THE MURDER AT THE VICARAGE

[Illustrated]

BY

AGATHA CHRISTIE

ENGLAND

1930

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ABOUT AUTHOR



Agatha Mary Christie, (1890 – 1976) was an English writer known for her sixty-six detective novels and fourteen short story collections, particularly those revolving around fictional detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. She also wrote the world's longest-running play The Mousetrap,

performed in the West End from 1952 to 2020, as well as six novels under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott. In 1971, she was appointed a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) for her contribution to literature.

Christie was born into a wealthy upper-middle-class family in Torquay, Devon, and was largely home-schooled. She was initially an unsuccessful writer with six consecutive rejections, but this changed in 1920 when The Mysterious Affair at Styles, featuring detective Hercule Poirot, was published. Her first husband was Archibald Christie; they married in 1914 and had one child together before divorcing in 1928. During both the First and Second World Wars, she served in hospital dispensaries, acquiring a thorough knowledge of the poisons which featured in many of her novels, short stories, and plays. Following her marriage to archaeologist Max Mallowan in 1930, she spent several months each year on digs in the Middle East, and used her first-hand knowledge of his profession in her fiction.

Guinness World Records lists Christie as the best-selling fiction writer of all time, her novels having sold over two billion copies. According to Index Translationum, she remains the most-translated individual author. And Then There Were None is one of the highest selling books of all time, with

approximately 100 million sales. Christie's stage play The Mousetrap holds the world record for longest initial run. It opened at the Ambassadors Theatre in the West End on 25 November 1952, and by September 2018 there had been more than 27,500 performances. The play was closed in March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In 1955, Christie was the first recipient of the Mystery Writers of America's Grand Master Award. Later that year, Witness for the Prosecution received an Edgar Award for best play. In 2013, she was voted the best crime writer and The Murder of Roger Ackroyd the best crime novel ever by 600 professional novelists of the Crime Writers' Association. In September 2015, coinciding with her 125th birthday, And Then There Were None was named the "World's Favourite Christie" in a vote sponsored by the author's estate. Most of Christie's books and short stories have been adapted for television, radio, video games, and graphic novels, and more than thirty feature films have been based on her work.

To

Rosalind

I



It is difficult to know quite where to begin this story, but I have fixed my choice on a certain Wednesday at luncheon at the Vicarage. The conversation, though in the main irrelevant to the matter in hand, yet contained one or two suggestive incidents which influenced later developments.

I had just finished carving some boiled beef (remarkably tough by the way) and on resuming my seat I remarked, in a spirit most unbecoming to my cloth, that anyone who murdered Colonel Protheroe would be doing the world at large a service.

My young nephew, Dennis, said instantly:

"That'll be remembered against you when the old boy is found bathed in blood. Mary will give evidence, won't you, Mary? And describe how you brandished the carving knife in a vindictive manner."

Mary, who is in service at the Vicarage as a stepping-stone to better things and higher wages, merely said in a loud, businesslike voice, "Greens," and thrust a cracked dish at him in a truculent manner.

My wife said in a sympathetic voice: "Has he been very trying?"

I did not reply at once, for Mary, setting the greens on the table with a bang, proceeded to thrust a dish of singularly moist and unpleasant dumplings under my nose. I said, "No, thank you," and she deposited the dish with a clatter on the table and left the room.

“It is a pity that I am such a shocking housekeeper,” said my wife, with a tinge of genuine regret in her voice.

I was inclined to agree with her. My wife’s name is Griselda—a highly suitable name for a parson’s wife. But there the suitability ends. She is not in the least meek.

I have always been of the opinion that a clergyman should be unmarried. Why I should have urged Griselda to marry me at the end of twenty-four hours’ acquaintance is a mystery to me. Marriage, I have always held, is a serious affair, to be entered into only after long deliberation and forethought, and suitability of tastes and inclinations is the most important consideration.

