

CHAPTER 1

Major Palgrave Tells a Story

‘Take all this business about Kenya,’ said Major Palgrave. ‘Lots of chaps gabbing away who know nothing about the place! Now *I* spent fourteen years of my life there. Some of the best years of my life, too—’

Old Miss Marple inclined her head.

It was a gentle gesture of courtesy. Whilst Major Palgrave proceeded with the somewhat uninteresting recollections of a lifetime, Miss Marple peacefully pursued her own thoughts. It was a routine with which she was well acquainted. The locale varied. In the past, it had been predominantly India. Majors, Colonels, Lieutenant-Generals—and a familiar series of words: *Simla. Bearers. Tigers. Chota Hazri—Tiffin. Khitmagars*, and so on. With Major Palgrave the terms were slightly different. *Safari. Kikuyu. Elephants. Swahili*. But the pattern was essentially the same. An elderly man who needed a listener so that he could, in memory, relive days in which he had been happy. Days when his back had been straight, his eyesight keen, his hearing acute.

Some of these talkers had been handsome soldierly old boys, some again had been regrettably unattractive; and Major Palgrave, purple of face, with a glass eye, and the general appearance of a stuffed frog, belonged in the latter category.

Miss Marple had bestowed on all of them the same gentle charity. She had sat attentively, inclining her head from time to time in gentle agreement, thinking her own thoughts and enjoying what there was to enjoy: in this case the deep blue of a Caribbean Sea.

So kind of dear Raymond—she was thinking gratefully, so really and truly kind . . . Why he should take so much trouble about his old aunt, she really did not know. Conscience, perhaps; family feeling? Or possibly he was truly fond of her . . .

She thought, on the whole, that he *was* fond of her—he always had been—in a slightly exasperated and contemptuous way! Always trying to bring her up to date. Sending her books to read. Modern novels. So difficult—all about such unpleasant people, doing such very odd things and not, apparently, even enjoying them. ‘Sex’ as a word had not been mentioned in Miss Marple’s young days; but there had been plenty of it—not talked about so much—but enjoyed far more than nowadays, or so it seemed to her. Though usually labelled Sin, she couldn’t help feeling that that was preferable to what it seemed to be nowadays—a kind of Duty.

Her glance strayed for a moment to the book on her lap lying open at page twenty-three which was as far as she had got (and indeed as far as she felt like getting!).

A Caribbean Mystery

“Do you mean that you’ve had no sexual experience at ALL?” demanded the young man incredulously. “At *nineteen*? But you *must*. It’s vital.”

“The girl hung her head unhappily, her straight greasy hair fell forward over her face.

“I know,” she muttered, “I know.”

‘He looked at her, stained old jersey, the bare feet, the dirty toe nails, the smell of rancid fat . . . He wondered why he found her so maddeningly attractive.’

Miss Marple wondered too! And really! To have sex experience urged on you exactly as though it was an iron tonic! Poor young things . . .

‘My dear Aunt Jane, why must you bury your head in the sand like a very delightful ostrich? All bound up in this idyllic rural life of yours. REAL LIFE—that’s what matters.’

Thus Raymond—and his Aunt Jane had looked properly abashed—and said ‘Yes,’ she was afraid she *was* rather old-fashioned.

Though really rural life was far from idyllic. People like Raymond were so ignorant. In the course of her duties in a country parish, Jane Marple had acquired quite a comprehensive knowledge of the facts of rural life. She had no urge to *talk* about them, far less to *write* about them—but she knew them. Plenty of sex. Rape, incest, perversion of all kinds. (Some kinds, indeed, that even the clever young men from Oxford who wrote books didn’t seem to have heard about.)

Miss Marple came back to the Caribbean and took up the thread of what Major Palgrave was saying . . .

‘A very unusual experience,’ she said encouragingly. ‘Most interesting.’

