



Agatha Christie

**the
sittaford
mystery**

'The Empress of the crime novel.'

Sunday Express

The Sittaford Mystery

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 story collections, 19 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 V.A.D. 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 averaging a book a year, 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.

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An Autobiography
Come, Tell Me How You Live

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

Agatha Christie

**The Sittaford
Mystery**

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

To M.E.M.
with whom I discussed the plot of this book,
to the alarm of those around us.

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Chapter 1

Sittaford House

Major Burnaby drew on his gum boots, buttoned his overcoat collar round his neck, took from a shelf near the door a hurricane lantern, and cautiously opened the front door of his little bungalow and peered out.

The scene that met his eyes was typical of the English countryside as depicted on Xmas cards and in old-fashioned melodramas. Everywhere was snow, deep drifts of it – no mere powdering an inch or two thick. Snow had fallen all over England for the last four days, and up here on the fringe of Dartmoor it had attained a depth of several feet. All over England householders were groaning over burst pipes, and to have a plumber friend (or even a plumber's mate) was the most coveted of all distinctions.

Up here, in the tiny village of Sittaford, at all times remote from the world, and now almost completely cut off, the rigours of winter were a very real problem.

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Major Burnaby, however, was a hardy soul. He snorted twice, grunted once, and marched resolutely out into the snow.

His destination was not far away. A few paces along a winding lane, then in at a gate, and so up a drive partially swept clear of snow to a house of some considerable size built of granite.

The door was opened by a neatly clad parlourmaid. The Major was divested of his British Warm, his gum boots and his aged scarf.

A door was flung open and he passed through it into a room which conveyed all the illusion of a transformation scene.

Although it was only half past three the curtains had been drawn, the electric lights were on and a huge fire blazed cheerfully on the hearth. Two women in afternoon frocks rose to greet the staunch old warrior.

'Splendid of you to turn out, Major Burnaby,' said the elder of the two.

'Not at all, Mrs Willett, not at all. Very good of you to ask me.' He shook hands with them both.

'Mr Garfield is coming,' went on Mrs Willett, 'and Mr Duke, and Mr Rycroft *said* he would come - but one can hardly expect him at his age in such weather. Really, it is *too* dreadful. One feels one *must* do something to keep oneself cheerful. Violet, put another log on the fire.'

The Major rose gallantly to perform this task.

‘Allow me, Miss Violet.’

He put the log expertly in the right place and returned once more to the armchair ~~his hostess~~ had indicated. Trying not to appear as though he were doing so, he cast surreptitious glances round the room. Amazing how a couple of women could alter the whole character of a room – and without doing anything very outstanding that you could put your finger on.

Sittaford House had been built ten years ago by Captain Joseph Trevelyan, R.N., on the occasion of his retirement from the Navy. He was a man of substance, and he had always had a great hankering to live on Dartmoor. He had placed his choice on the tiny hamlet of Sittaford. It was not in a valley like most of the villages and farms, but perched right on the shoulder of the moor under the shadow of Sittaford Beacon. He had purchased a large tract of ground, had built a comfortable house with its own electric light plant and an electric pump to save labour in pumping water. Then, as a speculation, he had built six small bungalows, each in its quarter acre of ground, along the lane.

The first of these, the one at his very gates, had been allotted to his old friend and crony, John Burnaby – the others had by degrees been sold, there being still a few people who from choice or necessity like to live

right out of the world. The village itself consisted of three picturesque but dilapidated cottages, a forge and a combined post office and sweet shop. The nearest town was Exhampton, six miles away, a steady descent which necessitated the sign, 'Motorists engage your lowest gear', so familiar on the Dartmoor roads.

Captain Trevelyan, as has been said, was a man of substance. In spite of this – or perhaps because of it – he was a man who was inordinately fond of money. At the end of October a house agent in Exhampton wrote to him asking if he would consider letting Sittaford House. A tenant had made inquiries concerning it, wishing to rent it for the winter.

Captain Trevelyan's first impulse was to refuse, his second to demand further information. The tenant in question proved to be a Mrs Willett, a widow with one daughter. She had recently arrived from South Africa and wanted a house on Dartmoor for the winter.

'Damn it all, the woman must be mad,' said Captain Trevelyan. 'Eh, Burnaby, don't you think so?'

Burnaby did think so, and said so as forcibly as his friend had done.

'Anyway, you don't want to let,' he said. 'Let the fool woman go somewhere else if she wants to freeze. Coming from South Africa too!'

But at this point Captain Trevelyan's money complex asserted itself. Not once in a hundred times would

you get a chance of letting your house in mid-winter. He demanded what rent the tenant was willing to pay.

An offer of twelve guineas a week clinched matters. Captain Trevelyan went into Exhampton, rented a small house on the outskirts at two guineas a week, and handed over Sittaford House to Mrs Willett, half the rent to be paid in advance.

‘A fool and her money are soon parted,’ he growled.

But Burnaby was thinking this afternoon as he scanned Mrs Willett covertly, that she did not look a fool. She was a tall woman with a rather silly manner – but her physiognomy was shrewd rather than foolish. She was inclined to overdress, had a distinct Colonial accent, and seemed perfectly content with the transaction. She was clearly very well off and that – as Burnaby had reflected more than once – really made the whole affair more odd. She was not the kind of woman one would credit with a passion for solitude.

As a neighbour she had proved almost embarrassingly friendly. Invitations to Sittaford House were rained on everybody. Captain Trevelyan was constantly urged to ‘Treat the house as though we hadn’t rented it.’ Trevelyan, however, was not fond of women. Report went that he had been jilted in his youth. He persistently refused all invitations.

