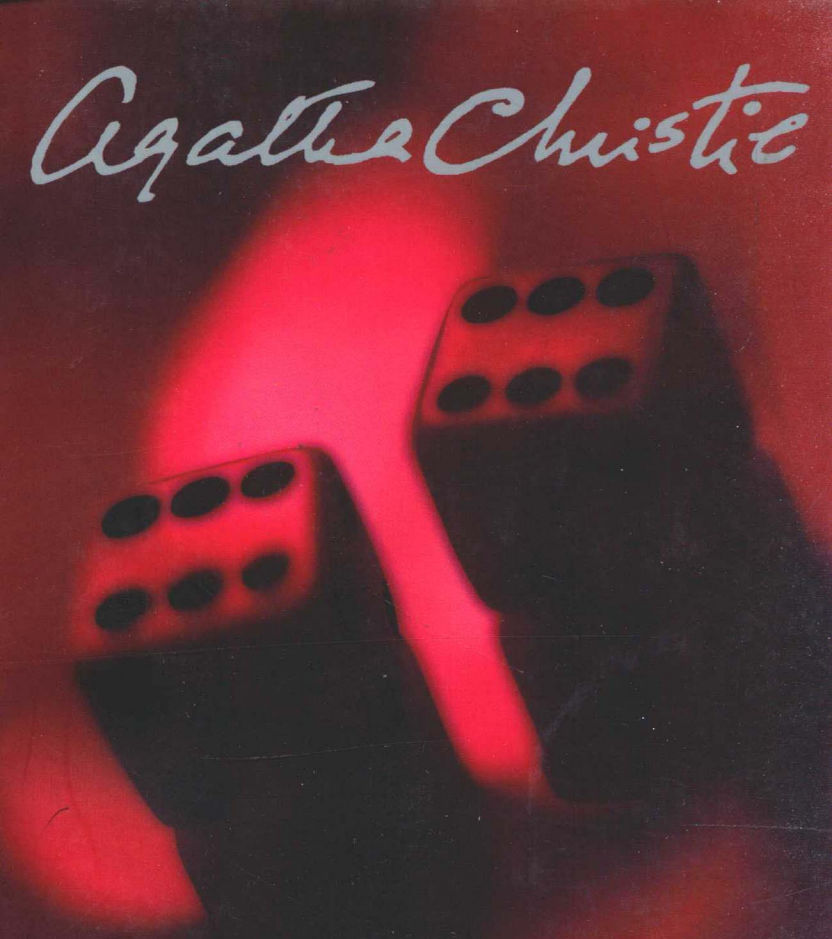
Agatha Christie



the listerdale mystery

'The acknowledged queen of detective fiction.'
Observer

The Listerdale 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 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 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.

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 Listerdale Mystery

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The Listerdale Mystery

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Mrs St Vincent was adding up figures. Once or twice she sighed, and her hand stole to her aching forehead. She had always disliked arithmetic. It was unfortunate that nowadays her life should seem to be composed entirely of one particular kind of sum, the ceaseless adding together of small necessary items of expenditure making a total that never failed to surprise and alarm her.

Surely it couldn't come to *that!* She went back over the figures. She had made a trifling error in the pence, but otherwise the figures were correct.

Mrs St Vincent sighed again. Her headache by now was very bad indeed. She looked up as the door opened and her daughter Barbara came into the room. Barbara St Vincent was a very pretty girl, she had her mother's delicate features, and the same proud turn of the head, but her eyes were dark instead of blue, and she had

a different mouth, a sulky red mouth not without attraction.

'Oh! Mother,' she cried. 'Still juggling with those horrid old accounts? Throw them all into the fire.'

'We must know where we are,' said Mrs St Vincent uncertainly.

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

'We're always in the same boat,' she said drily. 'Damned hard up. Down to the last penny as usual.'

Mrs St Vincent sighed.

'I wish –' she began, and then stopped.

'I must find something to do,' said Barbara in hard tones. 'And find it quickly. After all, I have taken that shorthand and typing course. So have about one million other girls from all I can see! "What experience?" "None, but –" "Oh! thank you, good-morning. We'll let you know." But they never do! I must find some other kind of a job – *any* job.'

'Not yet, dear,' pleaded her mother. 'Wait a little longer.'

Barbara went to the window and stood looking out with unseeing eyes that took no note of the dingy line of houses opposite.

