

Agatha
Christie

MRS
MCGINTY'S
DEAD

Mrs McGinty's Dead

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 countries. 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 Westmcott.

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

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The Sittaford Mystery
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Poirot

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Murder in Mesopotamia
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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
The Hollow
The Labours of Hercules

* novelised by Charles Osborne

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Mrs McGinty's Dead
After the Funeral
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The Clocks
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Come, Tell Me How You Live

Play Collections

The Mousetrap and Selected Plays
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Selected Plays

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**To Peter Saunders
in gratitude for his kindness
to authors**

Chapter 1

Hercule Poirot came out of the *Vieille Grand'mère* restaurant into Soho. He turned up the collar of his overcoat through prudence, rather than necessity, since the night was not cold. 'But at my age, one takes no risks,' Poirot was wont to declare.

His eyes held a reflective sleepy pleasure. The *Escargots de la Vieille Grand'mère* had been delicious. A real find, this dingy little restaurant. Meditatively, like a well fed dog, Hercule Poirot curled his tongue round his lips. Drawing his handkerchief from his pocket, he dabbed his luxuriant moustaches.

Yes, he had dined well . . . And now what?

A taxi, passing him, slowed down invitingly. Poirot hesitated for a moment, but made no sign. Why take a taxi? He would in any case reach home too early to go to bed.

'Alas,' murmured Poirot to his moustaches, 'that one

can only eat three times a day . . .’

For afternoon tea was a meal to which he had never become acclimatized. ‘If one partakes of the five o’clock, one does not,’ he explained, ‘approach the dinner with the proper quality of expectant gastric juices. And the dinner, let us remember, is the supreme meal of the day!’

Not for him, either, the mid-morning coffee. No, chocolate and *croissants* for breakfast, *Déjeuner* at twelve-thirty if possible but certainly not later than one o’clock, and finally the climax: *Le Dîner*!

These were the peak periods of Hercule Poirot’s day. Always a man who had taken his stomach seriously, he was reaping his reward in old age. Eating was now not only a physical pleasure, it was also an intellectual research. For in between meals he spent quite a lot of time searching out and marking down possible sources of new and delicious food. *La Vieille Grand’mère* was the result of one of these quests and *La Vieille Grand’mère* had just received the seal of Hercule Poirot’s gastronomic approval.

But now, unfortunately, there was the evening to put in.

Hercule Poirot sighed.

‘If only,’ he thought, ‘*ce cher Hastings* were available . . .’

He dwelt with pleasure on his remembrances of his old friend.

‘My first friend in this country – and still to me the dearest friend I have. True, often and often did he enrage me. But do I remember that now? No. I remember only his incredulous wonder, his open-mouthed appreciation of my talents – the ease with which I misled him without uttering an untrue word, his bafflement, his stupendous astonishment when he at last perceived the truth that had been clear to me all along. *Ce cher, cher ami!* It is my weakness, it has always been my weakness, to desire to show off. That weakness, Hastings could never understand. But indeed it is very necessary for a man of my abilities to admire himself – and for that one needs stimulation from outside. I cannot, truly I cannot, sit in a chair all day reflecting how truly admirable I am. One needs the human touch. One needs – as they say nowadays – the *stooge*.’

Hercule Poirot sighed. He turned into Shaftesbury Avenue.

Should he cross it and go on to Leicester Square and spend the evening at a cinema? Frowning slightly, he shook his head. The cinema, more often than not, enraged him by the looseness of its plots – the lack of logical continuity in the argument – even the photography which, raved over by some, to Hercule Poirot seemed often no more than the portrayal of scenes and objects so as to make them appear totally different from what they were in reality.

Everything, Hercule Poirot decided, was too artistic nowadays. Nowhere was there the love of order and method that he himself prized so highly. And seldom was there any appreciation of subtlety. Scenes of violence and crude brutality were the fashion, and as a former police officer, Poirot was bored by brutality. In his early days, he had seen plenty of crude brutality. It had been more the rule than the exception. He found it fatiguing, and unintelligent.

‘The truth is,’ Poirot reflected as he turned his steps homeward, ‘I am not in tune with the modern world. And I am, in a superior way, a slave as other men are slaves. My work has enslaved me just as their work enslaves them. When the hour of leisure arrives, they have nothing with which to fill their leisure. The retired financier takes up golf, the little merchant puts bulbs in his garden, me, I eat. But there it is, I come round to it again. *One can only eat three times a day.* And in between are the gaps.’

He passed a newspaper-seller and scanned the bill.

‘Result of McGinty Trial. Verdict.’

It stirred no interest in him. He recalled vaguely a small paragraph in the papers. It had not been an interesting murder. Some wretched old woman knocked on the head for a few pounds. All part of the senseless crude brutality of these days.

Poirot turned into the courtyard of his block of flats.

As always his heart swelled in approval. He was proud of his home. A splendid symmetrical building. The lift took him up to the third floor where he had a large luxury flat with impeccable chromium fittings, square armchairs, and severely rectangular ornaments. There could truly be said not to be a curve in the place.

As he opened the door with his latchkey and stepped into the square, white lobby, his manservant, George, stepped softly to meet him.

‘Good evening, sir. There is a – gentleman waiting to see you.’

He relieved Poirot deftly of his overcoat.

‘Indeed?’ Poirot was aware of that very slight pause before the word *gentleman*. As a social snob, George was an expert.

‘What is his name?’

‘A Mr Spence, sir.’

‘Spence.’ The name, for the moment, meant nothing to Poirot. Yet he knew that it should do so.

