

POIROT

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

A Hercule Poirot Mystery



**ELEPHANTS
REMEMBER**

Agatha Christie

Elephants Can
Remember

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

HARPER

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Dedication

To Molly Myers in return for many kindnesses

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A LITERARY LUNCHEON

Mrs. Oliver looked at herself in the glass. She gave a brief, sideways look towards the clock on the mantelpiece, which she had some idea was twenty minutes slow. Then she resumed her study of her coiffure. The trouble with Mrs. Oliver was—and she admitted it freely—that her styles of hairdressing were always being changed. She had tried almost everything in turn. A severe pompadour at one time, then a windswept style where you brushed back your locks to display an intellectual brow, at least she hoped the brow was intellectual. She had tried tightly arranged curls, she had tried a kind of artistic disarray. She had to admit that it did not matter very much today what her type of hairdressing was because today she was going to do what she very seldom did, wear a hat.

On the top shelf of Mrs. Oliver's wardrobe there reposed four hats. One was definitely allotted to weddings. When you went to a wedding, a hat was a "must." But even then Mrs. Oliver kept two. One in a round bandbox, was of feathers. It fitted closely to the head and stood up very well to sudden squalls of rain if they should overtake one unexpectedly as one passed from a car to the interior of the sacred edifice, or as so often nowadays, a registrar's office.

The other, and more elaborate, hat was definitely for attending a wedding held on a Saturday afternoon in summer. It had flowers and chiffon and a covering of yellow net attached with mimosa.

The other two hats on the shelf were of a more all-purpose character. One was what Mrs. Oliver called her "country house hat," made of tan felt suitable for wearing with tweeds of almost any pattern, with a becoming brim that you could turn up or turn down.

Mrs. Oliver had a cashmere pullover for warmth and a thin pullover for hot days, either of which was suitable in colour to go with this. However, though the pullovers were frequently worn, the hat was practically never worn. Because, really, why put on a hat just to go to the country and have a meal with your friends?

The fourth hat was the most expensive of the lot and it had extraordinarily durable advantages about it. Possibly, Mrs. Oliver sometimes thought, because it was so expensive. It consisted of a kind of turban of various layers of contrasting velvets, all of rather becoming pastel shades which would go with anything.

Mrs. Oliver paused in doubt and then called for assistance.

"Maria," she said, then louder, "Maria. Come here a minute."

Maria came. She was used to being asked to give advice on what Mrs. Oliver was thinking of wearing.

"Going to wear your lovely smart hat, are you?" said Maria.

"Yes," said Mrs. Oliver. "I wanted to know whether you think it looks best this way or the other way round."

Maria stood back and took a look.

“Well, that’s back to front you’re wearing it now, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I know,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I know that quite well. But I thought somehow it looked better that way.”

“Oh, why should it?” said Maria.

“Well, it’s meant, I suppose. But it’s got to be meant by me as well as the shop that sold it,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Why do you think it’s better the wrong way round?”

“Because you get that lovely shade of blue and the dark brown, and I think that looks better than the other way which is green with the red and the chocolate colour.”

At this point Mrs. Oliver removed the hat, put it on again and tried it wrong way round, right way round and sideways, which both she and Maria disapproved of.

“You can’t have it the wide way. I mean, it’s wrong for your face, isn’t it? It’d be wrong for anyone’s face.”

“No. That won’t do. I think I’ll have it the right way round, after all.”

“Well, I think it’s safer always,” said Maria.

Mrs. Oliver took off the hat. Maria assisted her to put on a well cut, thin woollen dress of a delicate puce colour, and helped her to adjust the hat.

“You look ever so smart,” said Maria.

That was what Mrs. Oliver liked so much about Maria. If given the least excuse for saying so, she always approved and gave praise.

“Going to make a speech at the luncheon, are you?” Maria asked.

“A speech!” Mrs. Oliver sounded horrified. “No, of course not. You know I never make speeches.”

“Well, I thought they always did at these here literary luncheons. That’s what you’re going to, isn’t it? Famous writers of 1973—or whichever year it is we’ve got to now.”

“I don’t need to make a speech,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Several other people who *like* doing it will be making speeches, and they are much better at it than I would be.”

“I’m sure you’d make a lovely speech if you put your mind to it,” said Maria, adjusting herself to the rôle of a tempter.

“No, I shouldn’t,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I know what I can do and I know what I can’t. I can’t make speeches. I get all worried and nervy and I should probably stammer or say the same thing twice. I should not only feel silly, I should probably look silly. Now it’s all right with words. You can write words down or speak them into a machine or dictate them. I can do things with words so long as I know it’s not a speech I’m making.”

“Oh well. I hope everything’ll go all right. But I’m sure it will. Quite a grand luncheon, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, in a deeply depressed voice. “Quite a grand luncheon.”

And why, she thought, but did not say, why on earth am I going to it? She searched her mind for a bit because she always really liked knowing what she was going to do instead of doing it first and then wondering why she had done it afterwards.

“I suppose,” she said, again to herself and not to Maria, who had had to return rather hurriedly to the kitchen, summoned by a smell of overflowing jam which she happened to have on the stove,

wanted to see what it felt like. I'm always being asked to literary lunches or something like that and never go."

Mrs. Oliver arrived at the last course of the grand luncheon with a sigh of satisfaction as she toyed with the remains of the meringue on her plate. She was particularly fond of meringues and it was a delicious last course in a very delicious luncheon. Nevertheless, when one reached middle age, one had to be careful with meringues. One's teeth? They looked all right, they had the great advantage that they could not ache, they were white and quite agreeable looking—just like the real thing. But it was true enough that they were *not* real teeth. And teeth that were not real teeth—or so Mrs. Oliver believed—were not really of high-class material. Dogs, she had always understood, had teeth of real ivory, but human beings had teeth merely of bone. Or, she supposed, if they were false teeth, of plastic. Anyway, the point was that you mustn't get involved in some rather shame-making appearance, which false teeth might lead you into. Lettuce was a difficulty, and salted almonds, and such things as chocolates with hard centres, clinging caramels and the delicious stickiness and adherence of meringues. With a sigh of satisfaction, she dealt with the final mouthful. It had been a good lunch, a very good lunch.