Griselda is nearly twenty years younger than myself. She is most distractingly pretty and quite incapable of taking anything seriously. She is incompetent in every way, and extremely trying to live with. She treats the parish as a kind of huge joke arranged for her amusement. I have endeavoured to form her mind and failed. I am more than ever convinced that celibacy is desirable for clergy. I have frequently hinted as much to Griselda, but she has only laughed.

“My dear,” I said, “if you would only exercise a little care—”

"I do sometimes," said Griselda. "But, on the whole, I think things go worse when I'm trying. I'm evidently not a housekeeper by nature. I find it better to leave things to Mary and just make up my mind to be uncomfortable and have nasty things to eat."

"And what about your husband, my dear?" I said reproachfully, and proceeding to follow the example of the devil in quoting Scripture for his own ends I added: "She looketh to the ways of her household…"

"Think how lucky you are not to be torn to pieces by lions," said Griselda, quickly interrupting. "Or burnt at the stake. Bad food and lots of dust and dead wasps is really nothing to make a fuss about. Tell me more about Colonel Protheroe. At any rate the early Christians were lucky enough not to have churchwardens."

"Pompous old brute," said Dennis. "No wonder his first wife ran away from him."

"I don't see what else she could do," said my wife.

"Griselda," I said sharply. "I will not have you speaking in that way."

"Darling," said my wife affectionately. "Tell me about him. What was the trouble? Was it Mr.

Hawes's becking and nodding and crossing himself every other minute?"

Hawes is our new curate. He has been with us just over three weeks. He has High Church views and fasts on Fridays. Colonel Protheroe is a great opposer of ritual in any form.

"Not this time. He did touch on it in passing. No, the whole trouble arose out of Mrs. Price Ridley's wretched pound note."

Mrs. Price Ridley is a devout member of my congregation. Attending early service on the anniversary of her son's death, she put a pound note in the offertory bag. Later, reading the amount of the collection posted up, she was pained to observe that one ten-shilling note was the highest item mentioned.

She complained to me about it, and I pointed out, very reasonably, that she must have made a mistake.

"We're none of us so young as we were," I said, trying to turn it off tactfully. "And we must pay the penalty of advancing years."

Strangely enough, my words only seemed to incense her further. She said that things had a very odd look and that she was surprised I didn't think so also. And she flounced away and, I gather, took

her troubles to Colonel Protheroe. Protheroe is the kind of man who enjoys making a fuss on every conceivable occasion. He made a fuss. It is a pity he made it on a Wednesday. I teach in the Church Day School on Wednesday mornings, a proceeding that causes me acute nervousness and leaves me unsettled for the rest of the day.

"Well, I suppose he must have some fun," said my wife, with the air of trying to sum up the position impartially. "Nobody flutters round him and calls him the dear vicar, and embroiders awful slippers for him, and gives him bed-socks for Christmas. Both his wife and his daughter are fed up to the teeth with him. I suppose it makes him happy to feel important somewhere."

"He needn't be offensive about it," I said with some heat. "I don't think he quite realized the implications of what he was saying. He wants to go over all the Church accounts—in case of defalcations—that was the word he used. Defalcations! Does he suspect me of embezzling the Church funds?"

"Nobody would suspect you of anything, darling," said Griselda. "You're so transparently above suspicion that really it would be a marvellous opportunity. I wish you'd embezzle the S.P.G. funds. I hate missionaries—I always have."

I would have reproved her for that sentiment, but Mary entered at that moment with a partially cooked rice pudding. I made a mild protest, but Griselda said that the Japanese always ate half-cooked rice and had marvellous brains in consequence.

"I dare say," she said, "that if you had a rice pudding like this every day till Sunday, you'd preach the most marvellous sermon."

"Heaven forbid," I said with a shudder.

"Protheroe's coming over tomorrow evening and we're going over the accounts together," I went on. "I must finish preparing my talk for the C.E.M.S. today. Looking up a reference, I became so engrossed in Canon Shirley's Reality that I haven't got on as well as I should. What are you doing this afternoon, Griselda?"

"My duty," said Griselda. "My duty as the Vicaress. Tea and scandal at four-thirty."

