

AN EXTRACT FROM
THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD

100
YEARS OF

Agatha Christie
STORIES

Chapter 1

Dr Sheppard at the Breakfast Table

Mrs Ferrars died on the night of the 16th–17th September—a Thursday. I was sent for at eight o'clock on the morning of Friday the 17th. There was nothing to be done. She had been dead some hours.

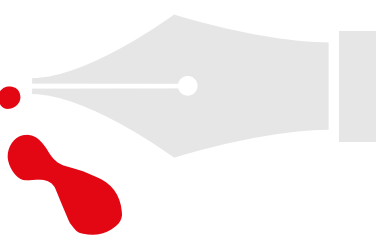
It was just a few minutes after nine when I reached home once more. I opened the front door with my latchkey, and purposely delayed a few moments in the hall, hanging up my hat and the light overcoat that I had deemed a wise precaution against the chill of an early autumn morning.

To tell the truth, I was considerably upset and worried. I am not going to pretend that at that moment I foresaw the events of the next few weeks. I emphatically did not do so.

But my instinct told me that there were stirring times ahead. From the dining-room on my left there came the rattle of tea-cups and the short, dry cough of my sister Caroline.

'Is that you, James?' she called.

An unnecessary question, since who else could it be?

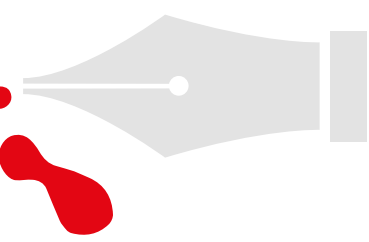


To tell the truth, it was precisely my sister Caroline who was the cause of my few minutes' delay. The motto of the mongoose family, so Mr Kipling tells us, is: 'Go and find out.' If Caroline ever adopts a crest, I should certainly suggest a mongoose rampant. One might omit the first part of the motto. Caroline can do any amount of finding out by sitting placidly at home. I don't know how she manages it, but there it is. I suspect that the servants and the tradesmen constitute her Intelligence Corps. When she goes out, it is not to gather in information, but to spread it. At that, too, she is amazingly expert.

It was really this last named trait of hers which was causing me these pangs of indecision. Whatever I told Caroline now concerning the demise of Mrs Ferrars would be common knowledge all over the village within the space of an hour and a half. As a professional man, I naturally aim at discretion. Therefore I have got into the habit of continually withholding all information possible from my sister. She usually finds out just the same, but I have the moral satisfaction of knowing that I am in no way to blame.

Mrs Ferrars' husband died just over a year ago, and Caroline has constantly asserted, without the least foundation for the assertion, that his wife poisoned him.

She scorns my invariable rejoinder that Mr Ferrars died of acute gastritis, helped on by habitual overindulgence in alcoholic beverages.



The symptoms of gastritis and arsenical poisoning are not, I agree, unlike, but Caroline bases her accusation on quite different lines.

'You've only got to look at her,' I have heard her say.

Mrs Ferrars, though not in her first youth, was a very attractive woman, and her clothes, though simple, always seemed to fit her very well, but all the same, lots of women buy their clothes in Paris, and have not, on that account, necessarily poisoned their husbands.

As I stood hesitating in the hall, with all this passing through my mind, Caroline's voice came again, with a sharper note in it.

'What on earth are you doing out there, James? Why don't you come and get your breakfast?'

'Just coming, my dear,' I said hastily. 'I've been hanging up my overcoat.'

'You could have hung up half a dozen overcoats in this time.'

She was quite right. I could have.

I walked into the dining-room, gave Caroline the accustomed peck on the cheek, and sat down to eggs and bacon.

The bacon was rather cold.

'You've had an early call,' remarked Caroline.

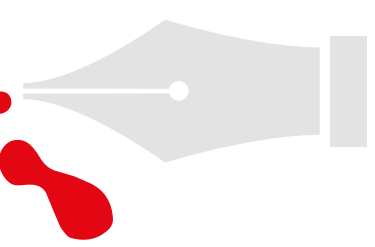
'Yes,' I said. 'King's Paddock. Mrs Ferrars.'

'I know,' said my sister.

'How did you know?'

'Annie told me.'

Annie is the house parlourmaid. A nice girl, but an inveterate talker.



There was a pause. I continued to eat eggs and bacon. My sister's nose, which is long and thin, quivered a little at the tip, as it always does when she is interested or excited over anything.

'Well?' she demanded.

'A sad business. Nothing to be done. Must have died in her sleep.'

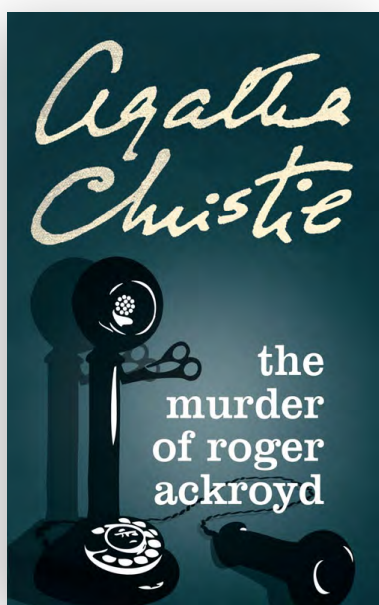
'I know,' said my sister again.

This time I was annoyed.

'You can't know,' I snapped. 'I didn't know myself until I got there, and haven't mentioned it to a soul yet. If that girl Annie knows, she must be a clairvoyant.'

'It wasn't Annie who told me. It was the milkman. He had it from the Ferrarses' cook.'

As I say, there is no need for Caroline to go out to get information. She sits at home and it comes to her.



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