who in turn waved an inadequate-looking wand and recited hopeful platitudes as to the ultimate triumph of good in a flat voice, thus prefacing the inevitable ‘song of the moment’ which

## Agatha Christie

never had anything to do with the story of that particular pantomime.

It came to me suddenly that evil was, perhaps, necessarily always more impressive than good. It *had* to make a show! It had to startle and challenge! It was instability attacking stability. And in the end, I thought, stability will always win. Stability can survive the triteness of Good Fairy Diamond; the flat voice, the rhymed couplet, even the irrelevant vocal statement of 'There's a Winding Road runs down the Hill, To the Olde World Town I love.' All very poor weapons it would seem, and yet those weapons would inevitably prevail. The pantomime would end in the way it always ended. The staircase, and the descending cast in order of seniority, with Good Fairy Diamond, practising the Christian virtue of humility and not seeking to be first (or, in this case, last) but arriving about half-way through the procession, side by side with her late opponent, now seen to be no longer the snarling Demon King breathing fire and brimstone, but just a man dressed up in red tights.

The Espresso hissed again in my ear. I signalled for another cup of coffee and looked around me. A sister of mine was always accusing me of not being observant, not noticing what was going on. 'You live in a world of your own,' she would say accusingly. Now, with a feeling of conscious virtue, I took note of what was

going on. It was almost impossible not to read about the coffee bars of Chelsea and their patrons every day in the newspapers; this was my chance to make my own appraisal of contemporary life.

It was rather dark in the Espresso, so you could not see very clearly. The clientele were almost all young people. They were, I supposed vaguely, what was called the off-beat generation. The girls looked, as girls always did look to me nowadays, dirty. They also seemed to be much too warmly dressed. I had noticed that when I had gone out a few weeks ago to dine with some friends. The girl who had sat next to me had been about twenty. The restaurant was hot, but she had worn a yellow wool pullover, a black skirt and black woollen stockings, and the perspiration poured down her face all through the meal. She smelt of perspiration-soaked wool and also, strongly, of unwashed hair. She was said, according to my friends, to be very attractive. Not to me! My only reaction was a yearning to throw her into a hot bath, give her a cake of soap and urge her to get on with it! Which just showed, I suppose, how out of touch with the times I was. Perhaps it came of having lived abroad so much. I recalled with pleasure Indian women with their beautifully-coiled black hair, and their saris of pure bright colours hanging in graceful folds, and the rhythmic sway of their bodies as they walked . . .

## *Agatha Christie*

I was recalled from these pleasant thoughts by a sudden accentuation of noise. Two young women at the table next to me had started a quarrel. The young men who were with them tried to adjust things, but without avail.

Suddenly they were screaming at each other. One girl slapped the other's face, the second dragged the first from her chair. They fought each other like fishwives, screaming abuse hysterically. One was a tousled red-head, the other a lank-haired blonde.

What the quarrel was about, apart from terms of abuse, I did not gather. Cries and catcalls arose from other tables.

'Attagirl! Sock her, Lou!'

The proprietor behind the bar, a slim Italian-looking fellow with sideburns, whom I had taken to be Luigi, came to intervene in a voice that was pure cockney London.

'Nah then – break it up – break it up – You'll 'ave the whole street in in a minute. You'll 'ave the coppers here. Stop it, I say.'

But the lank blonde had the red-head by the hair and was tugging furiously as she screamed:

'You're nothing but a man-stealing bitch!'

'Bitch yourself.'

Luigi and the two embarrassed escorts forced the girls apart. In the blonde's fingers were large tufts of

red hair. She held them aloft gleefully, then dropped them on the floor.

The door from the street was pushed open and Authority, dressed in blue, stood on the threshold and uttered the regulation words majestically.

‘What’s going on here?’

Immediately a common front was presented to the enemy.

‘Just a bit of fun,’ said one of the young men.

‘That’s all,’ said Luigi. ‘Just a bit of fun among friends.’

With his foot he kicked the tufts of hair adroitly under the nearest table. The contestants smiled at each other in false amnesty.

The policeman looked at everybody suspiciously.

‘We’re just going now,’ said the blonde sweetly. ‘Come on, Doug.’

By a coincidence several other people were just going. Authority watched them go grimly. His eye said that he was overlooking it *this* time, but he’d got his eye on them. He withdrew slowly.

The red-head’s escort paid the check.

‘You all right?’ said Luigi to the girl who was adjusting a headscarf. ‘Lou served you pretty bad, tearing out your hair by the roots like that.’

‘It didn’t hurt,’ said the girl nonchalantly. She smiled at him. ‘Sorry for the row, Luigi.’



## Agatha Christie

The party went out. The bar was now practically empty. I felt in my pocket for change.

‘She’s a sport all right,’ said Luigi approvingly watching the door close. He seized a floor brush and swept the tufts of red hair behind the counter.

‘It must have been agony,’ I said.

‘I’d have hollered if it had been me,’ admitted Luigi. ‘But she’s a real sport, Tommy is.’

‘You know her well?’

‘Oh, she’s in here most evenings. Tuckerton, that’s her name, Thomasina Tuckerton, if you want the whole set out. But Tommy Tucker’s what she’s called round here. Stinking rich, too. Her old man left her a fortune, and what does she go and do? Comes to Chelsea, lives in a slummy room half-way to Wandsworth Bridge, and mooches around with a gang all doing the same thing. Beats me, half of that crowd’s got money. Could have any mortal thing they want; stay at the Ritz if they liked. But they seem to get a kick out of living the way they do. Yes – it beats me.’

‘It wouldn’t be your choice?’

‘Ar, I’ve got sense!’ said Luigi. ‘As it is, I just cash in.’

I rose to go and asked what the quarrel was about.

‘Oh, Tommy’s got hold of the other girl’s boy friend. He’s not worth fighting about, believe me!’

‘The other girl seemed to think he was,’ I observed.