"Who is coming?"

Griselda ticked them off on her fingers with a glow of virtue on her face. "Mrs. Price Ridley, Miss Wetherby, Miss Hartnell, and that terrible Miss Marple."

"I rather like Miss Marple," I said. "She has, at least, a sense of humour."

“She’s the worst cat in the village,” said Griselda. “And she always knows every single thing that happens—and draws the worst inferences from it.”

Griselda, as I have said, is much younger than I am. At my time of life, one knows that the worst is usually true.

“Well, don’t expect me in for tea, Griselda,” said Dennis.

“Beast!” said Griselda.

“Yes, but look here, the Protheroes really did ask me for tennis today.”

“Beast!” said Griselda again.

Dennis beat a prudent retreat and Griselda and I went together into my study.

“I wonder who we shall have for tea,” said Griselda, seating herself on my writing-table. “Dr. Stone and Miss Cram, I suppose, and perhaps Mrs. Lestrange. By the way, I called on her yesterday, but she was out. Yes, I’m sure we shall have Mrs. Lestrange for tea. It’s so mysterious, isn’t it, her arriving like this and taking a house down here, and hardly ever going outside it? Makes one think of detective stories. You know—‘Who was she, the mysterious woman with the pale, beautiful face? What was her past history? Nobody knew. There

was something faintly sinister about her.' I believe Dr. Haydock knows something about her."

"You read too many detective stories, Griselda," I observed mildly.

"What about you?" she retorted. "I was looking everywhere for The Stain on the Stairs the other day when you were in here writing a sermon. And at last I came in to ask you if you'd seen it anywhere, and what did I find?"

I had the grace to blush.

"I picked it up at random. A chance sentence caught my eye and—"

"I know those chance sentences," said Griselda. She quoted impressively, "And then a very curious thing happened—Griselda rose, crossed the room and kissed her elderly husband affectionately."

She suited the action to the word.

"Is that a very curious thing?" I inquired.

"Of course it is," said Griselda. "Do you realize, Len, that I might have married a Cabinet Minister, a Baronet, a rich Company Promoter, three subalterns and a ne'er-do-well with attractive manners, and that instead I chose you? Didn't it astonish you very much?"

"At the time it did," I replied. "I have often wondered why you did it."

Griselda laughed.

"It made me feel so powerful," she murmured. "The others thought me simply wonderful and of course it would have been very nice for them to have me. But I'm everything you most dislike and disapprove of, and yet you couldn't withstand me! My vanity couldn't hold out against that. It's so much nicer to be a secret and delightful sin to anybody than to be a feather in their cap. I make you frightfully uncomfortable and stir you up the wrong way the whole time, and yet you adore me madly. You adore me madly, don't you?"

"Naturally I am very fond of you, my dear."

"Oh! Len, you adore me. Do you remember that day when I stayed up in town and sent you a wire you never got because the postmistress's sister was having twins and she forgot to send it round? The state you got into and you telephoned Scotland Yard and made the most frightful fuss."

There are things one hates being reminded of. I had really been strangely foolish on the occasion in question. I said:

"If you don't mind, dear, I want to get on with the C.E.M.S."

Griselda gave a sigh of intense irritation, ruffled my hair up on end, smoothed it down again, said:

"You don't deserve me. You really don't. I'll have an affair with the artist. I will—really and truly. And then think of the scandal in the parish."

"There's a good deal already," I said mildly.

Griselda laughed, blew me a kiss, and departed through the window.

II



Griselda is a very irritating woman. On leaving the luncheon table, I had felt myself to be in a good mood for preparing a really forceful address for the Church of England Men's Society. Now I felt restless and disturbed.

Just when I was really settling down to it, Lettice Protheroe drifted in.

I use the word drifted advisedly. I have read novels in which young people are described as bursting with energy—joie de vivre, the magnificent vitality of youth.... Personally, all the

young people I come across have the air of animal wraiths.

