

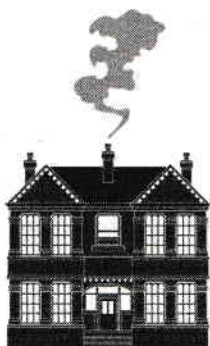
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AGATHA CHRISTIE

AUTUMN CHILLS

TALES OF INTRIGUE
FROM THE QUEEN OF CRIME



HarperCollins *Publishers*

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction: Down in the Wood</i>	vii
Murder in the Mews	1
The Case of the Rich Woman	64
While the Light Lasts	81
Triangle at Rhodes	92
Death by Drowning	123
The Bird with the Broken Wing	146
The Lemesurier Inheritance	170
The House of Lurking Death	185
Tape-Measure Murder	206
The Voice in the Dark	223
Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds	244
The Witness for the Prosecution	263
<i>Bibliography</i>	289

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Murder in the Mews

‘Penny for the guy, sir?’

A small boy with a grimy face grinned ingratiatingly.

‘Certainly not!’ said Chief Inspector Japp. ‘And, look here, my lad—’

A short homily followed. The dismayed urchin beat a precipitate retreat, remarking briefly and succinctly to his youthful friends:

‘Blimey, if it ain’t a cop all togged up!’

The band took to its heels, chanting the incantation:

*Remember, remember
The fifth of November
Gunpowder treason and plot.
We see no reason
Why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot.*

The chief inspector’s companion, a small, elderly man with an egg-shaped head and large, military-looking moustache, was smiling to himself.

‘Très bien, Japp,’ he observed. ‘You preach the sermon very well! I congratulate you!’

‘Rank excuse for begging, that’s what Guy Fawkes’ Day is!’ said Japp.

‘An interesting survival,’ mused Hercule Poirot. ‘The fireworks go up—crack—crack—long after the man they commemorate and his deeds are forgotten.’

The Scotland Yard man agreed.

‘Don’t suppose many of those kids really know who Guy Fawkes was.’

‘And soon, doubtless, there will be confusion of thought. Is it in honour or in execration that on the fifth of November the *feu d’artifice* are sent up? To blow up an English Parliament, was it a sin or a noble deed?’

Japp chuckled.

‘Some people would say undoubtedly the latter.’

Turning off the main road, the two men passed into the comparative quiet of a mews. They had been dining together and were now taking a short cut to Hercule Poirot’s flat.

As they walked along the sound of squibs was still heard periodically. An occasional shower of golden rain illuminated the sky.

‘Good night for a murder,’ remarked Japp with professional interest. ‘Nobody would hear a shot, for instance, on a night like this.’

‘It has always seemed odd to me that more criminals do not take advantage of the fact,’ said Hercule Poirot.

‘Do you know, Poirot, I almost wish sometimes that *you* would commit a murder.’

‘*Mon cher!*’

‘Yes, I’d like to see just how you’d set about it.’

‘My dear Japp, *if* I committed a murder you would not have the least chance of seeing how I set about it! You would not even be aware, probably, that a murder had been committed.’

Japp laughed good-humouredly and affectionately.

‘Cocky little devil, aren’t you?’ he said indulgently.

★ ★ ★

At half-past eleven the following morning, Hercule Poirot's telephone rang.

'Allo? 'Allo?'

'Hallo, that you, Poirot?'

'*Oui, c'est moi.*'

'Japp speaking here. Remember we came home last night through Bardsley Gardens Mews?'

'Yes?'

'And that we talked about how easy it would be to shoot a person with all those squibs and crackers and the rest of it going off?'

'Certainly.'

'Well, there was a suicide in that mews. No. 14. A young widow—Mrs Allen. I'm going round there now. Like to come?'

'Excuse me, but does someone of your eminence, my dear friend, usually get sent to a case of suicide?'

'Sharp fellow. No—he doesn't. As a matter of fact our doctor seems to think there's something funny about this. Will you come? I kind of feel you ought to be in on it.'

'Certainly I will come. No. 14, you say?'

'That's right.'

Poirot arrived at No. 14 Bardsley Gardens Mews almost at the same moment as a car drew up containing Japp and three other men.

No. 14 was clearly marked out as the centre of interest. A big circle of people, chauffeurs, their wives, errand boys, loafers, well-dressed passers-by and innumerable children were drawn up all staring at No. 14 with open mouths and a fascinated stare.

