

CHAPTER 1

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 the 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—'

The Murder at the Vicarage

‘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.’

Agatha Christie

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 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

The Murder at the Vicarage

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 what we shall have for tea,’ said Griselda, seating herself on my writing-table. ‘Dr Stone and Miss Cram, I suppose, and perhaps Mrs Lestrangle. By the way, I called on her yesterday, but she was out. Yes, I’m sure we shall have Mrs Lestrangle 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

The Murder at the Vicarage

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-weel 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.'

Agatha Christie

‘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.

The Murder at the Vicarage © 1930 Agatha Christie Limited. All rights reserved. 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.