Lettice was particularly wraithlike this afternoon. She is a pretty girl, very tall and fair and completely vague. She drifted through the French window, absently pulled off the yellow beret she was wearing and murmured vaguely with a kind of faraway surprise: "Oh! it's you."

There is a path from Old Hall through the woods which comes out by our garden gate, so that most people coming from there come in at that gate and up to the study window instead of going a long way round by the road and coming to the front door. I was not surprised at Lettice coming in this way, but I did a little resent her attitude.

If you come to a Vicarage, you ought to be prepared to find a Vicar.

She came in and collapsed in a crumpled heap in one of my big armchairs. She plucked aimlessly at her hair, staring at the ceiling.

"Is Dennis anywhere about?"

"I haven't seen him since lunch. I understood he was going to play tennis at your place."

"Oh!" said Lettice. "I hope he isn't. He won't find anybody there."

"He said you asked him."

"I believe I did. Only that was Friday. And today's Tuesday."

"It's Wednesday," I said.

"Oh, how dreadful!" said Lettice. "That means that I've forgotten to go to lunch with some people for the third time."

Fortunately it didn't seem to worry her much.

"Is Griselda anywhere about?"

"I expect you'll find her in the studio in the garden—sitting to Lawrence Redding."

"There's been quite a shemozzle about him," said Lettice. "With father, you know. Father's dreadful."

"What was the she—whatever it was about?" I inquired.

"About his painting me. Father found out about it. Why shouldn't I be painted in my bathing dress? If I go on a beach in it, why shouldn't I be painted in it?"

Lettice paused and then went on.

"It's really absurd—father forbidding a young man the house. Of course, Lawrence and I simply shriek about it. I shall come and be done here in your studio."

"No, my dear," I said. "Not if your father forbids it."

"Oh! dear," said Lettice, sighing. "How tiresome everyone is. I feel shattered. Definitely. If only I had some money I'd go away, but without it I can't. If only father would be decent and die, I should be all right."

"You must not say things like that, Lettice."

"Well, if he doesn't want me to want him to die, he shouldn't be so horrible over money. I don't wonder mother left him. Do you know, for years I believed she was dead. What sort of a young man did she run away with? Was he nice?"

"It was before your father came to live here."

"I wonder what's become of her. I expect Anne will have an affair with someone soon. Anne hates me—she's quite decent to me, but she hates me. She's getting old and she's doesn't like it. That's the age you break out, you know."

I wondered if Lettice was going to spend the entire afternoon in my study.

"You haven't seen my gramophone records, have you?" she asked.

"No."

"How tiresome. I know I've left them somewhere. And I've lost the dog. And my wrist watch is somewhere, only it doesn't much matter because it won't go. Oh! dear, I am so sleepy. I can't think why, because I didn't get up till eleven. But life's very shattering, don't you think? Oh! dear, I must go. I'm going to see Dr. Stone's barrow at three o'clock."

I glanced at the clock and remarked that it was now five-and-twenty to four.

"Oh! Is it? How dreadful. I wonder if they've waited or if they've gone without me. I suppose I'd better go down and do something about it."

She got up and drifted out again, murmuring over her shoulder:

"You'll tell Dennis, won't you?"

I said "Yes" mechanically, only realizing too late that I had no idea what it was I was to tell Dennis. But I reflected that in all probability it did not matter. I fell to cogitating on the subject of Dr. Stone, a well-known archaeologist who had recently come to stay at the Blue Boar, whilst he superintended the excavation of a barrow situated on Colonel Protheroe's property. There had already been several disputes between him and the

Colonel. I was amused at his appointment to take Lettice to see the operations.

It occurred to me that Lettice Protheroe was something of a minx. I wondered how she would get on with the archaeologist's secretary, Miss Cram. Miss Cram is a healthy young woman of twenty-five, noisy in manner, with a high colour, fine animal spirits and a mouth that always seems to have more than its full share of teeth.

Village opinion is divided as to whether she is no better than she should be, or else a woman of iron virtue who purposes to become Mrs. Stone at an early opportunity. She is in every way a great contrast to Lettice.

