

Agatha Christie



The Thirteen Problems

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 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 Surt
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
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

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
The Hollow
The Labours of Hercules

* novelised by Charles Osborne

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

**The Thirteen
Problems**

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To Leonard and Katherine Woolley

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Chapter 1

The Tuesday Night Club

‘Unsolved mysteries.’

Raymond West blew out a cloud of smoke and repeated the words with a kind of deliberate self-conscious pleasure.

‘Unsolved mysteries.’

He looked round him with satisfaction. The room was an old one with broad black beams across the ceiling and it was furnished with good old furniture that belonged to it. Hence Raymond West’s approving glance. By profession he was a writer and he liked the atmosphere to be flawless. His Aunt Jane’s house always pleased him as the right setting for her personality. He looked across the hearth to where she sat erect in the big grandfather chair. Miss Marple wore a black brocade dress, very much pinched in round the waist. Mechlin lace was arranged in a cascade down the front of the bodice. She had on black lace mittens, and a

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black lace cap surmounted the piled-up masses of her snowy hair. She was knitting – something white and soft and fleecy. Her faded blue eyes, benignant and kindly, surveyed her nephew and her nephew's guests with gentle pleasure. They rested first on Raymond himself, self-consciously debonair, then on Joyce Lemprière, the artist, with her close-cropped black head and queer hazel-green eyes, then on that well-groomed man of the world, Sir Henry Clithering. There were two other people in the room, Dr Pender, the elderly clergyman of the parish, and Mr Petherick, the solicitor, a dried-up little man with eyeglasses which he looked over and not through. Miss Marple gave a brief moment of attention to all these people and returned to her knitting with a gentle smile upon her lips.

Mr Petherick gave the dry little cough with which he usually prefaced his remarks.

‘What is that you say, Raymond? Unsolved mysteries? Ha – and what about them?’

‘Nothing about them,’ said Joyce Lemprière. ‘Raymond just likes the sound of the words and of himself saying them.’

Raymond West threw her a glance of reproach at which she threw back her head and laughed.

‘He is a humbug, isn't he, Miss Marple?’ she demanded. ‘You know that, I am sure.’

Miss Marple smiled gently at her but made no reply.

‘Life itself is an unsolved mystery,’ said the clergyman gravely.

Raymond sat up in his chair and flung away his cigarette with an impulsive gesture.

‘That’s not what I mean. I was not talking philosophy,’ he said. ‘I was thinking of actual bare prosaic facts, things that have happened and that no one has ever explained.’

‘I know just the sort of thing you mean, dear,’ said Miss Marple. ‘For instance Mrs Carruthers had a very strange experience yesterday morning. She bought two gills of picked shrimps at Elliot’s. She called at two other shops and when she got home she found she had not got the shrimps with her. She went back to the two shops she had visited but these shrimps had completely disappeared. Now that seems to me very remarkable.’

‘A very fishy story,’ said Sir Henry Clithering gravely.

‘There are, of course, all kinds of possible explanations,’ said Miss Marple, her cheeks growing slightly pinker with excitement. ‘For instance, somebody else—’

‘My dear Aunt,’ said Raymond West with some amusement, ‘I didn’t mean that sort of village incident. I was thinking of murders and disappearances – the kind of thing that Sir Henry could tell us about by the hour if he liked.’

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'But I never talk shop,' said Sir Henry modestly. 'No, I never talk shop.'

Sir Henry Clithering had been until lately Commissioner of Scotland Yard.

'I suppose there are a lot of murders and things that never are solved by the police,' said Joyce Lemprière.

'That is an admitted fact, I believe,' said Mr Petherick.

'I wonder,' said Raymond West, 'what class of brain really succeeds best in unravelling a mystery? One always feels that the average police detective must be hampered by lack of imagination.'

'That is the layman's point of view,' said Sir Henry dryly.

'You really want a committee,' said Joyce, smiling. 'For psychology and imagination go to the writer -'

She made an ironical bow to Raymond but he remained serious.

'The art of writing gives one an insight into human nature,' he said gravely. 'One sees, perhaps, motives that the ordinary person would pass by.'

'I know, dear,' said Miss Marple, 'that your books are very clever. But do you think that people are really so unpleasant as you make them out to be?'

'My dear Aunt,' said Raymond gently, 'keep your beliefs. Heaven forbid that *I* should in any way shatter them.'

'I mean,' said Miss Marple, puckering her brow a

little as she counted the stitches in her knitting, 'that so many people seem to me not to be either bad or good, but simply, you know, very silly.'