‘I could tell you a lot more. Some of the things, of course, not fit for a lady’s ears—’

With the ease of long practice, Miss Marple dropped her eyelids in a fluttery fashion, and Major Palgrave continued his bowdlerized version of tribal customs whilst Miss Marple resumed her thoughts of her affectionate nephew.

Raymond West was a very successful novelist and made a large income, and he conscientiously and kindly did all he could to alleviate the life of his elderly aunt. The preceding winter she had had a bad go of pneumonia, and medical opinion had advised sunshine. In lordly fashion Raymond had suggested a trip to the West Indies. Miss Marple had demurred—at the expense, the distance, the difficulties of travel, and at abandoning her house in St Mary Mead. Raymond had dealt with everything. A friend who was writing a book wanted a quiet place in the country. ‘He’ll look after the house all right. He’s very house proud.’

He went on to deal with the next points. Travel was nothing nowadays. She would go by air—another friend, Diana Horrocks, was going out to Trinidad and would see Aunt Jane was all right as far as there, and at St Honoré she would stay at the Golden Palm Hotel which was run by the Sandersons. Nicest couple in the world. They’d see she was all right. He’d write to them straight away.

As it happened the Sandersons had returned to England. But their successors, the Kendals, had been very nice and

A Caribbean Mystery

friendly and had assured Raymond that he need have no qualms about his aunt. There was a very good doctor on the island in case of emergency and they themselves would keep an eye on her and see to her comfort.

They had been as good as their word, too. Molly Kendal was an ingenuous blonde of twenty odd, always apparently in good spirits. She had greeted the old lady warmly and did everything to make her comfortable. Tim Kendal, her husband, lean, dark and in his thirties, had also been kindness itself.

So there she was, thought Miss Marple, far from the rigours of the English climate, with a nice bungalow of her own, with friendly smiling West Indian girls to wait on her, Tim Kendal to meet her in the dining-room and crack a joke as he advised her about the day's menu, and an easy path from her bungalow to the sea front and the bathing beach where she could sit in a comfortable basket chair and watch the bathing. There were even a few elderly guests for company. Old Mr Rafiel, Dr Graham, Canon Prescott and his sister, and her present cavalier Major Palgrave.

What more could an elderly lady want?

It is deeply to be regretted, and Miss Marple felt guilty even admitting it to herself, but she was not as satisfied as she ought to be.

Lovely and warm, yes—and so good for her rheumatism—and beautiful scenery, though perhaps—a trifle monotonous? So *many* palm trees. Everything the same every day—never anything *happening*. Not like St Mary Mead where something was always happening. Her

nephew had once compared life in St Mary Mead to scum on a pond, and she had indignantly pointed out that smeared on a slide under the microscope there would be plenty of life to be observed. Yes, indeed, in St Mary Mead, there was always something going on. Incident after incident flashed through Miss Marple's mind, the mistake in old Mrs Linnett's cough mixture—that very odd behaviour of young Polegate—the time when Georgy Wood's mother had come down to see him—(but *was* she his mother—?) the real cause of the quarrel between Joe Arden and his wife. So many interesting human problems—giving rise to endless pleasurable hours of speculation. If only there were something here that she could—well—get her teeth into.

With a start she realized that Major Palgrave had abandoned Kenya for the North West Frontier and was relating his experiences as a subaltern. Unfortunately he was asking her with great earnestness: 'Now don't you agree?'

Long practice had made Miss Marple quite an adept at dealing with that one.

'I don't really feel that I've got sufficient experience to judge. I'm afraid I've led rather a sheltered life.'

'And so you should, dear lady, so you should,' cried Major Palgrave gallantly.

'You've had such a very varied life,' went on Miss Marple, determined to make amends for her former pleasurable inattention.

'Not bad,' said Major Palgrave, complacently. 'Not bad at all.' He looked round him appreciatively. 'Lovely place, this.'

A Caribbean Mystery

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Miss Marple and was then unable to stop herself going on: ‘Does anything ever happen here, I wonder?’

