



P. D. JAMES

The
Mistletoe
Murder

AND OTHER STORIES

With a foreword by Val McDermid

ALSO BY P. D. JAMES

Fiction

Cover Her Face
A Mind to Murder
Unnatural Causes
Shroud for a Nightingale
An Unsuitable Job for a Woman
The Black Tower Death of an Expert Witness
Innocent Blood
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The Maul and the Pear Tree: The Ratcliffe Highway Murders, 1811 (with T. A. Critchley)
Time to Be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography
Talking About Detective Fiction

THE
Mistletoe Murder

and Other Stories



P. D. James



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Foreword

Like so many crime writers, P. D. James was drawn to her vocation out of love. Before she took up her pen, she was a keen reader of detective novels, and over her long career she remained fascinated by the so-called Golden Age that followed the end of the First World War. But she was more than a fan. She applied her keen intelligence to what she read and developed a genuine expertise on the subject. I once heard her lecture on the four Queens of Crime—Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh—and she even wrote a fascinating monograph on the subject, *Talking About Detective Fiction*. That love for the work of her predecessors is evident in this collection of her short stories: she picks the pockets of the mechanics of Golden Age plotting; Agatha Christie is referenced several times; and there are knowing nods to the conventions of traditional “cosy” mystery stories.

This appropriation of the conventions of the past sometimes misleads people into thinking of P. D. James as a cosy writer. The reality is that she was anything but cosy, and she takes on those conventions only to subvert them in an often witty way. But one thing in particular sets P. D. James apart from the mainstream tradition of Golden Age English crime fiction, with its stately homes and bourgeois villages where reality never rears its ill-mannered head. She understands that murder is nasty and brutal, that it is fuelled by the most malevolent of motives, and she’s not afraid to face that darkness head-on. Her understanding of what she often called “wickedness” is creepily accurate. There’s nothing cosy about the murders in these stories, however much the settings mimic their forerunners.

And those settings are another hallmark of P. D. James’s work. Her stories are always very specifically located in terms both of time

and place. She is meticulous in her descriptions, summoning up backdrops against which we can readily picture the events as they unfold. She makes those settings work for a living—they create atmosphere and often foreshadow what is to come. Here is our first sight of Stutleigh Manor: “It loomed up out of the darkness, a stark shape against a grey sky pierced with a few high stars. And then the moon moved from behind a cloud and the house was revealed; beauty, symmetry and mystery bathed in white light.” We know right now that something sinister and mysterious lies ahead.

As well as wickedness, P. D. James understood the importance of respectability. She wrote about people who would kill to preserve reputation and status, but who would never do it in a vulgar way. Her elegant prose always plays fair with the reader, and lulls us into a sense of false security, as her killers try to do. Behind those untroubled façades, the malice and suspense build, taking us to places that are dark, vicious and shocking. But always beautifully written. These stories are a delicious gift to us at a time when we thought we would read no more of P. D. James’s work.

—VAL MCDERMID

Preface

In her introduction to an anthology of short crime stories published in 1934, Dorothy L. Sayers wrote: "Death seems to provide the minds of the Anglo-Saxon race with a greater fund of innocent amusement than any other single subject." She was, of course, writing not of the horrifying, messy and occasionally pathetic murders of real life, but of the mysterious, elegantly contrived and popular concoctions of crime writers. Perhaps amusement is hardly the word; entertainment, relaxation or excitement would all be more appropriate. And, to judge from the universal popularity of crime writing, it isn't only the Anglo-Saxons who evince enthusiasm for murder most foul. Millions of readers throughout the world are at home in Sherlock Holmes's claustrophobic sanctum at 221b Baker Street, Miss Marples's charming cottage in St. Mary Mead, and Lord Peter Wimsey's elegant Piccadilly flat.

In the period leading up to the Second World War, much of crime writing was done in the form of a short story. The two writers who can be regarded as the founding fathers of the detective story, Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, were both masters of the form, and the former adumbrated most of the distinguishing features not only of the short story, but of the crime novel: the least likely suspect as murderer, the closed-room mystery, the case solved by an armchair detective, and the epistolary narrative. Eric Ambler has written: "The Detective story may have been born in the mind of Edgar Allan Poe, but it was London that fed it, clothed it and brought it to maturity." He was, of course, thinking of the genius of Conan Doyle, creator of the most famous detective in literature. He bequeathed to the genre a respect for reason, a non-abstract intellectualism, a reliance on ratiocination rather than on physical force, an abhorrence of sentimentality and the power to

create an atmosphere of mystery and gothic horror which is yet firmly rooted in physical reality. Above all, more than any other writer he established the tradition of the great detective, that omniscient amateur whose personal, sometimes bizarre eccentricity is contrasted with the rationality of his methods and who provides for the reader the comforting reassurance that, despite our apparent powerlessness, we yet inhabit an intelligible universe.

