



It was on top of the door, balanced there. It crashed down when the door was opened

Murder for Christmas

By Agatha Christie

ILLUSTRATED BY MARIO COOPER

The Story Thus Far:

WEALTHY old Simeon Lee learns that some rough diamonds—valuable stones that he had kept in a safe in his bedroom—have been stolen. He notifies the authorities, by telephone. A short time later, someone enters the old man's room (although the door is locked and the windows secure) and cuts his throat!

Three men investigate the crime: Colonel Johnson, chief constable of the county, Superintendent of Police Sugden; and Hercule Poirot, Europe's most capable detective, who happens to be in England at the time. They feel sure that the murderer has not made his getaway; and they learn that, just previous to the tragedy, Mr. Lee had let it be known that he was thinking of changing his will.

Assembled in the house—in addition to Mr. Lee's son, Alfred, and Alfred's wife, Lydia (who have presided over Mr. Lee's home, Gorston Hall, for years)—are the old fellow's two other married sons and their wives: David, an artist, and Hilda; George, a member of Parliament, and Magdalene. Also Harry Lee, the black sheep of the family, who has just come home after a long period of aimless wandering; Pilar Estravados, old Simeon's granddaughter,

who has been brought up in Spain; and Stephen Farr, the son of one of Mr. Lee's old partners.

Everyone in the house—including Tressilian, the butler, and Horbury, Mr. Lee's valet—is questioned. Everyone (with the possible exception of Horbury) is more or less suspect. . . . While in one of the gardens that surround Gorston Hall—a charming spot designed to represent the Dead Sea area, in miniature—Poirot, in a moment of nervousness, picks up some pebbles. To his amazement, they are rough diamonds!

At the first opportunity, he interrogates Alfred and Lydia. Again, neither will admit anything. After a time, Lydia remarks: "If only those diamonds could be found. I'm sure the solution lies there."

Poirot stares at her. "They have been found, Madame," he says.

Lydia is startled. "What?" she exclaims. Poirot smiles. "They were found in your little garden of the Dead Sea."

"In my garden?" Lydia—still incredulous—says. "How extraordinary!"

"Is it not, Madame?" Poirot says, softly.

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ALFRED LEE said with a sigh, "That was better than I feared!" They had just returned from the inquest.

Mr. Charlton, an old-fashioned type of solicitor with a cautious blue eye, had been present and had returned with them. He said, "Ah—I told you the proceedings would be purely formal—purely formal—there was bound to be an adjournment—to enable the police to gather up additional evidence."

George Lee said vexedly, "It is all most unpleasant—really most unpleasant—a terrible position in which to be placed! I myself am quite convinced that this crime was done by a maniac who somehow or other gained admittance to the house. That man Sugden is obstinate as a mule. Colonel John-

son should enlist the aid of Scotland Yard. These local police are no good. Thickheaded. What about this man Horbury, for instance? I hear his past is definitely unsatisfactory but the police do nothing whatever about it."

Mr. Charlton said, "Ah—I believe the man Horbury has a satisfactory alibi covering the period of time in question. The police have accepted it."

"Why should they?" George fumed. "If I were they, I should accept such an alibi with reserve—with great reserve. Naturally a criminal always provides himself with an alibi! It is the duty of the police to break down the alibi—that is, if they know their job."

"Well, well," said Mr. Charlton. "I don't think it's quite our business to
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Mountain Monarch

By William Arthur Breyfogle

ILLUSTRATED BY FLOYD DAVIS

Any man may become dangerous when a life more cherished than his own is at stake. Dr. Duncan and his wife met such a man

JEAN DUNCAN knew most of the people in and near Black Gap, but the man at the door now was a stranger to her. "The doctor is out," she told him, and practice kept the note of regret in her voice from sounding perfunctory. "If you could come back? Or if you don't mind waiting."

"I'll wait." He disposed his lean person in one of the rockers on the doctor's porch. "Happen you're his wife?"

"Happen I am!" said Jean, and smiled at him.

"And the nursin' woman? The call's for you, too. There's a man hurt, bad. You're to bring all you need for cuttin' him."

"The doctor won't be long. You didn't tell me where the place is."