Mrs. Oliver was fond of her creature comforts. She had enjoyed the luncheon very much. She had enjoyed the company, too. The luncheon, which had been given to celebrated female writers, had fortunately not been confined to female writers only. There had been other writers, and critics, and those who read books as well as those who wrote them. Mrs. Oliver had sat between two very charming members of the male sex. Edwin Aubyn, whose poetry she always enjoyed, an extremely entertaining person who had had various entertaining experiences in his tours abroad, and various literary and personal adventures. Also he was interested in restaurants and food and they had talked very happily about food, and left the subject of literature aside.

Sir Wesley Kent, on her other side, had also been an agreeable luncheon companion. He had said very nice things about her books, and had had the tact to say things that did not make her feel embarrassed, which many people could do almost without trying. He had mentioned one or two reasons why he had liked one or other of her books, and they had been the right reasons, and therefore Mrs. Oliver had thought favourably of him for that reason. Praise from men, Mrs. Oliver thought herself, is always acceptable. It was women who gushed. Some of the things that women wrote to her. Really! Not always women, of course. Sometimes emotional young men from very far away countries. Only last week she had received a fan letter beginning "Reading your book, I feel what a noble woman you must be." After reading *The Second Goldfish* he had then gone off into an intense kind of literary ecstasy which was, Mrs. Oliver felt, completely unfitting. She was not unduly modest. She thought the detective stories she wrote were quite good of their kind. Some were not so good and some were much better than others. But there was no reason, so far as she could see, to make anyone think that she was a noble woman. She was a lucky woman who had established a happy knack of writing what quite a lot of people wanted to read. Wonderful luck that was, Mrs. Oliver thought to herself.

Well, all things considered, she had got through this ordeal very well. She had quite enjoyed herself, talked to some nice people. Now they were moving to where coffee was being handed round and where you could change partners and chat with other people. This was the moment of danger, as Mrs. Oliver

knew well. This was now where other women would come and attack her. Attack her with fulsome praise, and where she always felt lamentably inefficient at giving the right answers because the weren't really any right answers that you could give. It went really rather like a travel book for going abroad with the right phrases.

Question: "I *must* tell you how very fond I am of reading your books and how wonderful I think they are."

Answer from flustered author, "Well, that's very kind. I am so glad."

"You must understand that I've been waiting to meet you for months. It really is wonderful."

"Oh, it's very nice of you. Very nice indeed."

It went on very much like that. Neither of you seemed to be able to talk about anything of outside interest. It had to be all about your books, or the other woman's books if you knew what her books were. You were in the literary web and you weren't good at this sort of stuff. Some people could do it but Mrs. Oliver was bitterly aware of not having the proper capacity. A foreign friend of hers had once put her, when she was staying at an embassy abroad, through a kind of course.

"I listen to you," Albertina had said in her charming, low, foreign voice, "I have listened to what you say to that young man who came from the newspaper to interview you. You have not got—no! you have not got the pride you should have in your work. You should say 'Yes, I write well. I write better than anyone else who writes detective stories.' "

"But I don't," Mrs. Oliver had said at that moment. "I'm not bad, but—"

"Ah, do not say 'I don't' like that. You must say you *do*; even if you do not think you do, you ought to say you do."

"I wish, Albertina," said Mrs. Oliver, "that you could interview these journalists who come. You would do it so well. Can't you pretend to be me one day, and I'll listen behind the door?"

"Yes, I suppose I could do it. It would be rather fun. But they would know I was not you. They know your face. But you must say 'Yes, yes, I know that I am better than anyone else.' You must say that to everybody. They should know it. They should announce it. Oh yes—it is terrible to hear you sitting there and say things as though you *apologize* for what you are. It must not be like that."

It had been rather, Mrs. Oliver thought, as though she had been a budding actress trying to learn her part, and the director had found her hopelessly bad at taking direction. Well, anyway, there'd be no much difficulty here. There'd be a few waiting females when they all got up from the table. In fact she could see one or two hovering already. That wouldn't matter much. She would go and smile and be nice and say "So kind of you. I'm so pleased. One is so glad to know people like one's books." All the stale old things. Rather as you put a hand into a box and took out some useful words already strung together like a necklace of beads. And then, before very long now, she could leave.

Her eyes went round the table because she might perhaps see some friends there as well as would-be admirers. Yes, she did see in the distance Maurine Grant, who was great fun. The moment came, the literary women and the attendant cavaliers who had also attended the lunch, rose. They streamed towards chairs, towards coffee tables, towards sofas, and confidential corners. The moment of peril. Mrs. Oliver often thought of it to herself, though usually at cocktail and not literary parties because she seldom went to the latter. At any moment the danger might arise, as someone whom you did not remember but who remembered you, or someone whom you definitely did not want to talk to b

whom you found you could not avoid. In this case it was the first dilemma that came to her. A large woman. Ample proportions, large white champing teeth. What in French could have been called *une femme formidable*, but who definitely had not only the French variety of being formidable, but the English one of being supremely bossy. Obviously she either knew Mrs. Oliver, or was intent on making her acquaintance there and then. The last was how it happened to go.

“Oh, Mrs. Oliver,” she said in a high-pitched voice. “What a pleasure to meet you today. I have wanted to for so long. I simply adore your books. So does my son. And my husband used to insist on never travelling without at least two of your books. But come, do sit down. There are so many things I want to ask you about.”

Oh well, thought Mrs. Oliver, not my favourite type of woman, this. But as well her as any other. She allowed herself to be conducted in a firm way rather as a police officer might have done. She was taken to a settee for two across a corner, and her new friend accepted coffee and placed coffee before her also.

“There. Now we are settled. I don’t suppose you know my name. I am Mrs. Burton-Cox.”