Although the Sherlock Holmes stories are the most famous of this period, they are not the only ones worth re-reading. Julian Symons, a respected critic of crime fiction, pointed out that most of the notable practitioners in the art of the short story turned to detection as a relief from their other work and enjoyed using a form still in its infancy which offered them infinite opportunities for originality and variation. G. K. Chesterton is an example of a writer whose main interest lay elsewhere but whose Father Brown stories are still read with pleasure. And it is surprising how many other distinguished writers tried their hand at the short crime story. In the second series of *Great Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, published in 1931, the contributors included H. G. Wells, Wilkie Collins, Walter de la Mare, Charles Dickens and Arthur Quiller-Couch, in addition to the names we would expect to find.

Few detective novelists writing today are uninfluenced by the founding fathers, but most crime writers produce novels rather than short stories. Part of the reason for this is the greatly reduced market for short stories generally, but the main reason is perhaps that the detective story has moved closer to mainstream fiction and a writer needs space if he or she is fully to explore the psychological subtleties of character, the complications of relationships, and the impact of murder and of a police investigation on the lives of those characters.

The scope of the short story is inevitably restricted and this means it is most effective when it deals with a single incident or one dominant idea. It is the originality and strength of this idea which largely determines the success of the story. Although it is far less complex in structure than a novel, more linear in concept, driving

single-mindedly to its denouement, the short story can still provide within its smaller compass a credible world into which the reader can enter for those satisfactions which we expect from good crime writing: a credible mystery, tension and excitement, characters with whom we can identify if not always sympathise, and an ending which does not disappoint. There is a satisfying art in containing within a few thousand words all those elements of plot, setting, characterisation and surprise which go to provide a good crime story.

Although most of my own work has been as a novelist, I have greatly enjoyed the challenge of the short story. Much has to be achieved with limited means. There is not space for long and detailed descriptions of place, but the setting must still come alive for the reader. Characterisation is as important as in the novel, but the essentials of a personality must be established with an economy of words. The plot must be strong but not too complex, and the denouement, to which every sentence of the narrative should inexorably lead, must surprise the reader but not leave him feeling cheated. All should command the most ingenious element of the short story: the shock of surprise. The good short story is accordingly difficult to write well, but in this busy age it can provide one of the most satisfactory reading experiences.

—P. D. JAMES

The Twelve Clues of Christmas



The figure who leaps from the side of the road in the darkness of a winter afternoon, frantically waving down the approaching motorist, is so much the creature of fiction that when it happened to the newly promoted Sergeant Adam Dalgliesh his first thought was that he had somehow become involved in one of those Christmas short stories written to provide a seasonal frisson for the readers of an upmarket weekly magazine. But the figure was real enough, the emergency apparently genuine.

Dalgliesh wound down the window of his MG Midget letting in a stream of cold December air, a swirl of soft snow and a male head.

“Thank God you’ve stopped! I’ve got to telephone the police. My uncle’s committed suicide. I’m from Harkerville Hall.”

“Haven’t you got a telephone?”

“If I had I wouldn’t be stopping you. It’s out of order. It often is. And now the car’s packed up.”

Adam had noticed a telephone box on the outskirts of a village he had passed less than five minutes ago. On the other hand, he was only ten minutes’ drive from his aunt’s cottage on the Suffolk coast where he was to spend Christmas. But why intrude a not particularly agreeable stranger on her privacy? He said: “I can drive you to a telephone box. I passed one just outside Wivenhaven.”

“Then hurry. It’s urgent. He’s dead.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. He’s cold and he isn’t breathing and he’s got no pulse.”

Dalgliesh was tempted to say, “In that case there’s no particular hurry,” but forbore.