'Sometimes,' she said slowly, 'I'm sorry Cousin Amy took me with her to Egypt last winter. Oh! I know I had fun – about the only fun I've ever had or am likely to have in my life. I *did* enjoy myself – enjoyed

myself thoroughly. But it was very unsettling. I mean – coming back to *this*.'

She swept a hand round the room. Mrs St Vincent followed it with her eyes and winced. The room was typical of cheap furnished lodgings. A dusty aspidistra, showily ornamental furniture, a gaudy wallpaper faded in patches. There were signs that the personality of the tenants had struggled with that of the landlady; one or two pieces of good china, much cracked and mended, so that their saleable value was *nil*, a piece of embroidery thrown over the back of the sofa, a water colour sketch of a young girl in the fashion of twenty years ago; near enough still to Mrs St Vincent not to be mistaken.

'It wouldn't matter,' continued Barbara, 'if we'd never known anything else. But to think of Ansteys –'

She broke off, not trusting herself to speak of that dearly loved home which had belonged to the St Vincent family for centuries and which was now in the hands of strangers.

'If only father – hadn't speculated – and borrowed –'

'My dear,' said Mrs St Vincent, 'your father was never, in any sense of the word, a business man.'

She said it with a graceful kind of finality, and Barbara came over and gave her an aimless sort of kiss, as she murmured, 'Poor old Mums. I won't say anything.'

Mrs St Vincent took up her pen again, and bent over her desk. Barbara went back to the window. Presently the girl said:

'Mother. I heard from – from Jim Masterton this morning. He wants to come over and see me.'

Mrs St Vincent laid down her pen and looked up sharply.

'Here?' she exclaimed.

'Well, we can't ask him to dinner at the Ritz very well,' sneered Barbara.

Her mother looked unhappy. Again she looked round the room with innate distaste.

'You're right,' said Barbara. 'It's a disgusting place. Genteel poverty! Sounds all right – a white-washed cottage, in the country, shabby chintzes of good design, bowls of roses, crown Derby tea service that you wash up yourself. That's what it's like in books. In real life, with a son starting on the bottom rung of office life, it means London. Frowsy landladies, dirty children on the stairs, fellow-lodgers who always seem to be half-castes, haddocks for breakfasts that aren't quite – quite and so on.'

'If only –' began Mrs St Vincent. 'But, really, I'm beginning to be afraid we can't afford even this room much longer.'

'That means a bed-sitting room – horror! – for you and me,' said Barbara. 'And a cupboard under the tiles

for Rupert. And when Jim comes to call, I'll receive him in that dreadful room downstairs with tabbies all round the walls knitting, and staring at us, and coughing that dreadful kind of gulping cough they have!'

There was a pause.

'Barbara,' said Mrs St Vincent at last. 'Do you – I mean – would you –?'

She stopped, flushing a little.

'You needn't be delicate, Mother,' said Barbara. 'Nobody is nowadays. Marry Jim, I suppose you mean? I would like a shot if he asked me. But I'm so awfully afraid he won't.'

'Oh, Barbara, dear.'

'Well, it's one thing seeing me out there with Cousin Amy, moving (as they say in novelettes) in the best society. He *did* take a fancy to me. Now he'll come here and see me in *this*! And he's a funny creature, you know, fastidious and old-fashioned. I – I rather like him for that. It reminds me of Ansteys and the village – everything a hundred years behind the times, but so – so – oh! I don't know – so fragrant. Like lavender!'

She laughed, half-ashamed of her eagerness. Mrs St Vincent spoke with a kind of earnest simplicity.

'I should like you to marry Jim Masterton,' she said. 'He is – one of us. He is very well off, also, but that I don't mind about so much.'

'I do,' said Barbara. 'I'm sick of being hard up.'

'But, Barbara, it isn't –'

'Only for that? No. I do really. I – oh! Mother, can't you *see* I do?'

Mrs St Vincent looked very unhappy.

'I wish he could see you in your proper setting, darling,' she said wistfully.

'Oh, well!' said Barbara. 'Why worry? We might as well try and be cheerful about things. Sorry I've had such a grouch. Cheer up, darling.'

She bent over her mother, kissed her forehead lightly, and went out. Mrs St Vincent, relinquishing all attempts at finance, sat down on the uncomfortable sofa. Her thoughts ran round in circles like squirrels in a cage.

