

Agatha Christie

DUMB WITNESS



POIROT

Dumb Witness

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

* novellised 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

Cynthia Christie

Dumb Witness

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To dear Peter,
most faithful of friends
and dearest of companions,
a dog in a thousand

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Chapter 1

The Mistress of Littlegreen House

Miss Arundell died on May 1st. Though her illness was short her death did not occasion much surprise in the little country town of Market Basing where she had lived since she was a girl of sixteen. For Emily Arundell was well over seventy, the last of a family of five, and she had been known to be in delicate health for many years and had indeed nearly died of a similar attack to the one that killed her some eighteen months before.

But though Miss Arundell's death surprised no one, something else did. The provisions of her will gave rise to varying emotions, astonishment, pleasurable excitement, deep condemnation, fury, despair, anger and general gossip. For weeks and even months Market Basing was to talk of nothing else! Everyone had their own contribution to make to the subject from Mr Jones the grocer, who held that 'blood was thicker than water', to Mrs Lamphrey at the post office, who

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repeated *ad nauseam* that 'there's something behind it, depend upon it! You mark my words.'

What added zest to the speculations on the subject was the fact that the will had been made as lately as April 21st. Add to this the further fact that Emily Arundell's near relations had been staying with her just before that date over Easter Bank Holiday and it will be realized that the most scandalous theories could be propounded, pleurably relieving the monotony of everyday life in Market Basing.

There was one person who was shrewdly suspected of knowing more about the matter than she was willing to admit. That was Miss Wilhelmina Lawson, Miss Arundell's companion. Miss Lawson, however, professed herself just as much in the dark as everyone else. She, too, she declared, had been dumbfounded when the will was read out.

A lot of people, of course, did not believe this. Nevertheless, whether Miss Lawson was or was not as ignorant as she declared herself to be, only one person really knew the true facts. That person was the dead woman herself. Emily Arundell had kept her own counsel as she was in the habit of doing. Even to her lawyer she had said nothing of the motives underlying her action. She was content with making her wishes clear.

In that reticence could be found the keynote of

Emily Arundell's character. She was, in every respect, a typical product of her generation. She had both its virtues and its vices. She was autocratic and often overbearing, but she was also intensely warm-hearted. Her tongue was sharp but her actions were kind. She was outwardly sentimental but inwardly shrewd. She had a succession of companions whom she bullied unmercifully, but treated with great generosity. She had a great sense of family obligation.

On the Friday before Easter Emily Arundell was standing in the hall of Littlegreen House giving various directions to Miss Lawson.

Emily Arundell had been a handsome girl and she was now a well-preserved handsome old lady with a straight back and a brisk manner. A faint yellowness in her skin was a warning that she could not eat rich food with impunity.

Miss Arundell was saying:

'Now then, Minnie, where have you put them all?'

'Well, I thought – I hope I've done right – Dr and Mrs Tanios in the Oak room and Theresa in the Blue room and Mr Charles in the Old Nursery –'

Miss Arundell interrupted:

'Theresa can have the Old Nursery and Charles will have the Blue room.'

'Oh, yes – I'm sorry – I thought the Old Nursery

being rather more inconvenient –’

‘It will do very nicely for Theresa.’

In Miss Arundell’s day, women took second place. Men were the important members of society.

‘I’m so sorry the dear little children aren’t coming,’ murmured Miss Lawson, sentimentally.

She loved children and was quite incapable of managing them.

‘Four visitors will be quite enough,’ said Miss Arundell. ‘In any case Bella spoils her children abominably. They never dream of doing what they are told.’

Minnie Lawson murmured:

‘Mrs Tanios is a very devoted mother.’

Miss Arundell said with grave approval:

‘Bella is a good woman.’

Miss Lawson sighed and said:

‘It must be very hard for her sometimes – living in an outlandish place like Smyrna.’

Emily Arundell replied:

‘She has made her bed and she must lie on it.’

And having uttered this final Victorian pronouncement she went on:

‘I am going to the village now to speak about the orders for the week-end.’

‘Oh, Miss Arundell, do let me. I mean –’

‘Nonsense. I prefer to go myself. Rogers needs a sharp word. The trouble with you is, Minnie, that

you're not *emphatic* enough. Bob! Bob! Where is the dog?'