The stranger’s voice was harsh and didactic, and Adam suspected that his face might be equally unprepossessing. He was, however, wearing a heavy tweed coat with collar upturned and little was visible except a long nose. Adam leaned over to open the left-hand door and he got in. He was certainly genuine enough in the sense that he was obviously labouring under some emotion, but Adam detected more anxiety and chagrin than shock or grief.

His passenger said ungraciously: “I’d better introduce myself. Helmut Harkerville, and I’m not German. My mother liked the name.”

There seemed no possible reply to this. Dalgliesh introduced himself and they drove in uncompanionable silence to the telephone box. Getting out, Harkerville said crossly: “Oh God, I’ve forgotten the money.”

Dalgliesh dug into his jacket pocket and handed over an assortment of coins, then followed him out to the telephone. The local police wouldn’t relish being called out at 4:30 on Christmas Eve, and if this was some kind of hoax he preferred not to be an active participant. On the other hand, it was right to call his aunt to warn her that he might be delayed.

The first call took some minutes. Returning, Harkerville said with annoyance: “They took it remarkably calmly. Anyone would think people in this county kill themselves routinely at Christmas.”

Dalgliesh said, “East Anglians are robust. Family members are occasionally tempted, but most manage to resist.”

Adam’s call completed, they came to the place where he had picked up his passenger. Harkerville said shortly: “There’s a right-hand turning here. It’s less than a mile to Harkerville Hall.”

Driving in silence, it occurred to Adam that he might have a responsibility beyond dropping his passenger at the front door. He

was, after all, a police officer. This wasn't his patch, but he ought to confirm that the corpse was indeed a corpse and beyond help, and to await the arrival of the local police. He put this proposition to his companion, quietly but firmly, and after a minute received a grudging acquiescence.

"Do what you like, but you're wasting your time. He's left a note. This is Harkerville Hall, but if you're local you probably know it, at least by sight."

Dalgliesh did know the hall by sight and its owner by reputation. It was a house difficult to avoid noticing. He reflected that today not even the most accommodating planning authority would have sanctioned its erection close to one of the most attractive stretches of the Suffolk coastline. In the 1870s a more indulgent system had prevailed. The then Harkerville had made his millions from dosing insomniacs, dyspeptics and the impotent with a mixture of opium, bicarbonate of soda and liquorice, and had retired to Suffolk to build his status symbol designed to impress the neighbours and inconvenience his staff. Its present owner was reputed to be equally rich, mean and reclusive.

Helmut said: "I'm down for Christmas as usual with my sister Gertrude and my brother Carl. My wife isn't with us. Not feeling up to it. Oh, and there's a temporary cook, Mrs. Dagworth. My uncle instructed me to advertise for her in the *Lady's Companion* and bring her down with us yesterday evening. His usual cook-housekeeper and Mavis the house parlour maid go home for Christmas."

Having put Adam into the picture by this surely unnecessary recital of domestic arrangements, he relapsed into silence.

The hall came upon them with such suddenness that Adam instinctively braked. It reared up in the headlights, looking more like an aberration of the natural world than a human habitation. The architect, if architect had indeed been employed, had begun his monstrosity as a large, square, multi-windowed house in red brick and had then, under the impulse of a perverse creative frenzy, erected a huge ornamental porch more suitable for a cathedral,

thrown out four large bay windows and adorned the roof with a turret at each corner and a central dome.

It had snowed all night, but the morning had been dry and very cold. Now, however, the first flakes were thickening, beginning to obliterate the double tyre marks in the car's headlights. Their approach was silent, and the house itself seemed deserted. Only the ground floor and an upper window showed a frail light shining through the slits of drawn curtains.

The great hall, oak-panelled and ill-lit, was cold. A cavernous fireplace contained only a two-bar electric fire, and a bunch of holly stuck behind a couple of heavy, undistinguished portraits enhanced rather than mitigated the gloom. The man who let them in and who now pushed shut the solid oak door was clearly Carl Harkerville. Like his sister, who came rushing forward, he had the Harkerville nose, bright suspicious eyes and a thin tight mouth. A second woman, standing at the edge of the group in stony disapproval, was not introduced, but was presumably the hired cook, although a thin plaster on her middle right finger suggested a certain incompetence with a knife. Her mean little mouth and dark suspicious eyes suggested that her mind was as tightly corseted as her body. Helmut's introduction of Adam as "a sergeant of the Metropolitan Police" was received by his siblings with a wary silence, and by Mrs. Dagworth with a quickly repressed gasp. When the family preceded Adam up to the bedroom she followed.