'One may say what one likes, appearances *do* put a man off. Not later – not if they were really engaged. He'd know then what a sweet, dear girl she is. But it's so easy for young people to take the tone of their surroundings. Rupert, now, he's quite different from what he used to be. Not that I want my children to be stuck up. That's not it a bit. But I should hate it if Rupert got engaged to that dreadful girl in the tobacconist's. I daresay she may be a very nice girl, really. But she's not our kind. It's all so difficult. Poor little Babs. If I could do anything – anything. But where's the money to come from? We've sold everything to give Rupert his start. We really can't even afford this.'

To distract herself Mrs St Vincent picked up the

Morning Post, and glanced down the advertisements on the front page. Most of them she knew by heart. People who wanted capital, people who had capital and were anxious to dispose of it on note of hand alone, people who wanted to buy teeth (she always wondered why), people who wanted to sell furs and gowns and who had optimistic ideas on the subject of price.

Suddenly she stiffened to attention. Again and again she read the printed words.

'To gentle people only. Small house in Westminster, exquisitely furnished, offered to those who would really care for it. Rent purely nominal. No agents.'

A very ordinary advertisement. She had read many the same or – well, nearly the same. Nominal rent, that was where the trap lay.

Yet, since she was restless and anxious to escape from her thoughts she put on her hat straightaway, and took a convenient bus to the address given in the advertisement.

It proved to be that of a firm of house-agents. Not a new bustling firm – a rather decrepit, old-fashioned place. Rather timidly she produced the advertisement, which she had torn out, and asked for particulars.

The white-haired old gentleman who was attending to her stroked his chin thoughtfully.

'Perfectly. Yes, perfectly, madam. That house, the

house mentioned in the advertisement is No 7 Cheviot Place. You would like an order?'

'I should like to know the rent first?' said Mrs St Vincent.

'Ah! the rent. The exact figure is not settled, but I can assure you that it is purely nominal.'

'Ideas of what is purely nominal can vary,' said Mrs St Vincent.

The old gentleman permitted himself to chuckle a little.

'Yes, that's an old trick – an old trick. But you can take my word for it, it isn't so in this case. Two or three guineas a week, perhaps, not more.'

Mrs St Vincent decided to have the order. Not, of course, that there was any real likelihood of her being able to afford the place. But, after all, she might just *see* it. There must be some grave disadvantage attaching to it, to be offered at such a price.

But her heart gave a little throb as she looked up at the outside of 7 Cheviot Place. A gem of a house. Queen Anne, and in perfect condition! A butler answered the door, he had grey hair and little side-whiskers, and the meditative calm of an archbishop. A kindly archbishop, Mrs St Vincent thought.

He accepted the order with a benevolent air.

'Certainly, madam. I will show you over. The house is ready for occupation.'

He went before her, opening doors, announcing rooms.

'The drawing-room, the white study, a powder closet through here, madam.'

It was perfect – a dream. The furniture all of the period, each piece with signs of wear, but polished with loving care. The loose rugs were of beautiful dim old colours. In each room were bowls of fresh flowers. The back of the house looked over the Green Park. The whole place radiated an old-world charm.

The tears came into Mrs St Vincent's eyes, and she fought them back with difficulty. So had Ansteys looked – Ansteys . . .

She wondered whether the butler had noticed her emotion. If so, he was too much the perfectly trained servant to show it. She liked these old servants, one felt safe with them, at ease. They were like friends.

'It is a beautiful house,' she said softly. 'Very beautiful. I am glad to have seen it.'

'Is it for yourself alone, madam?'

'For myself and my son and daughter. But I'm afraid –'

She broke off. She wanted it so dreadfully – so dreadfully.

She felt instinctively that the butler understood. He did not look at her, as he said in a detached impersonal way:

'I happen to be aware, madam, that the owner requires above all, suitable tenants. The rent is of no importance to him. He wants the house to be tenanted by someone who will really care for and appreciate it.'

'I should appreciate it,' said Mrs St Vincent in a low voice.

She turned to go.

'Thank you for showing me over,' she said courteously.

'Not at all, madam.'

He stood in the doorway, very correct and upright as she walked away down the street. She thought to herself: 'He knows. He's sorry for me. He's one of the old lot too. He'd like *me* to have it – not a labour member, or a button manufacturer! We're dying out, our sort, but we band together.'

In the end she decided not to go back to the agents. What was the good? She could afford the rent – but there were servants to be considered. There would have to be servants in a house like that.

The next morning a letter lay by her plate. It was from the house-agents. It offered her the tenancy of 7 Cheviot Place for six months at two guineas a week, and went on: 'You have, I presume, taken into consideration the fact that the servants are remaining at the landlord's expense? It is really a unique offer.'

It was. So startled was she by it, that she read the letter