A police constable in uniform stood on the step and did his best to keep back the curious. Alert-looking young men with cameras were busy and surged forward as Japp alighted.

'Nothing for you now,' said Japp, brushing them aside. He nodded to Poirot. 'So here you are. Let's get inside.'

They passed in quickly, the door shut behind them and they found themselves squeezed together at the foot of a ladder-like flight of stairs.

A man came to the top of the staircase, recognized Japp and said:

'Up here, sir.'

Japp and Poirot mounted the stairs.

The man at the stairhead opened a door on the left and they found themselves in a small bedroom.

'Thought you'd like me to run over the chief points, sir.'

'Quite right, Jameson,' said Japp. 'What about it?'

Divisional Inspector Jameson took up the tale.

'Deceased's a Mrs Allen, sir. Lived here with a friend—a Miss Plenderleith. Miss Plenderleith was away staying in the country and returned this morning. She let herself in with her key, was surprised to find no one about. A woman usually comes in at nine o'clock to do for them. She went upstairs first into her own room (that's this room) then across the landing to her friend's room. Door was locked on the inside. She rattled the handle, knocked and called, but couldn't get any answer. In the end getting alarmed she rang up the police station. That was at ten forty-five. We came along at once and forced the door open. Mrs Allen was lying in a heap on the ground shot through the head. There was an automatic in her hand—a Webley .25—and it looked a clear case of suicide.'

'Where is Miss Plenderleith now?'

'She's downstairs in the sitting-room, sir. A very cool, efficient young lady, I should say. Got a head on her.'

'I'll talk to her presently. I'd better see Brett now.'

Accompanied by Poirot he crossed the landing and entered the opposite room. A tall, elderly man looked up and nodded.

‘Hallo, Japp, glad you’ve got here. Funny business, this.’

Japp advanced towards him. Hercule Poirot sent a quick searching glance round the room.

It was much larger than the room they had just quitted. It had a built-out bay window, and whereas the other room had been a bedroom pure and simple, this was emphatically a bedroom disguised as a sitting-room.

The walls were silver and the ceiling emerald green. There were curtains of a modernistic pattern in silver and green. There was a divan covered with a shimmering emerald green silk quilt and numbers of gold and silver cushions. There was a tall antique walnut bureau, a walnut tallboy, and several modern chairs of gleaming chromium. On a low glass table there was a big ashtray full of cigarette stubs.

Delicately Hercule Poirot sniffed the air. Then he joined Japp where the latter stood looking down at the body.

In a heap on the floor, lying as if she had fallen from one of the chromium chairs, was the body of a young woman of perhaps twenty-seven. She had fair hair and delicate features. There was very little make-up on the face. It was a pretty, wistful, perhaps slightly stupid face. On the left side of the head was a mass of congealed blood. The fingers of the right hand were clasped round a small pistol. The woman was dressed in a simple frock of dark green high to the neck.

‘Well, Brett, what’s the trouble?’

Japp was looking down also at the huddled figure.

‘Position’s all right,’ said the doctor. ‘If she shot herself she’d probably have slipped from the chair into just that

position. The door was locked and the window was fastened on the inside.'

'That's all right, you say. Then what's wrong?'

'Take a look at the pistol. I haven't handled it—waiting for the fingerprint men. But you can see quite well what I mean.'

Together Poirot and Japp knelt down and examined the pistol closely.

'I see what you mean,' said Japp rising. 'It's in the curve of her hand. It *looks* as though she's holding it—but as a matter of fact she *isn't* holding it. Anything else?'

'Plenty. She's got the pistol in her *right* hand. Now take a look at the wound. The pistol was held close to the head just above the left ear—the *left* ear, mark you.'

'H'm,' said Japp. 'That does seem to settle it. She couldn't hold a pistol and fire it in that position with her right hand?'

'Plumb impossible, I should say. You might get your arm round but I doubt if you could fire the shot.'

'That seems pretty obvious then. Someone else shot her and tried to make it look like suicide. What about the locked door and window, though?'

Inspector Jameson answered this.

'Window was closed and bolted, sir, but although the door was locked *we haven't been able to find the key.*'

Japp nodded.

'Yes, that was a bad break. Whoever did it locked the door when he left and hoped the absence of the key wouldn't be noticed.'