Two months had passed since the installation of

the Willetts and the first wonder at their arrival had passed away.

Burnaby, naturally a silent man, continued to study his hostess, oblivious to any need for small talk. Liked to make herself out a fool, but wasn't really. So he summed up the situation. His glance shifted to Violet Willett. Pretty girl – scraggy, of course – they all were nowadays. What was the good of a woman if she didn't look like a woman? Papers said curves were coming back. About time too.

He roused himself to the necessity of conversation.

'We were afraid at first that you wouldn't be able to come,' said Mrs Willett. 'You said so, you remember. We were so pleased when you said that after all you would.'

'Friday,' said Major Burnaby, with an air of being explicit.

Mrs Willett looked puzzled.

'Friday?'

'Every Friday go to Trevelyan's. Tuesday he comes to me. Both of us done it for years.'

'Oh! I see. Of course, living so near –'

'Kind of habit.'

'But do you ~~still~~ keep it up? I mean now that he is living in Exhampton –'

'Pity to break a habit,' said Major Burnaby. 'We'd both of us miss those evenings.'

'You go in for competitions, don't you?' asked Violet. 'Acrostics and crosswords and all those things.'

Burnaby nodded.

'I do crosswords. Trevelyan ~~does acrostics~~. We each stick to our own line of country. I won three books last month in a crossword competition,' he volunteered.

'Oh! really. How nice. Were they interesting books?'

'Don't know. Haven't read them. Looked pretty hopeless.'

'It's the winning them that matters, isn't it?' said Mrs Willett vaguely.

'How do you get to Exhampton?' asked Violet. 'You haven't got a car.'

'Walk.'

'What? Not really? Six miles.'

'Good exercise. What's twelve miles? Keeps a man fit. Great thing to be fit.'

'Fancy! Twelve miles. But both you and Captain Trevelyan were great athletes, weren't you?'

'Used to go to Switzerland together. Winter sports in winter, climbing in summer. Wonderful man on ice, Trevelyan. Both too old for that sort of thing nowadays.'

'You won the Army Racquets Championship, too, didn't you?' asked Violet.

The Major blushed like a girl.

'Who told you that?' he mumbled.

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‘Captain Trevelyan.’

‘Joe should hold his tongue,’ said Burnaby. ‘He talks too much. What’s the weather like now?’

Respecting his embarrassment, Violet followed him to the window. They drew the curtain aside and looked out over the desolate scene.

‘More snow coming,’ said Burnaby. ‘A pretty heavy fall too, I should say.’

‘Oh! how thrilling,’ said Violet. ‘I do think snow is so romantic. I’ve never seen it before.’

‘It isn’t romantic when the pipes freeze, you foolish child,’ said her mother.

‘Have you lived all your life in South Africa, Miss Willett?’ asked Major Burnaby.

Some of the girl’s animation dropped away from her. She seemed almost constrained in her manner as she answered.

‘Yes – this is the first time I’ve ever been away. It’s all most frightfully thrilling.’

Thrilling to be shut away like this in a remote moorland village? Funny ideas. He couldn’t get the hang of these people.

The door opened and the parlourmaid announced:

‘Mr Rycroft and Mr Garfield.’

There entered a little elderly, dried-up man and a fresh-coloured, boyish young man. The latter spoke first.

'I brought him along, Mrs Willett. Said I wouldn't let him be buried in a snowdrift. Ha, ha. I say, this all looks simply marvellous. Yule logs burning.'

'As he says, my young friend very kindly piloted me here,' said Mr Rycroft as he shook hands somewhat ceremoniously. 'How do you do, Miss Violet? Very seasonable weather – rather too seasonable, I fear.'

He moved to the fire talking to Mrs Willett. Ronald Garfield buttonholed Violet.

'I say, can't we get up any skating anywhere? Aren't there some ponds about?'

'I think path digging will be your only sport.'

'I've been at it all the morning.'

'Oh! you he-man.'

'Don't laugh at me. I've got blisters all over my hands.'

'How's your aunt?'

'Oh! she's always the same – sometimes she says she's better and sometimes she says she's worse, but I think it's all the same really. It's a ghastly life, you know. Each year, I wonder how I can stick it – but there it is – if one doesn't rally round the old bird for Xmas – why, she's quite capable of leaving her money to a Cat's Home. She's got five of them, you know. I'm always stroking the brutes and pretending I dote upon them.'

'I like dogs much better than cats.'

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‘So do I. Any day. What I mean is a dog is – well, a dog’s a dog, you know.’

‘Has your aunt always been fond of cats?’

‘I think it’s just a kind of thing old maids grow into. Ugh! I hate the brutes.’

‘Your aunt’s very nice, but rather frightening.’

‘I should think she was frightening. Snaps my head off sometimes. Thinks I’ve got no brains, you know.’

‘Not really?’

‘Oh! look here, don’t say it like that. Lots of fellows look like fools and are laughing underneath.’

‘Mr Duke,’ announced the parlourmaid.

Mr Duke was a recent arrival. He had bought the last of the six bungalows in September. He was a big man, very quiet and devoted to gardening. Mr Rycroft who was an enthusiast on birds and who lived next door to him had taken him up, overruling the section of thought which voiced the opinion that of course Mr Duke was a very nice man, quite unassuming, but was he, after all, quite – well, quite? Mightn’t he, just possibly, be a retired tradesman?

But nobody liked to ask him – and indeed it was thought better not to know. Because if one did know, it might be awkward, and really in such a small community it was best to know everybody.

‘Not walking to Exhampton in this weather?’ he asked of Major Burnaby.