

POIROT

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie



A Hercule Poirot Collection

**POIROT
INVESTIGATES**

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Poirot
Investigates

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HARPER

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One

THE ADVENTURE OF "THE WESTERN STAR"

I was standing at the window of Poirot's rooms looking out idly on the street below.

"That's queer," I ejaculated suddenly beneath my breath.

"What is, *mon ami*?" asked Poirot placidly, from the depths of his comfortable chair.

"Deduce, Poirot, from the following facts! Here is a young lady, richly dressed—fashionable hat, magnificent furs. She is coming along slowly, looking up at the houses as she goes. Unknown to her, she is being shadowed by three men and a middle-aged woman. They have just been joined by an errand boy who points after the girl, gesticulating as he does so. What drama is this being played? Is the girl a crook, and are the shadows detectives preparing to arrest her? Or are *they* the scoundrels, and are they plotting to attack an innocent victim? What does the great detective say?"

"The great detective, *mon ami*, chooses, as ever, the simplest course. He rises to see for himself." And my friend joined me at the window.

In a minute he gave vent to an amused chuckle.

"As usual, your facts are tinged with your incurable romanticism. This is Miss Mary Marvell, the film star. She is being followed by a bevy of admirers who have recognized her. And, *en passant*, my dear Hastings, she is quite aware of the fact!"

I laughed.

"So all is explained! But you get no marks for that, Poirot. It was a mere matter of recognition."

“*En vérité!* And how many times have you seen Mary Marvell on the screen, *mon cher?*”

I thought.

“About a dozen times perhaps.”

“And I—once! Yet *I* recognize her, and *you* do not.”

“She looks so different,” I replied rather feebly.

“Ah! *Sacré!*” cried Poirot. “Is it that you expect her to promenade herself in the streets of London in a cowboy hat, or with bare feet, and a bunch of curls, as an Irish colleen? Always with you it is the nonessentials! Remember the case of the dancer, Valerie Saintclair.”

I shrugged my shoulders, slightly annoyed.

“But console yourself, *mon ami,*” said Poirot, calming down. “All cannot be as Hercule Poirot! I know it well.”

“You really have the best opinion of yourself of anyone I ever knew!” I cried, divided between amusement and annoyance.

“What will you? When one is unique, one knows it! And others share that opinion—even, if I mistake it not, Miss Mary Marvell.”

“What?”

“Without doubt. She is coming here.”

“How do you make that out?”

“Very simply. This street, it is not aristocratic, *mon ami!* In it there is no fashionable doctor, no fashionable dentist—still less is there a fashionable milliner! But there *is* a fashionable detective. *Oui,* my friend, it is true—I am become the mode, the *dernier cri!* One says to another: ‘*Comment?* You have lost your gold pencil case? You must go to the little Belgian. He is too marvellous! Everyone goes! *Courez!*’ And they arrive! In flocks, *mon ami!* With problems of the most foolish!” A bell rang below. “What did I tell you? That is Miss Marvell.”

As usual, Poirot was right. After a short interval, the American film star was ushered in, and we rose to our feet.

Mary Marvell was undoubtedly one of the most popular actresses on the screen. She had only lately arrived in England in company with her husband, Gregory B. Rolf, also a film actor. Their marriage had taken place about a year ago in the States and this was their first visit to England. They had been given a great reception. Everyone was prepared to go mad over Mary Marvell, her wonderful clothes, her furs, her jewels, above all one jewel, the great diamond which had been nicknamed, to match its owner, "The Western Star." Much, true and untrue, had been written about this famous stone which was reported to be insured for the enormous sum of fifty thousand pounds.

All these details passed rapidly through my mind as I joined with Poirot in greeting our fair client.

Miss Marvell was small and slender, very fair and girlish looking, with the wide innocent blue eyes of a child.

Poirot drew forward a chair for her, and she commenced talking at once.

"You will probably think me very foolish, Monsieur Poirot, but Lord Cronshaw was telling me last night how wonderfully you cleared up the mystery of his nephew's death, and I felt that I just must have your advice. I dare say it's only a silly hoax—Gregory says so—but it's just worrying me to death."

She paused for breath. Poirot beamed encouragement.

"Proceed, madame. You comprehend, I am still in the dark."

"It's these letters." Miss Marvell unclasped her handbag, and drew out three envelopes which she handed to Poirot.

The latter scrutinized them closely.

"Cheap paper—the name and address carefully printed. Let us see the inside." He drew out the enclosure.

I had joined him, and was leaning over his shoulder. The writing consisted of a single sentence, carefully printed like the envelope. It ran as follows:

“The great diamond which is the left eye of the god must return whence it came.”

The second letter was couched in precisely the same terms, but the third was more explicit:

“You have been warned. You have not obeyed. Now the diamond will be taken from you. At the full of the moon, the two diamonds which are the left and right eye of the god shall return. So it is written.”

“The first letter I treated as a joke,” explained Miss Marvell. “When I got the second, I began to wonder. The third one came yesterday, and it seemed to me that, after all, the matter might be more serious than I had imagined.”

“I see they did not come by post, these letters.”

“No; they were left by hand—by a *Chinaman*. That is what frightens me.”

“Why?”