“Oh yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, embarrassed, as usual. Mrs. Burton-Cox? Did she write books also? No, she couldn’t really remember anything about her. But she seemed to have heard the name. A faint thought came to her. A book on politics, something like that? Not fiction, not fun, not crime. Perhaps highbrow intellectual with political bias? That ought to be easy, Mrs. Oliver thought with relief. I can just let her talk and say “How interesting!” from time to time.

“You’ll be very surprised, really, at what I’m going to say,” said Mrs. Burton-Cox. “But I have felt from reading your books, how sympathetic you are, how much you understand of human nature. And I feel that if there is anyone who can give me an answer to the question I want to ask, you will be the one to do so.”

“I don’t think, really . . .” said Mrs. Oliver, trying to think of suitable words to say that she felt very uncertain of being able to rise to the heights demanded of her.

Mrs. Burton-Cox dipped a lump of sugar in her coffee and crunched it in a rather carnivorous way as though it was a bone. Ivory teeth, perhaps, thought Mrs. Oliver vaguely. Ivory? Dogs had ivory walruses had ivory and elephants had ivory, of course. Great big tusks of ivory. Mrs. Burton-Cox was saying:

“Now the first thing I must ask you—I’m pretty sure I am right, though—you have a goddaughter haven’t you? A goddaughter who’s called Celia Ravenscroft?”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Oliver, rather pleasurably surprised. She felt she could deal perhaps with a goddaughter. She had a good many goddaughters—and godsons, for that matter. There were times, she had to admit as the years were growing upon her, when she couldn’t remember them all. She had done her duty in due course, one’s duty being to send toys to your godchildren at Christmas in their early years, to visit them and their parents, or to have them visit you during the course of their upbringing to take the boys out from school perhaps, and the girls also. And then, when the crowning days came either the twenty-first birthday at which a godmother must do the right thing and let it be acknowledged to be done, and do it handsomely, or else marriage which entailed the same type of gift and a financial or other blessing. After that godchildren rather receded into the middle or far distance. They married or went abroad to foreign countries, foreign embassies, or taught in foreign schools

took up social projects. Anyway, they faded little by little out of your life. You were pleased to see them if they suddenly, as it were, floated up on the horizon again. But you had to remember to think when you had seen them last, whose daughters they were, what link had led to your being chosen as godmother.

“Celia Ravenscroft,” said Mrs. Oliver, doing her best. “Yes, yes, of course. Yes, definitely.”

Not that any picture rose before her eyes of Celia Ravenscroft, not, that is, since a very early time. The christening. She’d gone to Celia’s christening and had found a very nice Queen Anne silver strainer as a christening present. Very nice. Do nicely for straining milk and would also be the sort of thing a goddaughter could always sell for a nice little sum if she wanted ready money at any time. Yes, she remembered the strainer very well indeed. Queen Anne—Seventeen-eleven it had been. Britannia mark. How much easier it was to remember silver coffeepots or strainers or christening mugs than it was the actual child.

“Yes,” she said, “yes, of course. I’m afraid I haven’t seen Celia for a very long time now.”

“Ah yes. She is, of course, a rather impulsive girl,” said Mrs. Burton-Cox. “I mean, she’s changed her ideas very often. Of course, very intellectual, did very well at university, but—her political notions—I suppose all young people have political notions nowadays.”

“I’m afraid I don’t deal much with politics,” said Mrs. Oliver, to whom politics had always been anathema.

“You see, I’m going to confide in you. I’m going to tell you exactly what it is I want to know. I’m sure you won’t mind. I’ve heard from so many people how kind you are, how willing always.”

I wonder if she’s going to try and borrow money from me, thought Mrs. Oliver, who had known many interviews that began with this kind of approach.

“You see, it is a matter of the greatest moment to me. Something that I really feel I *must* find out. Celia, you see, is going to marry—or thinks she is going to marry—my son, Desmond.”

“Oh, indeed!” said Mrs. Oliver.

“At least, that is their idea at present. Of course, one has to know about people, and there’s something I want very much to know. It’s an extraordinary thing to ask anyone and I couldn’t go—well, I mean, I couldn’t very well go and ask a stranger, but I don’t feel you are a stranger, dear Mrs. Oliver.”

Mrs. Oliver thought, I wish you did. She was getting nervous now. She wondered if Celia had had an illegitimate baby or was going to have an illegitimate baby, and whether she, Mrs. Oliver, was supposed to know about it and give details. That would be very awkward. On the other hand, though Mrs. Oliver, I haven’t seen her now for five or six years and she must be about twenty-five or -six, so it would be quite easy to say I don’t know anything.

Mrs. Burton-Cox leaned forward and breathed hard.

“I want you to tell me because I’m sure you must know or perhaps have a very good idea how it all came about. Did her mother kill her father or was it the father who killed the mother?”

Whatever Mrs. Oliver had expected, it was certainly not that. She stared at Mrs. Burton-Cox unbelievably.

“But I don’t—” She stopped. “I—I can’t understand. I mean—what reason—”

“Dear Mrs. Oliver, you must *know* . . . I mean, such a famous case . . . Of course, I know it’s a long

time ago now, well, I suppose ten—twelve years at least, but it did cause a lot of attention at the time. I'm sure you'll remember, you *must* remember."

Mrs. Oliver's brain was working desperately. Celia was her goddaughter. That was quite true. Celia's mother—yes, of course. Celia's mother had been Molly Preston-Grey, who had been a friend of hers, though not a particularly intimate one, and of course she had married a man in the Army, you know—what was his name—Sir Something Ravenscroft. Or was he an ambassador? Extraordinary, or something, but she couldn't remember these things. She couldn't even remember whether she herself had been Molly's bridesmaid. She thought she had. Rather a smart wedding at the Guards Chapel or something like that. But one *did* forget so. And after that she hadn't met them for years—they'd been out somewhere—the Middle East? In Persia? In Iraq? One time in Egypt? Malaya? Very occasionally, when they had been visiting England, she met them again. But they'd been like one of those photographs that one takes and looks at. One knows the people vaguely who are in it but it's so faded that you really can't recognize them or remember who they were. And she couldn't remember now whether Sir Something Ravenscroft and Lady Ravenscroft, born Molly Preston-Grey, had entered much into her life. She didn't think so. But then . . . Mrs. Burton-Cox was still looking at her. Looking at her as though disappointed in her lack of *savoir-faire*, her inability to remember what had evidently been a *cause célèbre*.