A wire-haired terrier came tearing down the stairs. He circled round and round his mistress uttering short staccato barks of delight and expectation.

Together mistress and dog passed out of the front door and down the short path to the gate.

Miss Lawson stood in the doorway smiling rather foolishly after them, her mouth a little open. Behind her a voice said tartly:

'Them pillowcases you gave me, miss, isn't a pair.'

'What? How stupid of me . . .'

Minnie Lawson plunged once more into household routine.

Emily Arundell, attended by Bob, made a royal progress down the main street of Market Basing.

It was very much of a royal progress. In each shop she entered the proprietor always hurried forward to attend to her.

She was Miss Arundell of Littlegreen House. She was 'one of our oldest customers'. She was 'one of the old school. Not many about like her nowadays'.

'Good morning, miss. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you – Not tender? Well, I'm sorry to hear that. I thought myself it was as nice a little saddle – Yes, of course, Miss Arundell. If you say so, it is so – No, indeed I wouldn't think of sending Canterbury

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to you, Miss Arundell – Yes, I'll see to it myself, Miss Arundell.'

Bob and Spot, the butcher's dog, circled slowly round each other, hackles raised, growling gently. Spot was a stout dog of nondescript breed. He knew that he must not fight with customers' dogs, but he permitted himself to tell them, by subtle indication, just exactly what mincemeat he would make of them were he free to do so.

Bob, a dog of spirit, replied in kind.

Emily Arundell said 'Bob!' sharply and passed on.

In the greengrocer's there was a meeting of heavenly bodies. Another old lady, spherical in outline, but equally distinguished by that air of royalty, said:

'Mornin', Emily.'

'Good morning, Caroline.'

Caroline Peabody said:

'Expecting any of your young people down?'

'Yes, all of them. Theresa, Charles and Bella.'

'So Bella's home, is she? Husband too?'

'Yes.'

It was a simple monosyllable, but underlying it was knowledge common to both ladies.

For Bella Biggs, Emily Arundell's niece, had married a Greek. And Emily Arundell's people, who were what is known as 'all service people', simply did not marry Greeks.

By way of being obscurely comforting (for of course such a matter could not be referred to openly) Miss Peabody said:

‘Bella’s husband’s got brains. *And* charming manners!’

‘His manners are delightful,’ agreed Miss Arundell.

Moving out into the street Miss Peabody asked:

‘What’s this about Theresa being engaged to young Donaldson?’

Miss Arundell shrugged her shoulders.

‘Young people are so casual nowadays. I’m afraid it will have to be a rather long engagement – that is, if anything comes of it. He has no money.’

‘Of course Theresa has her own money,’ said Miss Peabody.

Miss Arundell said stiffly:

‘A man could not possibly wish to live on his wife’s money.’

Miss Peabody gave a rich, throaty chuckle.

‘They don’t seem to mind doing it, nowadays. You and I are out of date, Emily. What I can’t understand is what the child *sees* in him. Of all the namby-pamby young men!’

‘He’s a clever doctor, I believe.’

‘Those *pince-nez* – and that stiff way of talking! In my young days we’d have called him a poor stick!’

There was a pause while Miss Peabody’s memory,

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diving into the past, conjured up visions of dashing, bewhiskered young men . . .

She said with a sigh:

‘Send that young dog Charles along to see me – if he’ll come.’

‘Of course. I’ll tell him.’

The two ladies parted.

They had known each other for considerably over fifty years. Miss Peabody knew of certain regrettable lapses in the life of General Arundell, Emily’s father. She knew just precisely what a shock Thomas Arundell’s marriage had been to his sisters. She had a very shrewd idea of certain troubles connected with the younger generation.

But no word had ever passed between the two ladies on any of these subjects. They were both upholders of family dignity, family solidarity, and complete reticence on family matters.

Miss Arundell walked home, Bob trotting sedately at her heels. To herself, Emily Arundell admitted what she would never have admitted to another human being, her dissatisfaction with the younger generation of her family.

Theresa, for instance. She had no control over Theresa since the latter had come into her own money at the age of twenty-one. Since then the girl had achieved a certain notoriety. Her picture was often in