

*Agatha
Christie*



THE
HOLLOW

The Hollow

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

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The Moving Finger
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They Do It With Mirrors
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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 Hollow

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An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.harpercollins.co.uk

This *Agatha Christie Signature Edition* published 2002
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First published in Great Britain by
Collins 1946

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www.agathachristie.com

ISBN 13: 978 0 00 712102 1

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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**For Larry and Danae
With apologies for using their swimming pool
as the scene of a murder**

Chapter 1

At six thirteen am on a Friday morning Lucy Angkatell's big blue eyes opened upon another day and, as always, she was at once wide awake and began immediately to deal with the problems conjured up by her incredibly active mind. Feeling urgently the need of consultation and conversation, and selecting for the purpose her young cousin, Midge Hardcastle, who had arrived at The Hollow the night before, Lady Angkatell slipped quickly out of bed, threw a *négligée* round her still graceful shoulders, and went along the passage to Midge's room. Since she was a woman of disconcertingly rapid thought processes, Lady Angkatell, as was her invariable custom, commenced the conversation in her own mind, supplying Midge's answers out of her own fertile imagination.

The conversation was in full swing when Lady Angkatell flung open Midge's door.

‘— And so, darling, you really must agree that the

weekend is going to present difficulties!

'Eh? Hwah!' Midge grunted inarticulately, aroused thus abruptly from a satisfying and deep sleep.

Lady Angkatell crossed to the window, opening the shutters and jerking up the blind with a brisk movement, letting in the pale light of a September dawn.

'Birds!' she observed, peering with kindly pleasure through the pane. 'So sweet.'

'What?'

'Well, at any rate, the weather isn't going to present difficulties. It looks as though it has set in fine. That's something. Because if a lot of discordant personalities are boxed up indoors, I'm sure you will agree with me that it makes it ten times worse. Round games perhaps, and that would be like last year when I shall never forgive myself about poor Gerda. I said to Henry afterwards it was most thoughtless of me – and one *has* to have her, of course, because it would be so rude to ask John without her, but it really does make things difficult – and the worst of it is that she is so nice – really it seems odd sometimes that anyone so nice as Gerda is should be so devoid of any kind of intelligence, and if that is what they mean by the law of compensation I don't really think it is at all fair.'

'What *are* you talking about, Lucy?'

'The weekend, darling. The people who are coming tomorrow. I have been thinking about it all night and I

have been dreadfully bothered about it. So it really is a relief to talk it over with you, Midge. You are always so sensible and practical.'

'Lucy,' said Midge sternly. 'Do you know what time it is?'

'Not exactly, darling. I never do, you know.'

'It's quarter-past six.'

'Yes, dear,' said Lady Angkatell, with no signs of contrition.

Midge gazed sternly at her. How maddening, how absolutely impossible Lucy was! Really, thought Midge, I don't know why we put up with her!

Yet even as she voiced the thought to herself, she was aware of the answer. Lucy Angkatell was smiling, and as Midge looked at her, she felt the extraordinary pervasive charm that Lucy had wielded all her life and that even now, at over sixty, had not failed her. Because of it, people all over the world, foreign potentates, ADCs, Government officials, had endured inconvenience, annoyance and bewilderment. It was the childlike pleasure and delight in her own doings that disarmed and nullified criticism. Lucy had but to open those wide blue eyes and stretch out those fragile hands, and murmur, 'Oh! but I'm so *sorry* . . .' and resentment immediately vanished.

'Darling,' said Lady Angkatell, 'I'm so *sorry*. You should have told me!'

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‘I’m telling you now – but it’s too late! I’m thoroughly awake.’

‘What a shame! But you *will* help me, won’t you?’

‘About the weekend? Why? What’s wrong with it?’

Lady Angkatell sat down on the edge of the bed. It was not, Midge thought, like anyone else sitting on your bed. It was as insubstantial as though a fairy had poised itself there for a minute.

Lady Angkatell stretched out fluttering white hands in a lovely, helpless gesture.

‘All the wrong people coming – the wrong people to be *together*, I mean – not in themselves. They’re all charming really.’

‘Who *is* coming?’

Midge pushed thick wiry black hair back from her square forehead with a sturdy brown arm. Nothing insubstantial or fairylike about her.

‘Well, John and Gerda. That’s all right by itself. I mean, John is delightful – *most* attractive. And as for poor Gerda – well, I mean, we must all be very kind. Very, very kind.’

Moved by an obscure instinct of defence, Midge said:

‘Oh, come now, she’s not as bad as that.’

‘Oh, darling, she’s pathetic. Those eyes. And she never seems to understand a single word one says.’

‘She doesn’t,’ said Midge. ‘Not what you say – but

I don't know that I blame her. Your mind, Lucy, goes so fast, that to keep pace with it your conversation takes the most amazing leaps. All the connecting links are left out.'

'Just like a monkey,' said Lady Angkatell vaguely.

'But who else is coming besides the Christows? Henrietta, I suppose?'

Lady Angkatell's face brightened.

'Yes – and I really do feel that she will be a tower of strength. She always is. Henrietta, you know, is really kind – kind all through, not just on top. She will help a lot with poor Gerda. She was simply wonderful last year. That was the time we played limericks, or word-making, or quotations – or one of those things, and we had all finished and were reading them out when we suddenly discovered that poor dear Gerda hadn't even begun. She wasn't even sure what the game was. It was dreadful, wasn't it, Midge?'

'Why anyone ever comes to stay with the Angkatells, I don't know,' said Midge. 'What with the brainwork, and the round games, and your peculiar style of conversation, Lucy.'