"Killed? You mean—an accident?"

"Oh no. Not an accident. In one of those houses by the sea. Cornwall, I think. Somewhere where there were rocks. Anyway, they had a house down there. And they were both found on the cliff there and they'd been shot, you know. But there was nothing really by which the police could tell whether the wife shot the husband and then shot herself, or whether the husband shot the wife and then shot himself. They went into the evidence of the—you know—of the bullets and the various things, but it was very difficult. They thought it might be a suicide pact and—I forget what the verdict was. Something—it could have been misadventure or something like that. But of course everyone knew it must have been *meant*, and there were a lot of stories that went about, of course, at the time—"

"Probably all invented ones," said Mrs. Oliver hopefully, trying to remember even one of the stories if she could.

"Well, maybe. Maybe. It's very hard to say, I know. There were tales of a quarrel either that day or the day before, there was some talk of another man, and then of course there was the usual talk about some other woman. And one never knows which way it was about. I think things were hushed up a good deal because General Ravenscroft's position was rather a high one, and I think it was said that he'd been in a nursing home that year, and he'd been very run down or something, and that he really didn't know what he was doing."

"I'm really afraid," said Mrs. Oliver, speaking firmly, "that I must say that I don't know anything about it. I do remember, now you mention it, that there was such a case, and I remember the name of the man, and that I knew the people, but I never knew what happened or anything at all about it. And I really don't think I have the least idea. . . ."

And really, thought Mrs. Oliver, wishing she was brave enough to say it, how on earth *you* have the impertinence to ask me such a thing I don't know.

"It's very important that I should know," Mrs. Burton-Cox said.

Her eyes, which were rather like hard marbles, started to snap.

"It's important, you see, because of my boy, my dear boy wanting to marry Celia."

"I'm afraid I can't help you," said Mrs. Oliver. "I've never heard anything."

"But you *must* know," said Mrs. Burton-Cox. "I mean, you write these wonderful stories, you know all about crime. You know who commits crimes and why they do it, and I'm sure that all sorts of people will tell you the story behind the story, as one so much thinks of these things."

"I don't know anything," said Mrs. Oliver, in a voice which no longer held very much politeness and definitely now spoke in tones of distaste.

"But you do see that really one doesn't know who to go to ask about it? I mean, one couldn't go to the police after all these years, and I don't suppose they'd tell you anyway because obviously they were trying to hush it up. But I feel it's important to get the *truth*."

"I only write books," said Mrs. Oliver coldly. "They are entirely fictional. I know nothing personally about crime and have no opinions on criminology. So I'm afraid I can't help you in any way."

"But you could ask your goddaughter. You could ask Celia."

"Ask Celia!" Mrs. Oliver stared again. "I don't see how I could do *that*. She was—why, I think she must have been quite a child when this tragedy happened."

"Oh, I expect she knew all about it, though," said Mrs. Burton-Cox. "Children always know everything. And she'd tell you. I'm sure she'd tell *you*."

"You'd better ask her yourself, I should think," said Mrs. Oliver.

"I don't think I could really do that," said Mrs. Burton-Cox. "I don't think, you know, that Desmond would like it. You know he's rather—well, he's rather touchy where Celia is concerned and I really don't think that—no—I'm sure she'd tell you."

"I really shouldn't dream of asking her," said Mrs. Oliver. She made a pretence of looking at her watch. "Oh dear," she said, "what a long time we've been over this delightful lunch. I must run now, I have a very important appointment. Goodbye, Mrs.—er—Bedley-Cox, so sorry I can't help you but these things are rather delicate and—does it really make any difference anyway, from your point of view?"

"Oh, I think it makes *all* the difference."

At that moment, a literary figure whom Mrs. Oliver knew well drifted past. Mrs. Oliver jumped up to catch her by the arm.

"Louise, my dear, how lovely to see you. I hadn't noticed you were here."

"Oh, Ariadne, it's a long time since I've seen *you*. You've grown a lot thinner, haven't you?"

"What nice things you always say to me," said Mrs. Oliver, engaging her friend by the arm and retreating from the settee. "I'm rushing away because I've got an appointment."

"I suppose you got tied up with that awful woman, didn't you?" said her friend, looking over her shoulder at Mrs. Burton-Cox.

"She was asking me the most extraordinary questions," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Oh. Didn't you know how to answer them?"

"No. They weren't any of my business anyway. I didn't know anything about them. Anyway, I wouldn't have wanted to answer them."

“Was it about anything interesting?”

“I suppose,” said Mrs. Oliver, letting a new idea come into her head. “I suppose it might be interesting, only—”

“She’s getting up to chase you,” said her friend. “Come along. I’ll see you get out and give you a lift to anywhere you want to go if you haven’t got your car here.”

“I never take my car about in London, it’s so awful to park.”

“I know it is. Absolutely deadly.”

Mrs. Oliver made the proper goodbyes. Thanks, words of greatly expressed pleasure, and present was being driven round a London square.

“Eaton Terrace, isn’t it?” said the kindly friend.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Oliver, “but where I’ve got to go now is—I think it’s Whitefriars Mansions. I can’t quite remember the name of it, but I know where it is.”

“Oh, flats. Rather modern ones. Very square and geometrical.”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Oliver.

FIRST MENTION OF ELEPHANTS

HAVING failed to find her friend Hercule Poirot at home, Mrs. Oliver had to resort to a telephone enquiry.

