



Agatha Christie

**towards  
zero**

'Masterly storytelling.'  
*Times Literary Supplement*

## Towards Zero

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*

# **Towards Zero**

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## To Robert Graves

Dear Robert,

Since you are kind enough to say you like my stories, I venture to dedicate this book to you. All I ask is that you should sternly restrain your critical faculties (doubtless sharpened by your recent excesses in that line!) when reading it.

This is a story for your pleasure and *not* a candidate for Mr Graves' literary pillory!

Your friend,

*Agatha Christie*

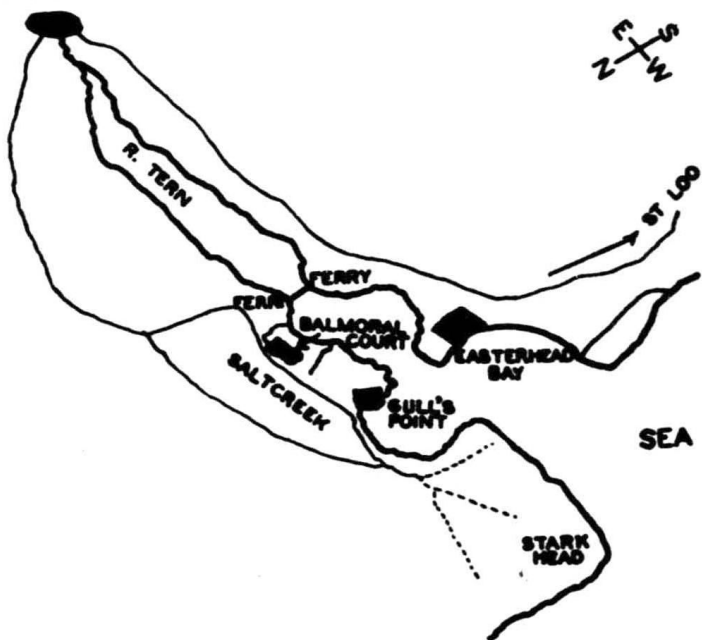


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SALTINGTON



## Prologue

**November 19th**

The group round the fireplace was nearly all composed of lawyers or those who had an interest in the law. There was Martindale the solicitor, Rufus Lord, KC, young Daniels who had made a name for himself in the Carstairs case, a sprinkling of other barristers, Mr Justice Cleaver, Lewis of Lewis and Trench and old Mr Treves. Mr Treves was close on eighty, a very ripe and experienced eighty. He was a member of a famous firm of solicitors, and the most famous member of that firm, he was said to know more of backstairs history than any man in England and he was a specialist on criminology.

Unthinking people said Mr Treves ought to write his memoirs. Mr Treves knew better. He knew that he knew too much.

Though he had long retired from active practice, there was no man in England whose opinion was

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so respected by the members of his own fraternity. Whenever his thin precise little voice was raised there was always a respectful silence.

The conversation now was on the subject of a much talked of case which had finished that day at the Old Bailey. It was a murder case and the prisoner had been acquitted. The present company was busy trying the case over again and making technical criticisms.

The prosecution had made a mistake in relying on one of its witnesses – old Depleach ought to have realized what an opening he was giving to the defence. Young Arthur had made the most of that servant girl's evidence. Bentmore, in his summing up, had very rightly put the matter in its correct perspective, but the mischief was done by then – the jury had believed the girl. Juries were funny – you never knew what they'd swallow and what they wouldn't. But let them once get a thing into their heads and no one was ever going to get it out again. They believed that the girl was speaking the truth about the crowbar and that was that. The medical evidence had been a bit above their heads. All those long terms and scientific jargon – damned bad witnesses, these scientific johnnies – always hemmed and hawed and couldn't say yes or no to a plain question – always 'in certain circumstances that might take place' – and so on!

They talked themselves out, little by little, and as

the remarks became more spasmodic and disjointed, a general feeling grew of something lacking. One head after another turned in the direction of Mr Treves. For Mr Treves had as yet contributed nothing to the discussion. Gradually it became apparent that the company was waiting for a final word from its most respected colleague.