"No need, ma'am. I'm to take you. 'Twas Jed Maclaren sent me."

"Jed Maclaren? But that's a long way, isn't it?"

The man looked at her. "They said you'd come."

"Oh, we'll come, yes!" She thought of questioning him further, and decided against it. The people here weren't communicative, even in Black Gap itself, and this man must have come from the Morlands, the far, blue rampart of mountains rising up in the west. Jed Maclaren had his kingdom there. It was enough, anyway, to know that Jed Maclaren wanted the services of Dr. James Duncan and Jean, his wife. Against all likelihood, they had a summons from the King of the Mountains.

It was the title she and Jim had bestowed upon Jed Maclaren, for they had heard plenty of rumors and legends about him. It had been seriously maintained in their hearing that he was eight feet tall and a hundred years old; that rattlesnakes bit him and fell dead; that he had nine wives. Like the mountains themselves, Jed Maclaren was an exciting background to life in Black Gap.

WHEN Jim came in from his calls, shortly after midday, they brought the messenger in from the porch to share their hasty lunch. Jim was making plans. "We can take the car as far as White Falls. After that—do we walk?"

"There's three mules waiting there," the man said.

"Three?"

"For you, the nursin' woman and me."

Duncan looked at his wife, in doubt. "It's bound to be a hard trip."

The man said, "I was to say she'd be needed, special." He had stopped eating. He looked concerned.

Jean assured him. "I'm going, of course. They've asked for me, and I'd want to go, even if they hadn't."

The twenty miles to White Falls were uphill, crooked and rough. Jean rode in the back seat, holding the heavy black bag on her lap. At White Falls they left the car. A man as lank and uncommunicative as their guide brought the mules out, saddled. There were not three of them but four, and the fourth was for this new member of their party. He and the guide conferred briefly, in low voices, and then they set out, with Jim Duncan and his wife riding in the middle. It was late afternoon. The road

ran a little way beyond White Falls, but they didn't take it. They swung to the right and followed a trail that, except where it lay across bare rock, was like a tunnel under thick trees.

"This here," their guide told them, "is all Webster country. Don't make no noise till I tell you you can." It wasn't until then that Jean saw the rifle in his saddle boot. His companion had one, too.

None of the Websters appeared to dispute their passage. But Jed Maclaren had taken no chances with the possibility of their appearance. Other men joined them at intervals along the trail. They were all armed, mounted and silent. When darkness fell, it was cold. Jean Duncan shivered, and Jim took off his jacket and made her put it on. "I should have told you what the nights would be like up here."

"How much farther, Jim?"

"No idea. These fellows won't talk. Except that we're not worth it, they might be kidnaping us!"

HE LAUGHED, but Jean looked up, startled. "Is that why there are so many of them—so we can't escape?"

"I doubt it. It's more likely to be on account of their pals, the Websters. Evidently they're at odds."

The armed escort wasn't altogether reassuring to think about. For the last two hours of the way, they rode in utter darkness. The pace didn't slacken. Jean was tired, and the mule's gait jerked cruelly at her neck and the small of her back. When she saw the glimmer of lights, a long way off, she hardly dared hope that it marked their journey's end. But after another mile, the mules stopped at last.

The lights, which at a distance had promised brightness, were dim when seen close at hand, and more confusing than unmixed darkness. A small crowd had gathered about them. Beyond the vague, upturned faces, Jean made out the shapes of buildings, of houses, probably. They seemed to be in the middle of a clearing, on fairly level ground. Their escort had dismounted, but she and Jim sat their mules until the messenger of that morning came up to them. "You get down now," he told them. "Light down, and I'll take you in to Jed Maclaren. He's a-waitin' for you."

It was probably her own imagination, but the way he spoke deepened Jean's sense that they were captives. She was grateful that, in the uncertain light, Jim couldn't be sure of the expression on her face. He was already on the ground, and helping her to dismount. "Chin up, girl!" he whispered. "Mustn't keep the king waiting!"

Except for their original guide, the crowd stayed outside. In the house, lamplight dazzled their eyes at first. Before they could see clearly, a voice from the corner of the room said, "Ye've brought them, have ye?"

"You've heard of a life for a life," the old man said. "That's the way it is between us, now"