“Because it was from a Chink in San Francisco that Gregory bought the stone three years ago.”

“I see, madame, that you believe the diamond referred to to be—”

“ ‘The Western Star,’ ” finished Miss Marvell. “That’s so. At the time, Gregory remembers that there was some story attached to the stone, but the Chink wasn’t handing out any information. Gregory says he seemed just scared to death, and in a mortal hurry to get rid of the thing. He only asked about a tenth of its value. It was Greg’s wedding present to me.”

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

“The story seems of an almost unbelievable romanticism. And yet—who knows? I pray of you, Hastings, hand me my little almanac.”

I complied.

“*Voyons!*” said Poirot, turning the leaves. “When is the date of the full moon? Ah, Friday next. That is in three days’ time. *Eh bien*, madame, you seek my advice—I give it to you. This *belle histoire* may be a hoax—but it may not! Therefore I counsel you to place the diamond in my keeping until after Friday next. Then we can take what steps we please.”

A slight cloud passed over the actress’s face, and she replied constrainedly:

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

“You have it with you—*hein?*” Poirot was watching her narrowly.

The girl hesitated a moment, then slipped her hand into the bosom of her gown, drawing out a long thin chain. She leaned forward, unclosing her hand. In the palm, a stone of white fire, exquisitely set in platinum, lay and winked at us solemnly.

Poirot drew in his breath with a long hiss.

“*Épatant!*” he murmured. “You permit, madame?” He took the jewel in his own hand and scrutinized it keenly, then restored it to her with a little bow. “A magnificent stone—without a flaw. Ah, *cent tonnerres!* and you carry it about with you, *comme ça!*”

“No, no, I’m very careful really, Monsieur Poirot. As a rule it’s locked up in my jewel case, and left in the hotel safe deposit. We’re staying at the *Magnificent*, you know. I just brought it along today for you to see.”

“And you will leave it with me, *n’est-ce pas?* You will be advised by Papa Poirot?”

“Well, you see, it’s this way, Monsieur Poirot. On Friday we’re going down to Yardly Chase to spend a few days with Lord and Lady Yardly.”

Her words awoke a vague echo of remembrance in my mind. Some gossip—what was it now? A few years ago Lord and Lady Yardly had

paid a visit to the States, rumour had it that his lordship had rather gone the pace out there with the assistance of some lady friends—but surely there was something more, more gossip which coupled Lady Yardly's name with that of a “movie” star in California—why! it came to me in a flash—of course it was none other than Gregory B. Rolf.

“I'll let you into a little secret, Monsieur Poirot,” Miss Marvell was continuing. “We've got a deal on with Lord Yardly. There's some chance of our arranging to film a play down there in his ancestral pile.”

“At Yardly Chase?” I cried, interested. “Why, it's one of the showplaces of England.”

Miss Marvell nodded.

“I guess it's the real old feudal stuff all right. But he wants a pretty stiff price, and of course I don't know yet whether the deal will go through, but Greg and I always like to combine business with pleasure.”

“But—I demand pardon if I am dense, madame—surely it is possible to visit Yardly Chase without taking the diamond with you?”

A shrewd, hard look came into Miss Marvell's eyes which belied their childlike appearance. She looked suddenly a good deal older.

“I want to wear it down there.”

“Surely,” I said suddenly, “there are some very famous jewels in the Yardly collection, a large diamond amongst them?”

“That's so,” said Miss Marvell briefly.

I heard Poirot murmur beneath his breath: “Ah, *c'est comme ça!* ” Then he said aloud, with his usual uncanny luck in hitting the bull's-eye (he dignifies it by the name of psychology): “Then you are without doubt already acquainted with Lady Yardly, or perhaps your husband is?”

“Gregory knew her when she was out West three years ago,” said Miss Marvell. She hesitated a moment, and then added abruptly: “Do either of you ever see *Society Gossip?*”

We both pleaded guilty rather shamefacedly.

“I ask because in this week’s number there is an article on famous jewels, and it’s really very curious—” She broke off.

I rose, went to the table at the other side of the room and returned with the paper in question in my hand. She took it from me, found the article, and began to read aloud:

“. . . Amongst other famous stones may be included The Star of the East, a diamond in the possession of the Yardly family. An ancestor of the present Lord Yardly brought it back with him from China, and a romantic story is said to attach to it. According to this, the stone was once the right eye of a temple god. Another diamond, exactly similar in form and size, formed the left eye, and the story goes that this jewel, too, would in course of time be stolen. ‘One eye shall go West, the other East, till they shall meet once more. Then, in triumph shall they return to the god.’ It is a curious coincidence that there is at the present time a stone corresponding closely in description with this one, and known as ‘The Star of the West,’ or ‘The Western Star.’ It is the property of the celebrated film star, Miss Mary Marvell. A comparison of the two stones would be interesting.”

She stopped.

“*Épatant!*” murmured Poirot. “Without doubt a romance of the first water.” He turned to Mary Marvell. “And you are not afraid, madame? You have no superstitious terrors? You do not fear to introduce these two Siamese twins to each other lest a Chinaman should appear and, hey presto! whisk them both back to China?”

His tone was mocking, but I fancied that an undercurrent of seriousness lay beneath it.