Major Palgrave stared.

‘Oh rather. Plenty of scandals—eh what? Why, I could tell you—’

But it wasn’t really scandals Miss Marple wanted. Nothing to get your teeth into in scandals nowadays. Just men and women changing partners, and calling attention to it, instead of trying decently to hush it up and be properly ashamed of themselves.

‘There was even a murder here a couple of years ago. Man called Harry Western. Made a big splash in the papers. Dare say you remember it.’

Miss Marple nodded without enthusiasm. It had not been her kind of murder. It had made a big splash mainly because everyone concerned had been very rich. It had seemed likely enough that Harry Western had shot the Count de Ferrari, his wife’s lover, and equally likely that his well-arranged alibi had been bought and paid for. Everyone seemed to have been drunk, and there was a fine scattering of dope addicts. Not really interesting people, thought Miss Marple—although no doubt very spectacular and attractive to *look* at. But definitely not *her* cup of tea.

‘And if you ask me, that wasn’t the only murder about that time.’ He nodded and winked. ‘I had my suspicions—oh!—well—’

Miss Marple dropped her ball of wool, and the Major stooped and picked it up for her.

Agatha Christie

‘Talking of murder,’ he went on. ‘I once came across a very curious case—not exactly personally.’

Miss Marple smiled encouragingly.

‘Lot of chaps talking at the club one day, you know, and a chap began telling a story. Medical man he was. One of his cases. Young fellow came and knocked him up in the middle of the night. His wife had hanged herself. They hadn’t got a telephone, so after the chap had cut her down and done what he could, he’d got out his car and hared off looking for a doctor. Well, she wasn’t dead but pretty far gone. Anyway, she pulled through. Young fellow seemed devoted to her. Cried like a child. He’d noticed that she’d been odd for some time, fits of depression and all that. Well, that was that. Everything seemed all right. But actually, about a month later, the wife took an overdose of sleeping stuff and passed out. Sad case.’

Major Palgrave paused, and nodded his head several times. Since there was obviously more to come Miss Marple waited.

‘And that’s that, you might say. Nothing there. Neurotic woman, nothing out of the usual. But about a year later, this medical chap was swapping yarns with a fellow medico, and the other chap told him about a woman who’d tried to drown herself, husband got her out, got a doctor, they pulled her round—and then a few weeks later she gassed herself.

‘Well, a bit of a coincidence—eh? Same sort of story. My chap said—“I had a case rather like that. Name of Jones (or whatever the name was)—What was your man’s name?” “Can’t remember. Robinson I think. Certainly not Jones.”

A Caribbean Mystery

‘Well, the chaps looked at each other and said it was pretty odd. And then my chap pulled out a snapshot. He showed it to the second chap. “That’s the fellow,” he said—“I’d gone along the next day to check up on the particulars, and I noticed a magnificent species of hibiscus just by the front door, a variety I’d never seen before in this country. My camera was in the car and I took a photo. Just as I snapped the shutter the husband came out of the front door so I got him as well. Don’t think he realized it. I asked him about the hibiscus but he couldn’t tell me its name.” Second medico looked at the snap. He said: “It’s a bit out of focus—But I could swear—at any rate I’m almost sure—*it’s the same man.*”

‘Don’t know if they followed it up. But if so they didn’t get anywhere. Expect Mr Jones or Robinson covered his tracks too well. But queer story, isn’t it? Wouldn’t think things like that could happen.’

‘Oh, yes, I would,’ said Miss Marple placidly. ‘Practically every day.’

‘Oh, come, come. That’s a bit fantastic.’

‘If a man gets a formula that works—he won’t stop. He’ll go on.’

‘Brides in the bath—eh?’

‘That kind of thing, yes.’

‘Doctor let me have that snap just as a curiosity—’

Major Palgrave began fumbling through an overstuffed wallet murmuring to himself: ‘Lots of things in here—don’t know why I keep all these things . . .’

