

Agatha Christie

HICKORY DICKORY DOCK



Hickory Dickory Dock

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, 14 short story collections, 16 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

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Chapter 1

Hercule Poirot frowned.

‘Miss Lemon,’ he said.

‘Yes, M. Poirot?’

‘There are three mistakes in this letter.’

His voice held incredulity. For Miss Lemon, that hideous and efficient woman, never made mistakes. She was never ill, never tired, never upset, never inaccurate. For all practical purposes, that is to say, she was not a woman at all. She was a machine – the perfect secretary. She knew everything, she coped with everything. She ran Hercule Poirot’s life for him, so that it, too, functioned like a machine. Order and method had been Hercule Poirot’s watchwords from many years ago. With George, his perfect manservant, and Miss Lemon, his perfect secretary, order and method ruled supreme in his life. Now that crumpets were baked square as well as round, he had nothing about which to complain.

And yet, this morning, Miss Lemon had made three mistakes in typing a perfectly simple letter, and moreover, had not even noticed those mistakes. The stars stood still in their courses!

Hercule Poirot held out the offending document. He was not annoyed, he was merely bewildered. This was one of the things that could not happen – but it had happened!

Miss Lemon took the letter. She looked at it. For the first time in his life, Poirot saw her blush; a deep ugly unbecoming flush that dyed her face right up to the roots of her strong grizzled hair.

‘Oh, dear,’ she said. ‘I can’t think how – at least I *can*. It’s because of my sister.’

‘Your sister?’

Another shock. Poirot had never conceived of Miss Lemon’s having a sister. Or, for that matter, having a father, mother, or even grandparents. Miss Lemon, somehow, was so completely machine made – a precision instrument so to speak – that to think of her having affections, or anxieties, or family worries, seemed quite ludicrous. It was well known that the whole of Miss Lemon’s heart and mind was given, when she was not on duty, to the perfection of a new filing system which was to be patented and bear her name.

‘Your sister?’ Hercule Poirot repeated, therefore, with an incredulous note in his voice.

Miss Lemon nodded a vigorous assent.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I don’t think I’ve ever mentioned her to you. Practically all her life has been spent in Singapore. Her husband was in the rubber business there.’

Hercule Poirot nodded understandingly. It seemed to him appropriate that Miss Lemon’s sister should have spent most of her life in Singapore. That was what places like Singapore were for. The sisters of women like Miss Lemon married men in Singapore, so that the Miss Lemons of this world could devote themselves with machine-like efficiency to their employers’ affairs (and of course to the invention of filing systems in their moments of relaxation).

‘I comprehend,’ he said. ‘Proceed.’

Miss Lemon proceeded.

‘She was left a widow four years ago. No children. I managed to get her fixed up in a very nice little flat at quite a reasonable rent –’

(Of course Miss Lemon *would* manage to do just that almost impossible thing.)

‘She is reasonably well off – though money doesn’t go as far as it did, but her tastes aren’t expensive and she has enough to be quite comfortable if she is careful.’

Miss Lemon paused and then continued:

‘But the truth is, of course, she was lonely. She had never lived in England and she’d got no old friends or

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cronies and of course she had a lot of time on her hands. Anyway, she told me about six months ago that she was thinking of taking up this job.'

'Job?'

'Warden, I think they call it – or matron – of a hostel for students. It was owned by a woman who was partly Greek and she wanted someone to run it for her. Manage the catering and see that things went smoothly. It's an old-fashioned roomy house – in Hickory Road, if you know where that is.' Poirot did not. 'It used to be a superior neighbourhood once, and the houses are well built. My sister was to have very nice accommodation, bedroom and sitting-room and a tiny bath kitchenette of her own –'

Miss Lemon paused. Poirot made an encouraging noise. So far this did not seem at all like a tale of disaster.

'I wasn't any too sure about it myself, but I saw the force of my sister's arguments. She's never been one to sit with her hands crossed all day long and she's a very practical woman and good at running things – and of course it wasn't as though she were thinking of putting money into it or anything like that. It was purely a salaried position – not a high salary, but she didn't need that, and there was no hard physical work. She's always been fond of young people and good with them, and having lived in the East so long she understands racial

differences and people's susceptibilities. Because these students at the hostel are of all nationalities; mostly English, but some of them actually *black*, I believe.'

'Naturally,' said Hercule Poirot.

'Half the nurses in our hospitals seem to be black nowadays,' said Miss Lemon doubtfully, 'and I understand much pleasanter and more attentive than the English ones. But that's neither here nor there. We talked the scheme over and finally my sister moved in. Neither she nor I cared very much for the proprietress, Mrs Nicoletis, a woman of very uncertain temper, sometimes charming and sometimes, I'm sorry to say, quite the reverse – and both cheese-paring and impractical. Still, naturally, if she'd been a thoroughly competent woman, she wouldn't have needed any assistance. My sister is not one to let people's tantrums and vagaries worry her. She can hold her own with anyone and she never stands any nonsense.'