The room, also panelled in oak, was immense. The bed was an oak four-poster with a canopy, and the dead man lay on top of the counterpane. He was wearing only his pyjamas and there was a small sprig of dry holly, extremely prickly and with shrunken berries, stuck into the top buttonhole. The Harkerville nose stuck out, pitted and scarred like a ship's prow weathered by many voyages. The eyes were tight-closed as if by an effort of will. The gaping mouth was stuffed with what looked like Christmas pudding. His gnarled hands, the nails surprisingly long and gummed with ointment, were disposed across his stomach. On his head was a crown in red tissue paper, obviously from a cracker. The heavy

bedside table held a lamp, switched on but giving a subdued light, an empty bottle of whisky, a labelled pill bottle, also empty, an open tin containing an obnoxious-smelling ointment labelled Harkerville's Hair Restorer, a small thermos-flask, a Christmas cracker which had been pulled, and a Christmas pudding still in its basin but with a lump gouged out of the top. There was also a note.

The message was handwritten in a surprisingly firm script. Dalglish read: "I've been planning this for some time, and if you don't like it, you can put up with it. This, thank God, will be my last family Christmas. No more of Gertrude's stodgy Christmas pudding and overcooked turkey. No more ridiculous paper hats. No more holly indiscriminately stuck around the house. No more of your repellently ugly faces and mind-numbing company. I'm entitled to some peace and happiness. I'm going where I can get it, and my darling will be waiting for me."

Helmut Harkerville said: "He was always a practical joker, but you'd think he'd want to die with some dignity. Finding him like this was a terrible shock, particularly for my sister. But then Uncle never had any consideration for others."

His brother said, with quiet reproof: "Nil nisi bonum, Helmut, nil nisi bonum. He knows better now."

Adam asked: "Who found him?"

"I did," said Helmut. "Well, at least I was first up the ladder. We never have early morning tea here, but Uncle always took to bed a flask of strong coffee to drink in the morning with a tot of whisky. He's usually up early so when he didn't appear for breakfast by nine o'clock Mrs. Dagworth went to see if he was all right. She found the door locked, but he shouted out that he didn't want to be disturbed. My sister tried again when he didn't come down for lunch. When we couldn't make him hear we got out the ladder and climbed in through the window. The ladder's still in place."

Mrs. Dagworth was standing beside the bed in stiff disapproval. She said: "I was employed to cook Christmas dinner for four. No one told me that the house was an unheated monstrosity and the owner suicidal. God knows how his usual cook manages. That

kitchen hasn't been upgraded for eighty years. I tell you now, I'm not staying. As soon as the police arrive, I go. And I shall make a complaint to the *Lady's Companion*. You'll be lucky to get another cook."

Helmut said: "The last bus leaves for London early on Christmas Eve and there isn't another until Boxing Day. You'll have to stay until then, so you may as well do what you're paid to do, get on with some work."

His brother said: "And you can make a start by getting us some tea, hot and strong. I'm starved in here."

Indeed the room was exceptionally cold. Gertrude said: "It will be warm in the kitchen. Thank God for the Aga. We'll all go there."

Dalgliesh had hoped for something a little more seasonal than tea and thought with longing of the excellent meal awaiting him at his aunt's cottage, the carefully chosen claret already open, the cracking and sea-tang of a driftwood fire. But the kitchen was at least warmer. The Aga was the only piece of reasonably modern equipment. The floor was stone-flagged, the double sink was stained and there was a huge dresser covering one wall loaded with an assortment of jugs, mugs, plates and tins, and several cupboards, the tops all similarly covered. On an overhead pulley a collection of tea towels, obviously washed but still stained, hung like depressing flags of truce.

Gertrude said: "I brought down a Christmas cake. Perhaps we could cut that."

Carl said quietly: "I think not, Gertrude. I don't think I could stomach Christmas cake with Uncle lying dead. There are probably some biscuits in the usual tin."

Mrs. Dagworth, her face a mask of resentment, took a tin from the dresser labelled "sugar" and began spooning out tea into the teapot, then burrowed in one of the cupboards and brought out a large red tin. The biscuits were old and soft. Dalgliesh declined them but was grateful for the tea when it came.

He said: "When did you last see your uncle alive?"