“Are you by any chance going to be at home this evening?” asked Mrs. Oliver.

She sat by her telephone, her fingers tapping rather nervously on the table.

“Would that be—?”

“Ariadne Oliver,” said Mrs. Oliver, who was always surprised to find she had to give her name because she always expected all her friends to know her voice as soon as they heard it.

“Yes, I shall be at home all this evening. Does that mean that I may have the pleasure of a visit from you?”

“It’s very nice of you to put it that way,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I don’t know that it will be such a pleasure.”

“It is always a pleasure to see you, *chère Madame*.”

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I might be going to—well, bother you rather. Ask things. I want to know what you think about something.”

“That I am always ready to tell anyone,” said Poirot.

“Something’s come up,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Something tiresome and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“And so you will come and see me. I am flattered. Highly flattered.”

“What time would suit you?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Nine o’clock? We will drink coffee together, perhaps, unless you prefer a Grenadine or a *Sirop de Cassis*. But no, you do not like that. I remember.”

“George,” said Poirot, to his invaluable manservant, “we are to receive tonight the pleasure of a visit from Mrs. Oliver. Coffee, I think, and perhaps a liqueur of some kind. I am never sure what she likes.”

“I have seen her drink kirsch, sir.”

“And also, I think, *crème de menthe*. But kirsch, I think, is what she prefers. Very well then,” said Poirot. “So be it.”

Mrs. Oliver came punctual to time. Poirot had been wondering, while eating his dinner, what it was that was driving Mrs. Oliver to visit him, and why she was so doubtful about what she was doing. Was she bringing him some difficult problem, or was she acquainting him with a crime? As Poirot knew her well, it could be anything with Mrs. Oliver. The most commonplace things or the most extraordinary things. They were, as you might say, all alike to her. She was worried, he thought. Ah well, Hercule

Poirot thought to himself, he could deal with Mrs. Oliver. He always had been able to deal with Mrs. Oliver. On occasion she maddened him. At the same time he was really very much attached to her. They had shared many experiences and experiments together. He had read something about her in the paper only that morning—or was it the evening paper? He must try and remember it before she came. He had just done so when she was announced.

She came into the room and Poirot deduced at once that his diagnosis of worry was true enough. Her hairdo, which was fairly elaborate, had been ruffled by the fact that she had been running her fingers through it in the frenzied and feverish way that she did sometimes. He received her with every sign of pleasure, established her in a chair, poured her some coffee and handed her a glass of kirsch.

“Ah!” said Mrs. Oliver, with the sigh of someone who has relief. “I expect you’re going to think I’m awfully silly, but still. . . .”

“I see, or rather, I saw in the paper that you were attending a literary luncheon today. Famous women writers. Something of that kind. I thought you never did that kind of thing.”

“I don’t usually,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and I shan’t ever do it again.”

“Ah. You suffered much?” Poirot was quite sympathetic.

He knew Mrs. Oliver’s embarrassing moments. Extravagant praise of her books always upset her highly because, as she had once told him, she never knew the proper answers.

“You did not enjoy it?”

“Up to a point I did,” said Mrs. Oliver, “and then something very tiresome happened.”

“Ah. And that is what you have come to see me about.”

“Yes, but I really don’t know why. I mean, it’s nothing to do with you and I don’t think it’s the sort of thing you’d even be interested in. And I’m not really interested in it. At least, I suppose I must be or I wouldn’t have wanted to come to you to know what you thought. To know what—well, what you would do if you were me.”

“That is a very difficult question, that last one,” said Poirot. “I know how I, Hercule Poirot, would act in anything, but I do not know how you would act, well though I know you.”

“You must have some idea by this time,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You’ve known me long enough.”

“About what—twenty years now?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I can never remember what years are, what dates are. You know, I get mixed up. I know 1939 because that’s when the war started and I know other dates because of queer things, here and there.”

“Anyway, you went to your literary luncheon. And you did not enjoy it very much.”

“I enjoyed the lunch but it was afterwards. . . .”

“People said things to you,” said Poirot, with the kindliness of a doctor demanding symptoms.

“Well, they were just getting ready to say things to me. Suddenly one of those large, bossy women who always manage to dominate everyone and who can make you feel more uncomfortable than anyone else, descended on me. You know, like somebody who catches a butterfly or something, only she’d have needed a butterfly net. She sort of rounded me up and pushed me onto a settee and then she began to talk to me, starting about a goddaughter of mine.”

“Ah yes. A goddaughter you are fond of?”

“I haven’t seen her for a good many years,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I can’t keep up with all of them,

mean. And then she asked me a most worrying question. She wanted me—oh dear, how very difficult it is for me to tell this—”

“No, it isn’t,” said Poirot kindly. “It is quite easy. Everyone tells everything to me sooner or later. I’m only a foreigner, you see, so it does not matter. It is easy because I am a foreigner.”

“Well, it is rather easy to say things to you,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You see, she asked me about the girl’s father and mother. She asked me whether her mother had killed her father or her father had killed her mother.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Poirot.

“Oh, I know it sounds mad. Well, I thought it was mad.”

“Whether your goddaughter’s mother had killed her father, or whether her father had killed her mother.”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“But—was that a matter of fact? Had her father killed her mother or her mother killed her father?”

“Well, they were both found shot,” said Mrs. Oliver. “On the top of a cliff. I can’t remember if it was in Cornwall or in Corsica. Something like that.”

“Then it was true, then, what she said?”

“Oh yes, that part of it was true. It happened years ago. Well, but I mean—why come to me?”

“All because you were a crime writer,” said Poirot. “She no doubt said you knew all about crime. This was a real thing that happened?”