I could imagine that the state of things at Old Hall might not be too happy. Colonel Protheroe had married again some five years previously. The second Mrs. Protheroe was a remarkably handsome woman in a rather unusual style. I had always guessed that the relations between her and her stepdaughter were not too happy.

I had one more interruption. This time, it was my curate, Hawes. He wanted to know the details of my interview with Protheroe. I told him that the colonel had deplored his "Romish tendencies" but that the real purpose of his visit had been on quite another matter. At the same time, I entered a

protest of my own, and told him plainly that he must conform to my ruling. On the whole, he took my remarks very well.

I felt rather remorseful when he had gone for not liking him better. These irrational likes and dislikes that one takes to people are, I am sure, very unChristian.

With a sigh, I realized that the hands of the clock on my writing-table pointed to a quarter to five, a sign that it was really half-past four, and I made my way to the drawing-room.

Four of my parishioners were assembled there with teacups. Griselda sat behind the tea table trying to look natural in her environment, but only succeeded in looking more out of place than usual.

I shook hands all round and sat down between Miss Marple and Miss Wetherby.

Miss Marple is a white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner—Miss Wetherby is a mixture of vinegar and gush. Of the two Miss Marple is much the more dangerous.

"We were just talking," said Griselda in a honeysweet voice, "about Dr. Stone and Miss Cram."

A ribald rhyme concocted by Dennis shot through my head.

"Miss Cram doesn't give a damn."

I had a sudden yearning to say it out loud and observe the effect, but fortunately I refrained. Miss Wetherby said tersely:

"No nice girl would do it," and shut her thin lips disapprovingly.

"Do what?" I inquired.

"Be a secretary to an unmarried man," said Miss Wetherby in a horrified tone.

"Oh! my dear," said Miss Marple. "I think married ones are the worst. Remember poor Mollie Carter."

"Married men living apart from their wives are, of course, notorious," said Miss Wetherby.

"And even some of the ones living with their wives," murmured Miss Marple. "I remember—"

I interrupted these unsavoury reminiscences.

"But surely," I said, "in these days a girl can take a post in just the same way as a man does."

"To come away to the country? And stay at the same hotel?" said Mrs. Price Ridley in a severe voice.

Miss Wetherby murmured to Miss Marple in a low voice:

"And all the bedrooms on the same floor…."

Miss Hartnell, who is weather-beaten and jolly and much dreaded by the poor, observed in a loud, hearty voice:

"The poor man will be caught before he knows where he is. He's as innocent as a babe unborn, you can see that."

Curious what turns of phrase we employ. None of the ladies present would have dreamed of alluding to an actual baby till it was safely in the cradle, visible to all.

"Disgusting, I call it," continued Miss Hartnell, with her usual tactlessness. "The man must be at least twenty-five years older than she is."

Three female voices rose at once making disconnected remarks about the Choir Boys' Outing, the regrettable incident at the last Mothers' Meeting, and the draughts in the church. Miss Marple twinkled at Griselda.

"Don't you think," said my wife, "that Miss Cram may just like having an interesting job? And that she considers Dr. Stone just as an employer?"

There was a silence. Evidently none of the four ladies agreed. Miss Marple broke the silence by patting Griselda on the arm.

“My dear,” she said, “you are very young. The young have such innocent minds.”

Griselda said indignantly that she hadn’t got at all an innocent mind.

“Naturally,” said Miss Marple, unheeding of the protest, “you think the best of everyone.”

“Do you really think she wants to marry that bald-headed dull man?”

“I understand he is quite well off,” said Miss Marple. “Rather a violent temper, I’m afraid. He had quite a serious quarrel with Colonel Protheroe the other day.”

Everyone leaned forward interestedly.

“Colonel Protheroe accused him of being an ignoramus.”

“How like Colonel Protheroe, and how absurd,” said Mrs. Price Ridley.