It was Helmut who replied: "He had supper with us last night. We didn't arrive till eight and naturally his cook had left nothing for us. She never does. But we'd brought some cold meat and salad and had that. Mrs. Dagworth opened a tin of soup. At nine o'clock, immediately after the news, Uncle said he'd go to bed. No one saw or heard him again except Mrs. Dagworth."

Mrs. Dagworth said: "When I called him for breakfast and he shouted to me to go away, I heard him pull the cracker. So he was alive at nine or just after."

Adam said: "You're sure of the sound?"

"Of course I was. I know the sound of a cracker being pulled. It seemed a little odd so I went to the door and called out, 'Are you all right Mr. Harkerville?' He called back, 'Of course I'm all right. Go away and stay away.' That's the last time he spoke to anyone."

Dalgliesh said: "He must have been standing close to the door for you to hear him. It's solid wood."

Mrs. Dagworth flushed, then said angrily: "Solid wood it may be, but I know what I heard. I heard the cracker and I heard him tell me to go away. Anyway, it's plain what's happened. You've got the suicide note, haven't you? It's in his handwriting."

Adam said: "I'll go upstairs and keep watch on the room. You'd better wait for the Suffolk police."

There was no reason why he should keep watch on the room, and he half-expected them to protest. However, no one did and he climbed the stairs alone. He entered the bedroom and locked the door with the key which was still in the keyhole. Going over to the bed, he scrutinised the corpse carefully, smelt the ointment with a grimace of distaste, and bent over the body. It was apparent that Harkerville had applied the grease liberally to his scalp before going to bed. The hands were lightly clenched but he could detect in the right palm a wodge of Christmas pudding. Rigor mortis was just beginning in the upper part of the body, but he gently raised the stiffening head and studied the pillow.

After examining the cracker he turned his attention to the note. Turning it over, he saw that the back of the paper was slightly brown as if it had been scorched. Going over to the immense grate, he saw that someone had been burning papers. There was a pyramid of white ash which still gave a faint heat to his exploring hand. The burning had been thorough except for one small segment of board with what looked like a unicorn's horn, and a scrap of letter. The paper was thick and the few type-written words plain. He read: "eight hundred pounds not unreasonable considering." There was no more and he left both fragments in place.

To the right of the window, there was a heavy oak desk. It suggested that Cuthbert Harkerville had slept more peaceably with his important papers close to hand. The desk was unlocked but was completely empty except for some bundles of old receipted bills held together with rubber bands. The desktop and the mantelshelf were likewise empty. The huge wardrobe, smelling of mothballs, held only clothes.

Adam decided to take a look at the adjoining rooms, not without qualms that this was trespass. The room occupied by Mrs. Dagworth was as bleakly unfurnished as a prison cell, the only remarkable feature a mouldy stuffed bear holding a brass tray. Her unopened case lay on a bed too narrow for comfort and with a single hard pillow.

The room to the right was equally small, but the absent Mavis had at least imposed on it some trace of adolescent personality. Posters of film and pop stars were stuck on the walls. There was a battered but comfortable cane chair and the bed was covered with a quilted bedspread patterned with leaping lambs in pink and blue. The small rickety wardrobe was empty; Mavis had discarded her half-used make-up jars into the wastepaper basket and had slung on top of them a variety of old and soiled clothes.

Adam returned to the main bedroom and completed his unsuccessful search for two missing objects.

The village was four miles distant and it was half an hour before Constable Taplow arrived. He was a thickset middle-aged man, his

natural bulk enhanced by the layers of clothing he considered necessary for a cycle ride in December. Despite the fact that the snow had subsided, he insisted on wheeling his bicycle into the hall, to the obvious but silent disapproval of the family, leant it with care against the wall and patted the saddle gently, as if stabling a horse.

After Adam had introduced himself and explained his presence, Constable Taplow said: "I suppose you'll be wanting to get on your way then. No point in hanging around. I'll deal with this."

Adam said firmly: "I'll come up with you. I've got the key. I thought it a prudent precaution to lock the door."

Constable Taplow took the key and seemed about to comment on the over-fussiness of the Met, but refrained. They went up together. Taplow regarded the body with mild disapproval, surveyed the contents of the table, sniffed at the jar of ointment and took up the note.

"Seems plain enough to me. He couldn't face another family Christmas."

"You've met the family before?"