'Yes, darling, we must be trying – and it must always be hateful for Gerda, and I often think that if she had any spirit she would stay away – but however, there it was, and the poor dear looked so bewildered and – well – mortified, you know. And John looked so dreadfully

impatient. And I simply couldn't think of how to make things all right again – and it was then that I felt so grateful to Henrietta. She turned right round to Gerda and asked about the pullover she was wearing – really a dreadful affair in faded lettuce green – too depressing and jumble sale, darling – and Gerda brightened up at once, it seems that she had knitted it herself, and Henrietta asked her for the pattern, and Gerda looked so happy and proud. And that is what I mean about Henrietta. She can always *do* that sort of thing. It's a kind of knack.'

'She takes trouble,' said Midge slowly.

'Yes, and she knows what to say.'

'Ah,' said Midge. 'But it goes further than saying. Do you know, Lucy, that Henrietta actually knitted that pullover?'

'Oh, my dear.' Lady Angkatell looked grave. 'And wore it?'

'And wore it. Henrietta carries things through.'

'And was it very dreadful?'

'No. On Henrietta it looked very nice.'

'Well, of course it would. That's just the difference between Henrietta and Gerda. Everything Henrietta does she does well and it turns out right. She's clever about nearly everything, as well as in her own line. I must say, Midge, that if anyone carries us through this weekend, it will be Henrietta. She will be nice to

Gerda and she will amuse Henry, and she'll keep John in a good temper and I'm sure she'll be most helpful with David.'

'David Angkatell?'

'Yes. He's just down from Oxford – or perhaps Cambridge. Boys of that age are so difficult – especially when they are intellectual. David is very intellectual. One wishes that they could put off being intellectual until they were rather older. As it is, they always glower at one so and bite their nails and seem to have so many spots and sometimes an Adam's apple as well. And they either won't speak at all, or else are very loud and contradictory. Still, as I say, I am trusting to Henrietta. She is very tactful and asks the right kind of questions, and being a sculptress they respect her, especially as she doesn't just carve animals or children's heads but does advanced things like that curious affair in metal and plaster that she exhibited at the New Artists last year. It looked rather like a Heath Robinson step-ladder. It was called Ascending Thought – or something like that. It is the kind of thing that would impress a boy like David . . . I thought myself it was just silly.'

'Dear Lucy!'

'But some of Henrietta's things I think are quite lovely. That Weeping Ash-tree figure, for instance.'

'Henrietta has a touch of real genius, I think. And

she is a very lovely and satisfying person as well,' said Midge.

Lady Angkatell got up and drifted over to the window again. She played absent-mindedly with the blind cord.

'Why acorns, I wonder?' she murmured.

'Acorns?'

'On the blind cord. Like pineapples on gates. I mean, there must be a *reason*. Because it might just as easily be a fir-cone or a pear, but it's always an acorn. Mast, they call it in crosswords – you know, for pigs. So curious, I always think.'

'Don't ramble off, Lucy. You came in here to talk about the weekend and I can't see why you were so anxious about it. If you manage to keep off round games, and try to be coherent when you're talking to Gerda, and put Henrietta on to tame intellectual David, where is the difficulty?'

'Well, for one thing, darling, Edward is coming.'

'Oh, Edward.' Midge was silent for a moment after saying the name.

Then she asked quietly:

'What on earth made you ask Edward for this weekend?'

'I didn't, Midge. That's just it. He asked himself. Wired to know if we could have him. You know what Edward is. How sensitive. If I'd wired back "No,"

he'd probably never have asked himself again. He's like that.'

Midge nodded her head slowly.

Yes, she thought, Edward was like that. For an instant she saw his face clearly, that very dearly loved face. A face with something of Lucy's insubstantial charm; gentle, diffident, ironic . . .

'Dear Edward,' said Lucy, echoing the thought in Midge's mind.

She went on impatiently:

'If only Henrietta would make up her mind to marry him. She is really fond of him, I know she is. If they had been here some weekend without the Christows . . . As it is, John Christow has always the most unfortunate effect on Edward. John, if you know what I mean, becomes so much *more* so and Edward becomes so much *less* so. You understand?'

Again Midge nodded.

'And I can't put the Christows off because this weekend was arranged long ago, but I do feel, Midge, that it is all going to be difficult, with David glowering and biting his nails, and with trying to keep Gerda from feeling out of it, and with John being so positive and dear Edward so negative -'

'The ingredients of the pudding are not promising,' murmured Midge.

Lucy smiled at her.

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‘Sometimes,’ she said meditatively, ‘things arrange themselves quite simply. I’ve asked the Crime man to lunch on Sunday. It will make a distraction, don’t you think so?’

‘Crime man?’

‘Like an egg,’ said Lady Angkatell. ‘He was in Baghdad, solving something, when Henry was High Commissioner. Or perhaps it was afterwards? We had him to lunch with some other Duty people. He had on a white duck suit, I remember, and a pink flower in his buttonhole, and black patent-leather shoes. I don’t remember much about it because I never think it’s very interesting who killed who. I mean, once they are dead it doesn’t seem to matter why, and to make a fuss about it all seems so silly . . .’

‘But have you any crimes down here, Lucy?’

‘Oh, no, darling. He’s in one of those funny new cottages – you know, beams that bump your head and a lot of very good plumbing and quite the wrong kind of garden. London people like that sort of thing. There’s an actress in the other, I believe. They don’t live in them all the time like we do. Still,’ Lady Angkatell moved vaguely across the room, ‘I dare say it pleases them. Midge, darling, it’s sweet of you to have been so helpful.’

‘I don’t think I have been so very helpful.’

‘Oh, haven’t you?’ Lucy Angkatell looked surprised.