Mr Treves, leaning back in his chair, was absent-mindedly polishing his glasses. Something in the silence made him look up sharply.

‘Eh?’ he said. ‘What was that? You asked me something?’

Young Lewis spoke.

‘We were talking, sir, about the Lamorne case.’

He paused expectantly.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Mr Treves. ‘I was thinking of that.’

There was a respectful hush.

‘But I’m afraid,’ said Mr Treves, still polishing, ‘that I was being fanciful. Yes, fanciful. Result of getting on in years, I suppose. At my age one can claim the privilege of being fanciful, if one likes.’

‘Yes, indeed, sir,’ said young Lewis, but he looked puzzled.

‘I was thinking,’ said Mr Treves, ‘not so much of the various points of law raised – though they were interesting – very interesting – if the verdict had gone the other way there would have been good grounds for

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appeal. I rather think – but I won't go into that now. I was thinking, as I say, not of the points of law but of the – well, of the *people* in the case.'

Everybody looked rather astonished. They had considered the people in the case only as regarding their credibility or otherwise as witnesses. No one had even hazarded a speculation as to whether the prisoner had been guilty or as innocent as the court had pronounced him to be.

'Human beings, you know,' said Mr Treves thoughtfully. 'Human beings. All kinds and sorts and sizes and shapes of 'em. Some with brains and a good many more without. They'd come from all over the place, Lancashire, Scotland – that restaurant proprietor from Italy and that school teacher woman from somewhere out Middle West. All caught up and enmeshed in the thing and finally all brought together in a court of law in London on a grey November day. Each one contributing his little part. The whole thing culminating in a trial for murder.'

He paused and gently beat a delicate tattoo on his knee.

'I like a good detective story,' he said. 'But, you know, they begin in the wrong place! They begin with the murder. But the murder is the *end*. The story begins long before that – years before sometimes – with all the causes and events that bring certain people to a certain

place at a certain time on a certain day. Take that little maid servant's' evidence – if the kitchenmaid hadn't pinched her young man she wouldn't have thrown up her situation in a huff and gone to the Lamornes and been the principal witness for the defence. That Guiseppe Antonelli – coming over to exchange with his brother for a month. The brother is as blind as a bat. He wouldn't have seen what Guiseppe's sharp eyes saw. If the constable hadn't been sweet on the cook at No. 48, *he* wouldn't have been late on his beat . . .'

He nodded his head gently:

'All converging towards a given spot . . . And then, when the time comes – over the top! *Zero Hour*. Yes, all of them converging towards zero . . .'

He repeated: 'Towards zero . . .'

Then gave a quick little shudder.

'You're cold, sir, come nearer the fire.'

'No, no,' said Mr Treves. 'Just someone walking over my grave, as they say. Well, well, I must be making my way homewards.'

He gave an affable little nod and went slowly and precisely out of the room.

There was a moment of dubious silence and then Rufus Lord, KC, remarked that poor old Treves was getting on.

Sir William Cleaver said:

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‘An acute brain – a very acute brain – but Anno Domini tells in the end.’

‘Got a groggy heart, too,’ said Lord. ‘May drop down any minute, I believe.’

‘He takes pretty good care of himself,’ said young Lewis.

At that moment Mr Treves was carefully stepping into his smooth-running Daimler. It deposited him at a house in a quiet square. A solicitous butler valet helped him off with his coat. Mr Treves walked into his library where a coal fire was burning. His bedroom lay beyond, for out of consideration for his heart he never went upstairs.

He sat down in front of the fire and drew his letters towards him.

His mind was still dwelling on the fancy he had outlined at the Club.

‘Even now,’ thought Mr Treves to himself, ‘some drama – some murder to be – is in course of preparation. If I were writing one of these amusing stories of blood and crime, I should begin now with an elderly gentleman sitting in front of the fire opening his letters – going, unbeknownst to himself – towards zero . . .’

He slit open an envelope and gazed down absently at the sheet he abstracted from it.

Suddenly his expression changed. He came back from romance to reality.

‘Dear me,’ said Mr Treves. ‘How extremely annoying! Really, how very vexing. After all these years! This will alter all my plans.’