“Very like Colonel Protheroe, but I don’t know about it being absurd,” said Miss Marple, “You remember the woman who came down here and said she represented Welfare, and after taking subscriptions she was never heard of again and proved to having nothing whatever to do with Welfare. One is so inclined to be trusting and take people at their own valuation.”

I should never have dreamed of describing Miss Marple as trusting.

"There's been some fuss about that young artist, Mr. Redding, hasn't there?" asked Miss Wetherby.

Miss Marple nodded.

"Colonel Protheroe turned him out of the house. It appears he was painting Lettice in her bathing dress."

"I always thought there was something between them," said Mrs. Price Ridley. "That young fellow is always mouching off up there. Pity the girl hasn't got a mother. A stepmother is never the same thing."

"I dare say Mrs. Protheroe does her best," said Miss Hartnell.

"Girls are so sly," deplored Mrs. Price Ridley.

"Quite a romance, isn't it?" said the softer-hearted Miss Wetherby. "He's a very good-looking young fellow."

"But loose," said Miss Hartnell. "Bound to be. An artist! Paris! Models! The Altogether!"

"Painting her in her bathing dress," said Mrs. Price Ridley. "Not quite nice."

"He's painting me too," said Griselda.

“But not in your bathing dress, dear,” said Miss Marple.

“It might be worse,” said Griselda solemnly.

“Naughty girl,” said Miss Hartnell, taking the joke broadmindedly. Everybody else looked slightly shocked.

“Did dear Lettice tell you of the trouble?” asked Miss Marple of me.

“Tell me?”

“Yes. I saw her pass through the garden and go round to the study window.”

Miss Marple always sees everything. Gardening is as good as a smoke screen, and the habit of observing birds through powerful glasses can always be turned to account.

“She mentioned it, yes,” I admitted.

“Mr. Hawes looked worried,” said Miss Marple. “I hope he hasn’t been working too hard.”

“Oh!” cried Miss Wetherby excitedly. “I quite forgot. I knew I had some news for you. I saw Dr. Haydock coming out of Mrs. Lestrange’s cottage.”

Everyone looked at each other.

“Perhaps she’s ill,” suggested Mrs. Price Ridley.

“It must have been very sudden, if so,” said Miss Hartnell. “For I saw her walking round her garden at three o’clock this afternoon, and she seemed in perfect health.”

“She and Dr. Haydock must be old acquaintances,” said Mrs. Price Ridley. “He’s been very quiet about it.”

“It’s curious,” said Miss Wetherby, “that he’s never mentioned it.”

“As a matter of fact—” said Griselda in a low, mysterious voice, and stopped. Everyone leaned forward excitely.

“I happen to know,” said Griselda impressively. “Her husband was a missionary. Terrible story. He was eaten, you know. Actually eaten. And she was forced to become the chief’s head wife. Dr. Haydock was with an expedition and rescued her.”

For a moment excitement was rife, then Miss Marple said reproachfully, but with a smile: “Naughty girl!”

She tapped Griselda reprovingly on the arm.

“Very unwise thing to do my dear. If you make up these things, people are quite likely to believe them. And sometimes that leads to complications.”

A distinct frost had come over the assembly. Two of the ladies rose to take their departure.

"I wonder if there is anything between young Lawrence Redding and Lettice Protheroe," said Miss Wetherby. "It certainly looks like it. What do you think, Miss Marple?"

Miss Marple seemed thoughtful.

"I shouldn't have said so myself. Not Lettice. Quite another person I should have said."

"But Colonel Protheroe must have thought—"

"He has always struck me as rather a stupid man," said Miss Marple. "The kind of man who gets the wrong idea into his head and is obstinate about it. Do you remember Joe Bucknell who used to keep the Blue Boar? Such a to-do about his daughter carrying on with young Bailey. And all the time it was that minx of a wife of his."

She was looking full at Griselda as she spoke, and I suddenly felt a wild surge of anger.

"Don't you think, Miss Marple," I said, "that we're all inclined to let our tongues run away with us too much. Charity thinketh no evil, you know. Inestimable harm may be done by foolish wagging of tongues in ill-natured gossip."