Mr Petherick gave his dry little cough again.

'Don't you think, Raymond,' he said, 'that you attach too much weight to imagination? Imagination is a very dangerous thing, as we lawyers know only too well. To be able to sift evidence impartially, to take the facts and look at them as facts – that seems to me the only logical method of arriving at the truth. I may add that in my experience it is the only one that succeeds.'

'Bah!' cried Joyce, flinging back her black head indignantly. 'I bet I could beat you all at this game. I am not only a woman – and say what you like, women have an intuition that is denied to men – I am an artist as well. I see things that you don't. And then, too, as an artist I have knocked about among all sorts and conditions of people. I know life as darling Miss Marple here cannot possibly know it.'

'I don't know about that, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'Very painful and distressing things happen in villages sometimes.'

'May I speak?' said Dr Pender smiling. 'It is the fashion nowadays to decry the clergy, I know, but we hear things, we know a side of human character which is a sealed book to the outside world.'

'Well,' said Joyce, 'it seems to me we are a pretty

representative gathering. How would it be if we formed a Club? What is today? Tuesday? We will call it The Tuesday Night Club. It is to meet every week, and each member in turn has to propound a problem. Some mystery of which they have personal knowledge, and to which, of course, they know the answer. Let me see, how many are we? One, two, three, four, five. We ought really to be six.'

'You have forgotten me, dear,' said Miss Marple, smiling brightly.

Joyce was slightly taken aback, but she concealed the fact quickly.

'That would be lovely, Miss Marple,' she said. 'I didn't think you would care to play.'

'I think it would be very interesting,' said Miss Marple, 'especially with so many clever gentlemen present. I am afraid I am not clever myself, but living all these years in St Mary Mead does give one an insight into human nature.'

'I am sure your co-operation will be very valuable,' said Sir Henry, courteously.

'Who is going to start?' said Joyce.

'I think there is no doubt as to that,' said Dr Pender, 'when we have the great good fortune to have such a distinguished man as Sir Henry staying with us -'

He left his sentence unfinished, making a courtly bow in the direction of Sir Henry.

The latter was silent for a minute or two. At last he sighed and recrossed his legs and began:

‘It is a little difficult for me to select just the kind of thing you want, but I think, as it happens, I know of an instance which fits these conditions very aptly. You may have seen some mention of the case in the papers of a year ago. It was laid aside at the time as an unsolved mystery, but, as it happens, the solution came into my hands not very many days ago.

‘The facts are very simple. Three people sat down to a supper consisting, amongst other things, of tinned lobster. Later in the night, all three were taken ill, and a doctor was hastily summoned. Two of the people recovered, the third one died.’

‘Ah!’ said Raymond approvingly.

‘As I say, the facts as such were very simple. Death was considered to be due to ptomaine poisoning, a certificate was given to that effect, and the victim was duly buried. But things did not rest at that.’

Miss Marple nodded her head.

‘There was talk, I suppose,’ she said, ‘there usually is.’

‘And now I must describe the actors in this little drama. I will call the husband and wife Mr and Mrs Jones, and the wife’s companion Miss Clark. Mr Jones was a traveller for a firm of manufacturing chemists. He was a good-looking man in a kind of coarse, florid

way, aged about fifty. His wife was a rather commonplace woman, of about forty-five. The companion, Miss Clark, was a woman of sixty, a stout cheery woman with a beaming rubicund face. None of them, you might say, very interesting.

‘Now the beginning of the troubles arose in a very curious way. Mr Jones had been staying the previous night at a small commercial hotel in Birmingham. It happened that the blotting paper in the blotting book had been put in fresh that day, and the chambermaid, having apparently nothing better to do, amused herself by studying the blotter in the mirror just after Mr Jones had been writing a letter there. A few days later there was a report in the papers of the death of Mrs Jones as the result of eating tinned lobster, and the chambermaid then imparted to her fellow servants the words that she had deciphered on the blotting pad. They were as follows: *Entirely dependent on my wife . . . when she is dead I will . . . hundreds and thousands . . .*

‘You may remember that there had recently been a case of a wife being poisoned by her husband. It needed very little to fire the imagination of these maids. Mr Jones had planned to do away with his wife and inherit hundreds of thousands of pounds! As it happened one of the maids had relations living in the small market town where the Joneses resided. She wrote to them, and they in return wrote to her. Mr Jones, it seemed,