"Never set eyes on any of them, except for the deceased. It's known that the family come to the hall every year but they don't show their faces, no more than he ever does—that is, did."

Adam suggested mildly: "A suspicious death, wouldn't you say?"

"No, I wouldn't, and I'll tell you why. This is where local knowledge counts. The family are all mad, or as near mad as makes no odds. His father did just the same."

"Killed himself at Christmas?"

"Guy Fawkes Night. Filled all his pockets with Catherine wheels and bangers, stuffed bloody great rockets round his belt, drank a whole bottle of whisky and ran straight into the bonfire."

"And went out with a bang, not a whimper. I hope there weren't any children present."

"He went out with a bang, that's for sure. And they don't invite children to Harkerville Hall. You won't find vicar bringing the carol singers round here tonight."

Adam felt that he had a duty to persevere. He said: "His desk is almost empty. Someone's been burning papers. The two half-burnt scraps are interesting."

"Suicides usually burn papers. I'll look at them in good time. The paper that counts is here. This is a suicide note by any reckoning. Thanks for waiting, Sarge. I'll take over now."

But when they reached the hall Constable Taplow said, with an attempt at nonchalance: "Perhaps you'd drop me at the nearest telephone box. Better let CID have a look at this lot before they take the old gentleman away."

Adam finally turned the MG seaward in the comfortable assurance that he had done as much as duty and inclination had required. If the local CID wanted him, then they knew where to find him. The Curious Case of the Christmas Cracker—an appropriate title, he felt, for such a bizarre preliminary to Christmas—could safely be left to the Suffolk police.

But if he had hoped for a peaceful evening, he was to be disappointed. He only had time to take a leisurely bath, unpack his case and settle himself before the driftwood fire with the first drink of the evening in his hand, when Inspector Peck knocked on the door. He was very different from Constable Taplow; young for his rank, with a sharp-featured expressive face under the dark hair, and apparently impervious to cold since he wore only slacks and jacket, his only concession to the December night a large multicoloured knitted scarf wound twice round his neck. He was gracefully apologetic to Miss Dalglish but wasted no such niceties on her nephew.

"I've done a bit of checking up on you, Sergeant. Not easy on Christmas Eve, but someone at the Met was alive and sober. Apparently you're the Inspector's blue-eyed boy. They say you've got a brain between your ears and eyes in your head. You're coming back with me to Harkerville Hall."

"Now, Sir?" Adam's glance at the fire was eloquent.

“Now, as at this moment, at once, immediately, pronto. Bring your car. I’d drive you there and bring you back, but I’ve a feeling I’m likely to be at the hall for some little time.”

Night had fallen now. As Dalglish went to his car the air felt and smelt colder. The snow had finally ceased drifting down and a moon was reeling between the scudding clouds. At the hall they parked their cars side by side.

The door of the hall was opened by Mrs. Dagworth, who, with one malevolent look, let them in silently, then disappeared towards the kitchen. As they mounted the stairs, Harkerville appeared.

Looking up at them, he said querulously: “I thought you were going to have Uncle taken away, Inspector. It’s hardly decent to leave him in his present state. Surely the district nurse can come and lay him out? This is all extremely upsetting for my sister.”

“All in good time, Sir. I’m waiting for the police surgeon and the photographer.”

“Photographer? Why on earth should you want him photographed? I consider that positively indecent. I’ve half a mind to telephone the Chief Constable.”

“You do that, Sir. I think you’ll find he’s with his son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren in Scotland, but I expect he’ll be glad to hear from you. It’ll quite make his Christmas, I don’t wonder.”

In the bedroom Inspector Peck said: “I suppose you’re going to tell me that the suicide note isn’t entirely convincing. I’m inclined to agree, but tell that to the coroner. You’ve heard the family history?”

“Some of it. I’ve heard about the ascension of grandfather.”

“And he wasn’t the only one. The Harkervilles have an aversion to natural death. Their lives are unremarkable so they ensure that their deaths are spectacular. So what struck you particularly about this little charade?”

Dalglish said: “A number of oddities, Sir. If this were a detective story, you could call it ‘The Twelve Clues of Christmas.’ It’s taken a

little mental agility to get the number to twelve, but I thought it appropriate.”

“Cut out the cleverness, laddie, and get to the facts.”