“Dear Vicar,” said Miss Marple, “You are so unworldly. I’m afraid that observing human nature for as long as I have done, one gets not to expect very much from it. I dare say the idle tittle-tattle is very wrong and unkind, but it so often true, isn’t it?”

That last Parthian shot went home.

III



"Nasty old cat," said Griselda, as soon as the door was closed.

She made a face in the direction of the departing visitors and then looked at me and laughed.

"Len, do you really suspect me of having an affair with Lawrence Redding?"

"My dear, of course not."

“But you thought Miss Marple was hinting at it. And you rose to my defence simply beautifully. Like—like an angry tiger.”

A momentary uneasiness assailed me. A clergyman of the Church of England ought never to put himself in the position of being described as an angry tiger. However, I trusted that Griselda exaggerated.

“I felt the occasion could not pass without a protest,” I said. “But Griselda, I wish you would be a little more careful in what you say.”

“Do you mean the cannibal story?” she asked. “Or the suggestion that Lawrence was painting me in the nude! If they only knew that he was painting me in a thick cloak with a very high fur collar—the sort of thing that you could go quite purely to see the Pope in—not a bit of sinful flesh showing anywhere! In fact, it’s all marvellously pure. Lawrence never even attempts to make love to me—I can’t think why.”

“Surely knowing that you’re a married woman—”

“Don’t pretend to come out of the ark, Len. You know very well that an attractive young woman with an elderly husband is a kind of gift from heaven to a young man. There must be some other reason—it’s not that I’m unattractive—I’m not.”

"Surely you don't want him to make love to you?"

"N-n-o," said Griselda, with more hesitation than I thought becoming.

"If he's in love with Lettice Protheroe—"

"Miss Marple didn't seem to think he was."

"Miss Marple may be mistaken."

"She never is. That kind of old cat is always right." She paused a minute and then said, with a quick sidelong glance at me: "You do believe me, don't you? I mean, that there's nothing between Lawrence and me."

"My dear Griselda," I said, surprised. "Of course."

My wife came across and kissed me.

"I wish you weren't so terribly easy to deceive, Len. You'd believe me whatever I said."

"I should hope so. But, my dear, I do beg you to guard your tongue and be careful of what you say. These women are singularly deficient in humour, remember, and take everything seriously."

"What they need," said Griselda, "is a little immorality in their lives. Then they wouldn't be so busy looking for it in other people's."

And on this she left the room, and glancing at my watch I hurried out to pay some visits that ought to have been made earlier in the day.

That Wednesday evening service was sparsely attended as usual, but when I came out through the church, after disrobing in the vestry, it was empty save for a woman who stood staring up at one of our windows. We have some rather fine old stained glass, and indeed the church itself is well worth looking at. She turned at my footsteps, and I saw that it was Mrs. Lestrange.

We both hesitated a moment, and then I said:

"I hope you like our little church."

"I've been admiring the screen," she said.

Her voice was pleasant, low, yet very distinct, with a clear-cut enunciation. She added:

"I'm so sorry to have missed your wife yesterday."

We talked a few minutes longer about the church. She was evidently a cultured woman who knew something of Church history and architecture. We left the building together and walked down the road, since one way to the Vicarage led past her house. As we arrived at the gate, she said pleasantly:

“Come in, won’t you? And tell me what you think of what I have done.”

I accepted the invitation. Little Gates had formerly belonged to an Anglo-Indian colonel, and I could not help feeling relieved by the disappearance of the brass tables and Burmese idols. It was furnished now very simply, but in exquisite taste. There was a sense of harmony and rest about it.

Yet I wondered more and more what had brought such a woman as Mrs. Lestrange to St. Mary Mead. She was so very clearly a woman of the world that it seemed a strange taste to bury herself in a country village.

In clear light of her drawing-room I had an opportunity of observing her closely for the first time.