Pausing for a moment before the mirror to adjust his moustaches to a state of perfection, Poirot opened the door of the sitting-room and entered. The man sitting in one of the big square armchairs got up.

‘Hallo, M. Poirot, hope you remember me. It’s a long time . . . Superintendent Spence.’

‘But of course.’ Poirot shook him warmly by the hand.

Superintendent Spence of the Kilchester Police. A very interesting case that had been . . . As Spence had said, a long time ago now . . .

Poirot pressed his guest with refreshments. A *grenadine*? *Crème de Menthe*? *Benedictine*? *Crème de Cacao*? . . .

At this moment George entered with a tray on which was a whisky bottle and a siphon. 'Or beer if you prefer it, sir?' he murmured to the visitor.

Superintendent Spence's large red face lightened.

'Beer for me,' he said.

Poirot was left to wonder once more at the accomplishments of George. He himself had had no idea that there was beer in the flat and it seemed incomprehensible to him that it could be preferred to a sweet liqueur.

When Spence had his foaming tankard, Poirot poured himself out a tiny glass of gleaming green *crème de menthe*.

'But it is charming of you to look me up,' he said. 'Charming. You have come up from -?'

'Kilchester. I'll be retired in about six months. Actually, I was due for retirement eighteen months ago. They asked me to stop on and I did.'

'You were wise,' said Poirot with feeling. 'You were very wise . . .'

'Was I? I wonder. I'm not so sure.'

'Yes, yes, you were wise,' Poirot insisted. 'The long hours of *ennui*, you have no conception of them.'

'Oh, I'll have plenty to do when I retire. Moved into a new house last year, we did. Quite a bit of garden and shamefully neglected. I haven't been able to get down to it properly yet.'

'Ah yes, you are one of those who garden. Me, once I decided to live in the country and grow vegetable marrows. It did not succeed. I have not the temperament.'

'You should have seen one of my marrows last year,' said Spence with enthusiasm. 'Colossal! And my roses. I'm keen on roses. I'm going to have –'

He broke off.

'That's not what I came to talk about.'

'No, no, you came to see an old acquaintance – it was kind. I appreciate it.'

'There's more to it than that, I'm afraid, M. Poirot. I'll be honest. I want something.'

Poirot murmured delicately:

'There is a mortgage, possibly, on your house? You would like a loan –'

Spence interrupted in a horrified voice:

'Oh, good Lord, it's not *money*! Nothing of that kind.'

Poirot waved his hands in graceful apology.

'I demand your pardon.'

'I'll tell you straight out – it's damned cheek what I've come for. If you send me away with a flea in my ear I shan't be surprised.'

'There will be no flea,' said Poirot. 'But continue.'
'It's the McGinty case. You've read about it, perhaps?'
Poirot shook his head.

'Not with attention. Mrs McGinty – an old woman in a shop or a house. She is dead, yes. How did she die?'

Spence stared at him.

'Lord!' he said. 'That takes me back. Extraordinary. And I never thought of it until now.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Nothing. Just a game. Child's game. We used to play it when we were kids. A lot of us in a row. Question and answer all down the line. "*Mrs McGinty's dead!*" "*How did she die?*" "*Down on one knee just like I.*" And then the next question, "*Mrs McGinty's dead.*" "*How did she die?*" "*Holding her hand out just like I.*" And there we'd be, all kneeling and our right arms held out stiff. And then you got it! "*Mrs McGinty's dead.*" "*How did she die?*" "*Like THIS!*" Smack, the top of the row would fall sideways and down we all went like a pack of ninepins!' Spence laughed uproariously at the remembrance. 'Takes me back, it does!'

Poirot waited politely. This was one of the moments when, even after half a lifetime in the country, he found the English incomprehensible. He himself had played at *Cache Cache* in his childhood, but he felt no desire to talk about it or even to think about it.

When Spence had overcome his own amusement, Poirot repeated with some slight weariness, 'How *did* she die?'

The laughter was wiped off Spence's face. He was suddenly himself again.

'She was hit on the back of her head with some sharp, heavy implement. Her savings, about thirty pounds in cash, were taken after her room had been ransacked. She lived alone in a small cottage except for a lodger. Man of the name of Bentley. James Bentley.'

'Ah yes, Bentley.'

'The place wasn't broken into. No signs of any tampering with the windows or locks. Bentley was hard up, had lost his job, and owed two months' rent. The money was found hidden under a loose stone at the back of the cottage. Bentley's coat sleeve had blood on it and hair – same blood group and the right hair. According to his first statement he was never near the body – so it couldn't have come there by accident.'

'Who found her?'

'The baker called with bread. It was the day he got paid. James Bentley opened the door to him and said he'd knocked at Mrs McGinty's bedroom door, but couldn't get an answer. The baker suggested she might have been taken bad. They got the woman from next door to go up and see. Mrs McGinty wasn't in the bedroom, and hadn't slept in the bed, but the room had

been ransacked and the floorboards had been prised up. Then they thought of looking in the parlour. She was there, lying on the floor, and the neighbour fairly screamed her head off. Then they got the police, of course.'

'And Bentley was eventually arrested and tried?'

'Yes. The case came on at the Assizes. Yesterday. Open and shut case. The jury were only out twenty minutes this morning. Verdict: Guilty. Condemned to death.'

Poirot nodded.

'And then, after the verdict, you got in a train and came to London and came here to see me. Why?'

Superintendent Spence was looking into his beer glass. He ran his finger slowly round and round the rim.

'Because,' he said, 'I don't think he did it . . .'