“This supposed suicide note for a start. It reads to me like the last page of a letter to one or more of the family. The paper was originally folded twice to get it into the envelope. The back is slightly singed. Someone has tried to iron out the creases. It hasn’t been entirely successful; you can still see two faint marks. And then there’s the wording. This was to be Harkerville’s last Christmas. It suggests that he expected to suffer Gertrude’s cooking for the final time, so why kill himself on Christmas Eve?”

“Changed his mind. Not unknown. What do you suggest the note means?”

“That he was planning to get away from here, perhaps to go abroad. There’s a small segment of cardboard in the grate, with part of the head of a unicorn. You can just see the horn. I think someone burnt his passport, perhaps to conceal the fact that he’s recently renewed it. There must have been travel documents, too, but the family burnt those together with most of his papers. And there’s this scrap of half-burnt letter. It could be taken as a demand for money, but I don’t think it is. Look at the comma, Sir. There could have been other digits before the eight hundred pounds. For example, suppose it read ‘four hundred thousand, eight hundred pounds not unreasonable considering the amount of land.’ It could have been from an estate agent. Perhaps he was planning to sell up, add the proceeds to his existing fortune and say goodbye to this place for ever.”

“Escaping to the sun? Could be. And his darling will be waiting for him?”

“So she may be, but on the Costa Brava, not in Heaven. You should take a look next door at the maid’s room, Sir. Nothing of any value left in the wardrobe and a pile of old clothes dumped unceremoniously in the waste-paper basket. Mavis is probably even now sitting in the sun waiting for a call from the aged person of her heart, dreaming of a few years of pampered luxury together, and

then the rest of her life as a wealthy widow. Perhaps that's why he bothered with the hair restorer. It's rather pathetic, really."

"You'll never make Inspector, lad, if you don't curb that imagination. As for the lass, she lives in the village. Easy enough to check whether she's at home."

Adam said: "Three clues so far: the singed note, the half-burnt passport, the scrap of letter. And then there's the ointment. Why bother with hair restorer if you're planning suicide?"

"Could be habit. Suicides don't always act rationally. Well, the act itself is totally irrational. Why take the one option that cuts out all the other options? Still, I grant that plastering on that ointment was odd."

"And he plastered it on thickly, Sir. Clue number four, the stained pillow. Rigor was just beginning to set in when I first saw him but I lifted the head. The pillow is sticky with the stuff, much more so than the paper hat. The hat must have been put on after he was dead. Then there's the cracker. If that was pulled here in the bedroom, where's the toy? The motto's in the cracker still but not the favour."

Inspector Peck said: "You're not the only one to search. I asked the family to leave the kitchen for a while and sit in the drawing room. I found this under the dresser." He put his hand in his pocket and took out a sealed plastic envelope. Inside was a cheap gaudy brooch. He said: "We'll check with the manufacturers but I don't think there's much doubt where this came from. God knows why they didn't pull the cracker in the bedroom, but some people are superstitious about making a noise in the presence of the dead. I'll grant you the Clue of the Christmas Cracker, Sergeant."

"And what about the Clue of the Counterfeit Cook, Sir? Why would Harkerville instruct his nephew to advertise for one? He's known to be mean, a miser, and the note makes it plain that it was usually Gertrude who cooked the indigestible Christmas dinners. I think Mrs. Dagworth was brought in, not last night but this morning, to provide that evidence about hearing the cracker pulled just after nine o'clock and to give the others an alibi. If she arrived

with them last night, as they claim, why is her case lying unopened on her bed next door? And she stated that the note was in Harkerville's handwriting. How did she know? It was Helmut Harkerville who claims he engaged her, not his uncle. And there's another thing: you've seen what a mess that kitchen is in. When she made tea for us and got out the old biscuits she knew exactly where to find what she wanted. She's worked in that kitchen before."

"When do you suggest she arrived?"

"On this morning's early bus. It was important, after all, that Cuthbert Harkerville never saw her. She must have been here before. I think the family met her at Saxmundham. The car may be out of commission now, but when I arrived I saw two sets of tyre marks quite plainly in my headlights. They're obliterated by the snow now, but they were plain then."

"Pity you didn't preserve them. They're not much good as evidence now. Still, you didn't know at the time there was anything suspicious about the death. I'll give you two clues for the counterfeit cook. A bit risky, though, wasn't it, putting themselves in the power of a stranger? Why not keep it in the family?"