“Oh yes. It wasn’t something like what would A do—or what would be the proper procedure if your mother had killed your father or your father had killed your mother. No, it was something that really happened. I suppose really I’d better tell you all about it. I mean, I can’t remember all about it but it was quite well known at the time. It was about—oh, I should think it was about twelve years ago at least. And, as I say, I can remember the names of the people because I did know them. The wife had been at school with me and I’d known her quite well. We’d been friends. It was a well-known case—you know, it was in all the papers and things like that. Sir Alistair Ravenscroft and Lady Ravenscroft. A very happy couple and he was a colonel or a general and she’d been with him and they’d been all over the world. Then they bought this house somewhere—I think it was abroad but I can’t remember. And then there were suddenly accounts of this case in the papers. Whether somebody else had killed them or whether they’d been assassinated or something, or whether they killed each other. I think it was a revolver that had been in the house for ages and—well, I’d better tell you as much as I can remember.”

Pulling herself slightly together, Mrs. Oliver managed to give Poirot a more or less clear *résumé* of what she had been told. Poirot from time to time checked on a point here or there.

“But why?” he said finally, “why should this woman want to know this?”

“Well, that’s what I want to find out,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I could get hold of Celia, I think. I mean she still lives in London. Or perhaps it’s Cambridge she lives in, or Oxford—I think she’s got a degree and either lectures here or teaches somewhere, or does something like that. And—very modern, you know. Goes about with long-haired people in queer clothes. I don’t think she takes drugs. She’s quite all right and—just very occasionally I hear from her. I mean, she sends a card at Christmas and things like that. Well, one doesn’t think of one’s godchildren all the time, and she’s quite twenty-five or

six.”

“Not married?”

“No. Apparently she is going to marry—or that is the idea—Mrs.—What’s the name of that woman again?—oh yes, Mrs. Brittle—no—Burton-Cox’s son.”

“And Mrs. Burton-Cox does not want her son to marry this girl because her father killed her mother or her mother killed her father?”

“Well, I suppose so,” said Mrs. Oliver. “It’s the only thing I can think. But what does it matter which? If one of your parents killed the other, would it really matter to the mother of the boy you were going to marry, which way round it was?”

“That is a thing one might have to think about,” said Poirot. “It is—yes, you know it is quite interesting. I do not mean it is very interesting about Sir Alistair Ravenscroft or Lady Ravenscroft. I seem to remember vaguely—oh, some case like this one, or it might not have been the same one. But it is very strange about Mrs. Burton-Cox. Perhaps she is a bit touched in the head. Is she very fond of her son?”

“Probably,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Probably she doesn’t want him to marry this girl at all.”

“Because she may have inherited a predisposition to murder the man she marries—or something of that kind?”

“How do I know?” said Mrs. Oliver. “She seems to think that I can tell her, and she’s really not told me enough, has she? But why, do you think? What’s behind it all? What does it *mean*?”

“It would be almost interesting to find out,” said Poirot.

“Well, that’s why I’ve come to you,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You like finding out things. Things that you can’t see the reason for at first. I mean, that nobody can see the reason for.”

“Do you think Mrs. Burton-Cox has any preference?” said Poirot.

“You mean that she’d rather the husband killed the wife, or the wife killed the husband? I don’t think so.”

“Well,” said Poirot, “I see your dilemma. It is very intriguing. You come home from a party. You’ve been asked to do something that is very difficult, almost impossible, and—you wonder what the proper way to deal with such a thing.”

“Well, what would you think is the proper way?” said Mrs. Oliver.

“It is not easy for me to say,” said Poirot. “I’m not a woman. A woman whom you do not really know, whom you had met at a party, has put this problem to you, asked you to do it, giving no discernible reason.”

“Right,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Now what does Ariadne do? What does A do, in other words, if you were reading this as a problem in a newspaper?”

“Well, I suppose,” said Poirot, “there are three things that A could do. A could write a note to Mrs. Burton-Cox and say, ‘I’m very sorry but I really feel I cannot oblige you in this matter,’ or whatever words you like to put. B. You get into touch with your goddaughter and you tell her what has been asked of you by the mother of the boy, or the young man, or whatever he is, whom she is thinking of marrying. You will find out from her if she is really thinking of marrying this young man. If so, whether she has any idea or whether the young man has said anything to her about what his mother has got in her head. And there will be other interesting points, like finding out what this girl thinks of the

mother of the young man she wants to marry. The third thing you could do,” said Poirot, “and the really is what I firmly advise you to do, is . . .”

“I know,” said Mrs. Oliver, “one word.”

“Nothing,” said Poirot.

“Exactly,” said Mrs. Oliver. “I know that is the simple and proper thing to do. Nothing. It’s darne cheek to go and tell a girl who’s my goddaughter what her future mother-in-law is going about saying and asking people. But—”

“I know,” said Poirot, “it is human curiosity.”

“I want to know why that odious woman came and said what she did to me,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Once I know that I could relax and forget all about it. But until I know that. . . .”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “you won’t sleep. You’ll wake up in the night and, if I know you, you will have the most extraordinary and extravagant ideas which presently, probably, you will be able to make into a most attractive crime story. A whodunit—a thriller. All sorts of things.”

“Well, I suppose I could if I thought of it that way,” said Mrs. Oliver. Her eyes flashed slightly.

“Leave it alone,” said Poirot. “It will be a very difficult plot to undertake. It seems as though there could be no good reason for this.”

“But I’d like to make *sure* that there *is* no good reason.”

“Human curiosity,” said Poirot. “Such a very interesting thing.” He sighed. “To think what we owe to it throughout history. Curiosity. I don’t know who invented curiosity. It is said to be usually associated with the cat. Curiosity killed the cat. But I should say really that the Greeks were the inventors of curiosity. They wanted to *know*. Before them, as far as I can see, nobody wanted to know *much*. They just wanted to know what the rules of the country they were living in were, and how they could avoid having their heads cut off or being impaled on spikes or something disagreeable happening to them. But they either obeyed or disobeyed. They didn’t want to know *why*. But since then a lot of people have wanted to know *why* and all sorts of things have happened because of that. Boats, trains, flying machines and atom bombs and penicillin and cures for various illnesses. A little boy watches his mother’s kettle raising its lid because of the steam. And the next thing we know is we have railway trains, leading on in due course to railway strikes and all that. And so on and so on.”