Poirot murmured:

'*C'est bête, ça!*'

'Oh, come now, Poirot, old man, you mustn't judge everybody else by the light of your shining intellect! As a matter of fact that's the sort of little detail that's quite apt to be overlooked. Door's locked. People break

in. Woman found dead—pistol in her hand—clear case of suicide—she locked herself in to do it. They don't go hunting about for keys. As a matter of fact, Miss Plenderleith's sending for the police was lucky. She might have got one or two of the chauffeurs to come and burst in the door—and then the key question would have been overlooked altogether.'

'Yes, I suppose that is true,' said Hercule Poirot. 'It would have been many people's natural reaction. The police, they are the last resource, are they not?'

He was still staring down at the body.

'Anything strike you?' Japp asked.

The question was careless but his eyes were keen and attentive.

Hercule Poirot shook his head slowly.

'I was looking at her wrist-watch.'

He bent over and just touched it with a finger-tip. It was a dainty jewelled affair on a black moiré strap on the wrist of the hand that held the pistol.

'Rather a swell piece that,' observed Japp. 'Must have cost money!' He cocked his head inquiringly at Poirot. 'Something in that maybe?'

'It is possible—yes.'

Poirot strayed across to the writing-bureau. It was the kind that has a front flap that lets down. This was daintily set out to match the general colour scheme.

There was a somewhat massive silver inkstand in the centre, in front of it a handsome green lacquer blotter. To the left of the blotter was an emerald glass pen-tray containing a silver penholder—a stick of green sealing-wax, a pencil and two stamps. On the right of the blotter was a movable calendar giving the day of the week, date and month. There was also a little glass jar of shot and standing in it a flamboyant green quill pen. Poirot seemed interested in the pen. He took it out and

looked at it but the quill was innocent of ink. It was clearly a decoration—nothing more. The silver penholder with the ink-stained nib was the one in use. His eyes strayed to the calendar.

‘Tuesday, November fifth,’ said Japp. ‘Yesterday. That’s all correct.’

He turned to Brett.

‘How long has she been dead?’

‘She was killed at eleven thirty-three yesterday evening,’ said Brett promptly.

Then he grinned as he saw Japp’s surprised face.

‘Sorry, old boy,’ he said. ‘Had to do the super doctor of fiction! As a matter of fact eleven is about as near as I can put it—with a margin of about an hour either way.’

‘Oh, I thought the wrist-watch might have stopped—or something.’

‘It’s stopped all right, but it’s stopped at a quarter past four.’

‘And I suppose she couldn’t have been killed possibly at a quarter past four.’

‘You can put that right out of your mind.’

Poirot had turned back the cover of the blotter.

‘Good idea,’ said Japp. ‘But no luck.’

The blotter showed an innocent white sheet of blotting-paper. Poirot turned over the leaves but they were all the same.

He turned his attention to the waste-paper basket.

It contained two or three torn-up letters and circulars. They were only torn once and were easily reconstructed. An appeal for money from some society for assisting ex-service men, an invitation to a cocktail party on November 3rd, an appointment with a dressmaker. The circulars were an announcement of a furrier’s sale and a catalogue from a department store.

‘Nothing there,’ said Japp.

'No, it is odd...' said Poirot.

'You mean they usually leave a letter when it's suicide?'

'Exactly.'

'In fact, one more proof that it *isn't* suicide.'

He moved away.

'I'll have my men get to work now. We'd better go down and interview this Miss Plenderleith. Coming, Poirot?'

Poirot still seemed fascinated by the writing-bureau and its appointments.

He left the room, but at the door his eyes went back once more to the flaunting emerald quill pen.

At the foot of the narrow flight of stairs a door gave admission to a large-sized living-room—actually the converted stable. In this room, the walls of which were finished in a roughened plaster effect and on which hung etchings and woodcuts, two people were sitting.

One, in a chair near the fireplace, her hand stretched out to the blaze, was a dark efficient-looking young woman of twenty-seven or eight. The other, an elderly woman of ample proportions who carried a string bag, was panting and talking when the two men entered the room.

'—and as I said, Miss, such a turn it gave me I nearly dropped down where I stood. And to think that this morning of all mornings—'

The other cut her short.

'That will do, Mrs Pierce. These gentlemen are police officers, I think.'

'Miss Plenderleith?' asked Japp, advancing.

The girl nodded.

'That is my name. This is Mrs Pierce who comes in to work for us every day.'