"I think they did keep it in the family. If you call Mrs. Dagworth Mrs. Helmut Harkerville, I think you might get a reaction. No wonder she's so sour, waiting on the others isn't exactly congenial."

"Well, go on Sergeant. We're not up to number twelve yet."

"There's the holly, Sir. The stem is extremely prickly. There's no holly in this room, so someone must have brought it up, probably from the hall. If it were Cuthbert Harkerville, how did he manage to avoid pricking his fingers either when he carried it or when he pushed it through the buttonhole? And the stem of the holly isn't sticky with ointment."

"He could have put the holly in place before he smeared that stuff over his scalp."

"But would it have stayed in place? It's very loose in the buttonhole. I think it was put there after he was dead. It might be

worth asking the counterfeit cook why her finger has a plaster. One point for the holly, Sir?”

“Fair enough, I suppose. I agree it must have been sticky if he’d stuck it in the buttonhole after he’d applied the ointment. All right, Sergeant, I know what you’re going to say next. We’re not exactly daft in the Suffolk CID. I suppose you’re going to call it the Clue of the Christmas Pudding?”

“It does seem appropriate, Sir. It’s obvious from examining the pudding—an unseasonably pale concoction I thought—that a piece has been gouged out of the top, not sliced. Someone stuck in a hand. If that hand was Cuthbert Harkerville’s, why isn’t there pudding under his nails? The only splodge of pudding is in his right palm. Someone smeared the palm after his death. It was a stupid error, but then the Harkervilles strike me as more ingenious than intelligent. I’m not sure that the final clue isn’t the strongest. Judging by the onset of rigor, he probably died between eight and nine, early anyway. I think the family put an overdose of his sleeping pills into the thermos of strong coffee knowing that they’d be fatal taken with a generous slug of whisky. So why were the ashes in the grate still warm when I examined the fire eight hours later? And, more important, where are the matches? And that, by my reckoning, brings the number up to a seasonal dozen.”

“I’ll take your word for it, Sergeant. God knows how I got drawn into this arithmetical nonsense. We’ve got a dozen questions. Let’s see if we can get any answers.”

The Harkervilles were in the kitchen sitting disconsolately round the large central table. The cook was sitting with them but, as if anxious to show that this familiarity was unusual, almost sprang to her feet at their entrance. The wait had had its effect on the family. Adam saw that he and Inspector Peck were now facing three frightened people. Only Helmut attempted to hide his anxiety with bluster.

“It’s time you explained yourself, Inspector. I demand that my uncle’s body be decently laid out and removed and the family left in peace.”

Without replying, Peck looked at the cook. "You seem curiously familiar with the kitchen, Mrs. Dagworth. And perhaps you can explain why, if you arrived last night, your suitcase is still lying packed on your bed, and how you knew that the suicide note was in the deceased's handwriting?"

The questions, although mildly put, were more dramatic in their effect than Adam could have expected. Gertrude turned on the cook and screamed: "You stupid bitch! Can't you do even the simplest thing without making a mess of it? It's been the same ever since you married into this family."

Helmut Harkerville, trying to retrieve the situation said loudly: "Stop it. No one is to answer any more questions. I demand to see my solicitor."

"That, of course, is your right," said Inspector Peck. "In the meantime, perhaps the three of you would be good enough to come with me to the station."

Amid the ensuing expostulations, accusations and counter-accusations, Adam murmured a brief goodbye to the Inspector and left them to it. He pulled back the car hood and drove in a rush of cold cleansing air towards the growing rhythmic moaning of the North Sea.

Miss Dalglish had no objection to her nephew's job, thinking it entirely proper that murderers should be caught, but on the whole she preferred to take no active interest in the process. This evening, however, curiosity overcame her. While Adam was helping to carry the boeuf bourguignon and winter salad to the table, she said: "I hope your evening wasn't interrupted for nothing. Is the case concluded? What did you think of it?"

"What did I think of it?" Adam paused for a moment and considered. "My dear Aunt Jane, I don't think I'll ever have another case like it. It was pure Agatha Christie."

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P. D. JAMES was the author of twenty-one books, many of which feature her detective hero Adam Dalgliesh and have been televised or filmed. She was the recipient of many honors, including the Mystery Writers of America Grandmaster Award and the National Arts Club Medal of Honor for Literature, and in 1991 was created Baroness James of Holland Park. She died in 2014 at the age of ninety-four.