“Just tell me,” said Mrs. Oliver, “do you think I’m a terrible nosey parker?”

“No, I don’t,” said Poirot. “On the whole I don’t think you are a woman of great curiosity. But I can quite see you getting in a het-up state at a literary party, busy defending yourself against too much kindness, too much praise. You ran yourself instead into a very awkward dilemma, and took a very strong dislike to the person who ran you into it.”

“Yes. She’s a very tiresome woman, a very disagreeable woman.”

“This murder in the past of this husband and wife who were supposed to get on well together and no apparent signs of a quarrel was known. One never really read about any cause for it, according to you?”

“They were shot. Yes, they were shot. It could have been a suicide pact. I think the police thought that was at first. Of course, one can’t find out about things all those years afterwards.”

“Oh yes,” said Poirot, “I think I could find out something about it.”

“You mean—through the exciting friends you’ve got?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say the exciting friends, perhaps. Certainly there are knowledgeable friends who could get certain records, look up the accounts that were given of the crime at the time, and with some access I could get to certain records.”

“You could find out things,” said Mrs. Oliver hopefully, “and then tell me.”

“Yes,” said Poirot, “I think I could help you to know at any rate the full facts of the case. It’ll take a little time, though.”

“I can see that if you do that, which is what I want you to do, I’ve got to do something myself. I have to see the girl. I’ve got to see whether she knows anything about all this, ask her if she’d like me to give her mother-in-law-to-be a raspberry or whether there is any other way in which I can help her. And I’d like to see the boy she’s going to marry, too.”

“Quite right,” said Poirot. “Excellent.”

“And I suppose,” said Mrs. Oliver, “there might be people—” She broke off, frowning.

“I don’t suppose people will be very much good,” said Hercule Poirot. “This is an affair of the past. A *cause célèbre* perhaps at the time. But what is a *cause célèbre* when you come to think of it? Unless it comes to an astonishing *dénouement*, which this one didn’t. Nobody remembers it.”

“No,” said Mrs. Oliver, “that is quite true. There was a lot about it in the papers and mentions of it for some time, and then it just—faded out. Well, like things do now. Like that girl, the other day. You know, who left her home and they couldn’t find her anywhere. Well, I mean, that was five or six years ago and then suddenly a little boy, playing about in a sand heap or a gravel pit or something, suddenly came across her dead body. Five or six years later.”

“That is true,” said Poirot. “And it is true that knowing from that body how long it is since dead and what happened on the particular day and going back over various events of which there is no written record, one may in the end turn up a murderer. But it will be more difficult in your problem since it seems the answer must be one of two things: that the husband disliked his wife and wanted to get rid of her, or that the wife hated her husband or else had a lover. Therefore, it might have been a passionate crime or something quite different. Anyway, there would be nothing, as it were, to find out about it. If the police could not find out at the time, then the motive must have been a difficult one, not easy to see. Therefore it has remained a nine days’ wonder, that is all.”

“I suppose I can go to the daughter. Perhaps that is what that odious woman was getting me to do—wanted me to do. She thought the daughter knew—well, the daughter might have known,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Children do, you know. They know the most extraordinary things.”

“Have you any idea how old this goddaughter of yours would have been at the time?”

“Well, I have if I reckon it up, but I can’t say offhand. I think she might have been nine or ten, but perhaps older, I don’t know. I think that she was away at school at the time. But that may be just my fancy, remembering back what I read.”

“But you think Mrs. Burton-Cox’s wish was to make you get information from the daughter. Perhaps the daughter knows something, perhaps she said something to the son, and the son said something to his mother. I expect Mrs. Burton-Cox tried to question the girl herself and got rebuffed but thought the famous Mrs. Oliver, being both a godmother and also full of criminal knowledge, might obtain information. Though why it should matter to her, I still don’t see,” said Poirot. “And it does not seem to me that what you call vaguely ‘people’ can help after all this time.” He added

“Would anybody remember?”

“Well, that’s where I think they might,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“You surprise me,” said Poirot, looking at her with a somewhat puzzled face. “Do people remember?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Oliver, “I was really thinking of elephants.”

“Elephants?”

As he had thought often before, Poirot thought that really Mrs. Oliver was the most unaccountable woman. Why suddenly elephants?

“I was thinking of elephants at the lunch yesterday,” said Mrs. Oliver.

“Why were you thinking of elephants?” said Poirot, with some curiosity.

“Well, I was really thinking of teeth. You know, things one tries to eat, and if you’ve got some sort of false teeth—well, you can’t do it very well. You know, you’ve got to know what you can eat and what you can’t.”

“Ah!” said Poirot, with a deep sigh. “Yes, yes. The dentists, they can do much for you, but not everything.”

“Quite so. And then I thought of—you know—our teeth being only bone and so not awfully good and how nice it would be to be a dog, who has real ivory teeth. And then I thought of anyone else who has ivory teeth, and I thought about walruses and—oh, other things like that. And I thought about elephants. Of course when you think of ivory you do think of elephants, don’t you? Great big elephants with tusks.”

“That is very true,” said Poirot, still not seeing the point of what Mrs. Oliver was saying.

“So I thought that what we’ve really got to do is to get at the people who are like elephants. Because elephants, so they say, don’t forget.”

“I have heard the phrase, yes,” said Poirot.

“Elephants don’t forget,” said Mrs. Oliver. “You know, a story children get brought up on? How about someone, an Indian tailor, stuck a needle or something in an elephant’s tusk. No. Not a tusk, his trunk. Of course, an elephant’s trunk. And the next time the elephant came past he had a great mouthful of water and he splashed it out all over the tailor though he hadn’t seen him for several years. He hadn’t forgotten. He remembered. That’s the point, you see. Elephants remember. What I’ve got to do is—I’ve got to get in touch with some elephants.”