Poirot nodded. He felt a vague resemblance to Miss Lemon showing in this account of Miss Lemon's sister – a Miss Lemon softened as it were by marriage and the climate of Singapore, but a woman with the same hard core of sense.

'So your sister took the job?' he asked.

'Yes, she moved into 26 Hickory Road about six months ago. On the whole, she liked her work there and found it interesting.'

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Hercule Poirot listened. So far the adventure of Miss Lemon's sister had been disappointingly tame.

'But for some time now she's been badly worried. Very badly worried.'

'Why?'

'Well, you see, M. Poirot, she doesn't like the things that are going on.'

'There are students there of both sexes?' Poirot inquired delicately.

'Oh no, M. Poirot, I don't mean *that*! One is always prepared for difficulties of *that* kind, one *expects* them! No, you see, things have been disappearing.'

'Disappearing?'

'Yes. And such odd things . . . And all in rather an unnatural way.'

'When you say things have been disappearing, you mean things have been stolen?'

'Yes.'

'Have the police been called in?'

'No. Not yet. My sister hopes that it may not be necessary. She is fond of these young people – of some of them, that is – and she would very much prefer to straighten things out by herself.'

'Yes,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'I can quite see that. But that does not explain, if I may say so, your own anxiety which I take to be a reflex of your sister's anxiety.'

‘I don’t like the situation, M. Poirot. I don’t like it at all. I cannot help feeling that something is going on which I do not understand. No ordinary explanation seems quite to cover the facts – and I really cannot imagine what other explanation there can be.’

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Miss Lemon’s Heel of Achilles had always been her imagination. She had none. On questions of fact she was invincible. On questions of surmise, she was lost. Not for her the state of mind of Cortez’s men upon the peak of Darien.

‘Not ordinary petty thieving? A kleptomaniac, perhaps?’

‘I do not think so. I read up the subject,’ said the conscientious Miss Lemon, ‘in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and in a medical work. But I was not convinced.’

Hercule Poirot was silent for a minute and a half.

Did he wish to embroil himself in the troubles of Miss Lemon’s sister and the passions and grievances of a polyglot hostel? But it was very annoying and inconvenient to have Miss Lemon making mistakes in typing his letters. He told himself that *if* he were to embroil himself in the matter, that would be the reason. He did not admit to himself that he had been rather bored of late and that the very triviality of the business attracted him.

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“The parsley sinking into the butter on a hot day,” he murmured to himself.

‘Parsley? Butter?’ Miss Lemon looked startled.

‘A quotation from one of your classics,’ he said. ‘You are acquainted, no doubt, with the Adventures, to say nothing of the Exploits, of Sherlock Holmes.’

‘You mean these Baker Street societies and all that,’ said Miss Lemon. ‘Grown men being so silly! But there, that’s men all over. Like the model railways they go on playing with. I can’t say I’ve ever had time to *read* any of the stories. When I do get time for reading, which isn’t very often, I prefer an improving book.’

Hercule Poirot bowed his head gracefully.

‘How would it be, Miss Lemon, if you were to invite your sister here for some suitable refreshment – afternoon tea, perhaps? I might be able to be of some slight assistance to her.’

‘That’s very kind of you, M. Poirot. Really very kind indeed. My sister is always free in the afternoons.’

‘Then shall we say tomorrow, if you can arrange it?’

And in due course, the faithful George was instructed to provide a meal of square crumpets richly buttered, symmetrical sandwiches, and other suitable components of a lavish English afternoon tea.

Chapter 2

Miss Lemon's sister, whose name was Mrs Hubbard, had a definite resemblance to her sister. She was a good deal yellower of skin, she was plumper, her hair was more frivolously done, and she was less brisk in manner, but the eyes that looked out of a round and amiable countenance were the same shrewd eyes that gleamed through Miss Lemon's pince-nez.

'This is very kind of you, I'm sure, M. Poirot,' she said. '*Very* kind. And such a delicious tea, too. I'm sure I've eaten far more than I should – well, perhaps just *one* more sandwich – tea? Well, just *half* a cup.'

'First,' said Poirot, 'we make the repast – afterwards we get down to business.'

He smiled at her amiably and twirled his moustache, and Mrs Hubbard said:

'You know, you're exactly like I pictured you from Felicity's description.'

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After a moment's startled realisation that Felicity was the severe Miss Lemon's Christian name, Poirot replied that he should have expected no less given Miss Lemon's efficiency.

'Of course,' said Mrs Hubbard absently, taking a second sandwich, 'Felicity has never cared for *people*. I do. That's why I'm so worried.'

'Can you explain to me exactly what does worry you?'

'Yes, I can. It would be natural enough for money to be taken – small sums here and there. And if it were jewellery that's quite straightforward too – at least, I don't mean straightforward, quite the opposite – but it would fit in – with kleptomania or dishonesty. But I'll just read you a list of the things that have been taken, that I've put down on paper.'

Mrs Hubbard opened her bag and took out a small notebook.

Evening shoe (one of a new pair)

Bracelet (costume jewellery)

Diamond ring (found in plate of soup)

Powder compact

Lipstick

Stethoscope

Ear-rings

Cigarette lighter