She was a very tall woman. Her hair was gold with a tinge of red in it. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were dark, whether by art or by nature I could not decide. If she was, as I thought, made up, it was done very artistically. There was something Sphinxlike about her face when it was in repose and she had the most curious eyes I have ever seen—they were almost golden in shade.

Her clothes were perfect and she had all the ease of manner of a well-bred woman, and yet there was something about her that was incongruous and baffling. You felt that she was a mystery. The word Griselda had used occurred to me—sinister. Absurd, of course, and yet—was it so absurd? The thought sprang unbidden into my mind: "This woman would stick at nothing."

Our talk was on most normal lines—pictures, books, old churches. Yet somehow I got very strongly the impression that there was something else—something of quite a different nature that Mrs. Lestrange wanted to say to me.

I caught her eye on me once or twice, looking at me with a curious hesitancy, as though she were unable to make up her mind. She kept the talk, I noticed, strictly to impersonal subjects. She made no mention of a husband or relations.

But all the time there was that strange urgent appeal in her glance. It seemed to say: "Shall I tell you? I want to. Can't you help me?"

Yet in the end it died away—or perhaps it had all been my fancy. I had the feeling that I was being dismissed. I rose and took my leave. As I went out of the room, I glanced back and saw her staring after me with a puzzled, doubtful expression. On an impulse I came back:

"If there is anything I can do—"

She said doubtfully: "It's very kind of you—"

We were both silent. Then she said:

"I wish I knew. It's very difficult. No, I don't think anyone can help me. But thank you for offering to do so."

That seemed final, so I went. But as I did so, I wondered. We are not used to mysteries in St. Mary Mead.

So much is this the case that as I emerged from the gate I was pounced upon. Miss Hartnell is very good at pouncing in a heavy and cumbrous way.

"I saw you!" she exclaimed with ponderous humour. "And I was so excited. Now you can tell us all about it."

"About what?"

"The mysterious lady! Is she a widow or has she a husband somewhere?"

"I really couldn't say. She didn't tell me."

"How very peculiar. One would think she would be certain to mention something casually. It almost looks, doesn't it, as though she had a reason for not speaking?"

"I really don't see that."

"Ah! But as dear Miss Marple says, you are so unworldly, dear vicar. Tell me, has she known Dr. Haydock long?"

"She didn't mention him, so I don't know."

"Really? But what did you talk about then?"

"Pictures, music, books," I said truthfully.

Miss Hartnell, whose only topics of conversation are the purely personal, looked suspicious and unbelieving. Taking advantage of a momentary hesitation on her part as to how to proceed next, I bade her good night and walked rapidly away.

I called in at a house farther down the village and returned to the Vicarage by the garden gate, passing, as I did so, the danger point of Miss Marple's garden. However, I did not see how it was humanly possible for the news of my visit to Mrs. Lestrange to have yet reached her ears, so I felt reasonably safe.

As I latched the gate, it occurred to me that I would just step down to the shed in the garden which young Lawrence Redding was using as a studio, and see for myself how Griselda's portrait was progressing.

I append a rough sketch here which will be useful in the light of after happenings, only sketching in such details as are necessary.

I had no idea there was anyone in the studio. There had been no voices from within to warn me, and I suppose that my own footsteps made no noise upon the grass.

I opened the door and then stopped awkwardly on the threshold. For there were two people in the studio, and the man's arms were round the woman and he was kissing her passionately.

The two people were the artist, Lawrence Redding, and Mrs. Protheroe.

I backed out precipitately and beat a retreat to my study. There I sat down in a chair, took out my pipe, and thought things over. The discovery had come as a great shock to me. Especially since my conversation with Lettice that afternoon, I had felt fairly certain that there was some kind of understanding growing up between her and the young man. Moreover, I was convinced that she herself thought so. I felt positive that she had no idea of the artist's feelings for her stepmother.

A nasty tangle. I paid a grudging tribute to Miss Marple. She had not been deceived but had evidently suspected the true state of things with a fair amount of accuracy. I had entirely misread her meaning glance at Griselda.