“I do not know yet if I quite see what you mean,” said Hercule Poirot. “Who are you classifying elephants? You sound as though you were going for information to the Zoo.”

“Well, it’s not exactly like that,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Not elephants, as elephants, but the way people remember up to a point would resemble elephants. There are some people who *do* remember. In fact, one does remember queer things, I mean there are a lot of things that *I* remember very well. They happened—I remember a birthday party I had when I was five, and a pink cake—a lovely pink cake. It had a sugar bird on it. And I remember the day my canary flew away and I cried. And I remember another day when I went into a field and there was a bull there and somebody said it would gore me, and I was terrified and wanted to run out of the field. Well, I remember that quite well. It was a Tuesday too. I don’t know why I should remember it was a Tuesday, but it was a Tuesday. And I remember a wonderful picnic with blackberries. I remember getting pricked terribly, but getting more blackberries.”

than anyone else. It was wonderful! By that time I was nine, I think. But one needn't go back as far as that. I mean, I've been to hundreds of weddings in my life, but when I look back on a wedding there are only two that I remember *particularly*. One where I was a bridesmaid. It took place in the New Forest, I remember, and I can't remember who was there actually. I think it was a cousin of mine getting married. I didn't know her very well but she wanted a good many bridesmaids and, well, I came in handy, I suppose. But I know another wedding. That was a friend of mine in the Navy. He was nearly drowned in a submarine, and then he was saved, and then the girl he was engaged to, her people didn't want her to marry him but then he did marry her after that and I was one of her bridesmaids at the marriage. Well, I mean, there's always things you *do* remember."

"I see your point," said Poirot. "I find it interesting. So you will go *à la recherche des éléphants*?"

"That's right. I'd have to get the date right."

"There," said Poirot, "I hope I may be able to help you."

"And then I'll think of people I knew about at that time, people that I may have known who also knew the same friends that I did, who probably knew General What-not. People who may have known them abroad, but whom I also knew although I mayn't have seen them for a good many years. You can look up people, you know, that you haven't seen for a long time. Because people are always quite pleased to see someone coming up out of the past, even if they can't remember very much about you. And then you naturally will talk about the things that were happening at that date, that you remember about."

"Very interesting," said Poirot. "I think you are very well equipped for what you propose to do. People who knew the Ravenscrofts either well or not very well; people who lived in the same part of the world where the things happened or who might have been staying there. More difficult, but I think one could get at it. And so, somehow or other one would try different things. Start a little talk going about what happened, what they think happened, what anyone else has ever told you about what might have happened. About any love affairs the husband or wife had, about any money that somebody might have inherited. I think you could scratch up a lot of things."

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Oliver. "I'm afraid really I'm just a nosey parker."

"You've been given an assignment," said Poirot, "not by someone you like, not by someone you wish to oblige, but someone you entirely dislike. That does not matter. You are still on a quest, a quest of knowledge. You take your own path. It is the path of the elephants. The elephants *may* remember. *Bon voyage*," said Poirot.

"I beg your pardon," said Mrs. Oliver.

"I'm sending you forth on your voyage of discovery," said Poirot. "*À la recherche des éléphants*."

"I expect I'm mad," said Mrs. Oliver sadly. She brushed her hands through her hair again so that she looked like the old picture books of Struwpeter. "I was just thinking of starting a story about a golden retriever. But it wasn't going well. I couldn't get started, if you know what I mean."

"All right, abandon the golden retriever. Concern yourself only with elephants."

BOOK ONE

ELEPHANTS

“Can you find my address book for me, Miss Livingstone?”

“It’s on your desk, Mrs. Oliver. In the left-hand corner.”

“I don’t mean that one,” said Mrs. Oliver. “That’s the one I’m using now. I mean my last one. The one I had last year, or perhaps the one before that again.”

“Has it been thrown away, perhaps?” suggested Miss Livingstone.

“No, I don’t throw away address books and things like that because so often you want one. I mean some address that you haven’t copied into the new one. I expect it may be in one of the drawers of the tallboys.”

Miss Livingstone was a fairly new arrival, replacing Miss Sedgwick. Ariadne Oliver missed Miss Sedgwick. Sedgwick knew so many things. She knew the places where Mrs. Oliver sometimes put things, the kind of places Mrs. Oliver kept things in. She remembered the names of people Mrs. Oliver had written nice letters to, and the names of people that Mrs. Oliver, goaded beyond endurance, had written rather rude things to. She was invaluable, or rather, had been invaluable. “She was like—what was the book called?” Mrs. Oliver said, casting her mind back. “Oh yes, I know—a big brown book. All Victorians had it. *Enquire Within Upon Everything*. And you could too! How to take iron marks off linen, how to deal with curdled mayonnaise, how to start a chatty letter to a bishop. Many many things. It was all there in *Enquire Within Upon Everything*.” Great Aunt Alice’s great standby.

Miss Sedgwick had been just as good as Aunt Alice’s book. Miss Livingstone was not at all the same thing. Miss Livingstone stood there always, very long-faced with a sallow skin, looking purposefully efficient. Every line of her face said “I am very efficient.” But she wasn’t really, Mrs. Oliver thought. She only knew all the places where former literary employers of hers had kept things, and where she clearly considered Mrs. Oliver ought to keep them.

“What I want,” said Mrs. Oliver, with firmness and the determination of a spoilt child, “is my 1969 address book. And I think 1969 as well. Please look for it as quick as you can, will you?”

“Of course, of course,” said Miss Livingstone.

She looked round her with the rather vacant expression of someone who is looking for something she has never heard of before but which efficiency may be able to produce by some unexpected turn of luck.

If I don’t get Sedgwick back, I shall go mad, thought Mrs. Oliver to herself. I can’t deal with this thing if I don’t have Sedgwick.

Miss Livingstone started pulling open various drawers in the furniture in Mrs. Oliver’s so-called study and writing room.

“Here is last year’s,” said Miss Livingstone happily. “That will be much more up-to-date, won’t it?”

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