Miss Marple thought she did know. They were part of the Major’s stock-in-trade. They illustrated his repertoire

of stories. The story he had just told, or so she suspected, had not been originally like that—it had been worked up a good deal in repeated telling.

The Major was still shuffling and muttering—‘Forgotten all about *that* business. Good-looking woman *she* was, you’d never suspect—now *where*—Ah—that takes my mind back—what tusks! I must show you—’

He stopped—sorted out a small photographic print and peered down at it.

‘Like to see the picture of a murderer?’

He was about to pass it to her when his movement was suddenly arrested. Looking more like a stuffed frog than ever, Major Palgrave appeared to be staring fixedly over her right shoulder—from whence came the sound of approaching footsteps and voices.

‘Well, I’m damned—I mean—’ He stuffed everything back into his wallet and crammed it into his pocket.

His face went an even deeper shade of purplish red—He exclaimed in a loud, artificial voice:

‘As I was saying—I’d like to have shown you those elephant tusks—Biggest elephant I’ve ever shot—Ah, hallo!’ His voice took on a somewhat spurious hearty note.

‘Look who’s here! The great quartette—Flora and Fauna—What luck have you had today—Eh?’

The approaching footsteps resolved themselves into four of the hotel guests whom Miss Marple already knew by sight. They consisted of two married couples and though Miss Marple was not as yet acquainted with their surnames, she knew that the big man with the upstanding

A Caribbean Mystery

bush of thick grey hair was addressed as 'Greg', that the golden blonde woman, his wife, was known as Lucky—and that the other married couple, the dark lean man and the handsome but rather weather-beaten woman, were Edward and Evelyn. They were botanists, she understood, and also interested in birds.

'No luck at all,' said Greg—'At least no luck in getting what we were after.'

'Don't know if you know Miss Marple? Colonel and Mrs Hillingdon and Greg and Lucky Dyson.'

They greeted her pleasantly and Lucky said loudly that she'd die if she didn't have a drink at once or sooner.

Greg hailed Tim Kendal who was sitting a little way away with his wife poring over account books.

'Hi, Tim. Get us some drinks.' He addressed the others. 'Planters Punch?'

They agreed.

'Same for you, Miss Marple?'

Miss Marple said Thank you, but she would prefer fresh lime.

'Fresh lime it is,' said Tim Kendal, 'and five Planters Punches.'

'Join us, Tim?'

'Wish I could. But I've got to fix up these accounts. Can't leave Molly to cope with everything. Steel band tonight, by the way.'

'Good,' cried Lucky. 'Damn it,' she winced, 'I'm all over thorns. Ouch! Edward deliberately rammed me into a thorn bush!'

'Lovely pink flowers,' said Hillingdon.

Agatha Christie

‘And lovely long thorns. Sadistic brute, aren’t you, Edward?’

‘Not like me,’ said Greg, grinning. ‘Full of the milk of human kindness.’

Evelyn Hillingdon sat down by Miss Marple and started talking to her in an easy pleasant way.

Miss Marple put her knitting down on her lap. Slowly and with some difficulty, owing to rheumatism in the neck, she turned her head over her right shoulder to look behind her. At some little distance there was the large bungalow occupied by the rich Mr Rafiel. But it showed no sign of life.

She replied suitably to Evelyn’s remarks (really, how kind people were to her!) but her eyes scanned thoughtfully the faces of the two men.

Edward Hillingdon looked a nice man. Quiet but with a lot of charm . . . And Greg—big, boisterous, happy-looking. He and Lucky were Canadian or American, she thought.

She looked at Major Palgrave, still acting a *bonhomie* a little larger than life.

Interesting . . .

A Caribbean Mystery © 1964 Agatha Christie Limited. All rights reserved. AGATHA CHRISTIE, MARPLE and the Agatha Christie Signature are registered trademarks of Agatha Christie Limited in the UK and elsewhere. All rights reserved.