POIROT

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

TAKEN AT THE FLOOD

A Hercule Poirot Mystery

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Epigraph

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

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Prologue

I

In every club there is a club bore. The Coronation Club was no exception, and the fact that an air raid was in progress made no difference to normal procedure.

Major Porter, late Indian Army, rustled his newspaper and cleared his throat. Every one avoided his eye, but it was no use.

"I see they've got the announcement of Gordon Cloade's death in the *Times*," he said. "Discreetly put, of course. *On Oct. 5th, result of enemy action.* No address given. As a matter of fact it was just round the corner from my little place. One of those big houses on top of Campden Hill. I can tell you it shook me up a bit. I'm a Warden, you know. Cloade had only just got back from the States. He'd been over on that Government Purchase business. Got married while he was over there. A young widow—young enough to be his daughter. Mrs. Underhay. As a matter of fact I knew her first husband out in Nigeria."

Major Porter paused. Nobody displayed any interest or asked him to continue. Newspapers were held up sedulously in front of faces, but it took more than that to discourage Major Porter. He always had long histories to relate, mostly about people whom nobody knew.

"Interesting," said Major Porter, firmly, his eyes fixed absently on a pair of extremely pointed patent-leather shoes—a type of foot-wear of which he profoundly disapproved. "As I said, I'm a Warden. Funny business this blast. Never know what it's going to do. Blew the basement in and ripped off the roof. First floor practically wasn't touched. Six people in the house. Three servants: married couple and a housemaid, Gordon Cloade, his wife and the wife's brother. They were all down in the basement except the wife's brother—ex-Commando fellow—he preferred his own comfortable bedroom on the first floor—and by Jove, he escaped with a few bruises. The three servants were all killed by blast—Gordon Cloade must have been worth well over a million."

Again Major Porter paused. His eyes had travelled up from the patent-leather shoes—striped trousers—black coat—egg-shaped head and colossal moustaches. Foreign, of course! That explained the shoes.

“Really,” thought Major Porter, “what’s the club coming to? Can’t get away from foreigners even *here*.” This separate train of thought ran alongside his narrative.

The fact that the foreigner in question appeared to be giving him full attention did not abate Major Porter’s prejudice in the slightest.

“She can’t be more than about twenty-five,” he went on. “And a widow for the second time. Or at any rate—that’s what *she* thinks….”

He paused, hoping for curiosity—for comment. Not getting it, he nevertheless went doggedly on:

“Matter of fact I’ve got my own ideas about that. Queer business. As I told you, I knew her first husband, Underhay. Nice fellow—district commissioner in Nigeria at one time. Absolutely dead keen on his job—first-class chap. He married this girl in Cape Town. She was out there with some touring company. Very down on her luck, and pretty and helpless and all that. Listened to poor old Underhay raving about his district and the great wide-open spaces—and breathed out, ‘Wasn’t it wonderful?’ and how she wanted ‘to get away from everything.’ Well, she married him and got away from it. He was very much in love, poor fellow—but the thing didn’t tick over from the first. She hated the bush and was terrified of the natives and was bored to death. Her idea of life was to go round to the local and meet the theatrical crowd and talk shop. Solitude à deux in the jungle wasn’t at all her cup of tea. Mind you, I never met her myself—I heard all this from poor old Underhay. It hit him pretty hard. He did the decent thing, sent her home and agreed to give her a divorce. It was just after that I met him. He was all on edge and in the mood when a man’s got to talk. He was a funny old-fashioned kind of chap in some ways—an R.C., and he didn’t care for divorce. He said to me, ‘There are other ways of giving a woman her freedom.’ ‘Now, look here, old boy,’ I said, ‘don’t go doing anything foolish. No woman in the world is worth putting a bullet through your head.’

“He said that that wasn’t his idea at all. ‘But I’m a lonely man,’ he said. ‘Got no relations to bother about me. If a report of my death gets back that will make Rosaleen a widow, which is what she wants.’ ‘And what about you?’ I said. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘maybe a Mr. Enoch Arden will turn up somewhere a thousand miles or so away and start life anew.’ ‘Might be awkward for her some day,’ I warned him. ‘Oh, no,’ he says, ‘I’d play the game. Robert Underhay would be dead all right.’

“Well, I didn’t think any more of it, but six months later I heard that Underhay had died of fever up in the bush somewhere. His natives were a trustworthy lot and they came back with a good circumstantial tale and

a few last words scrawled in Underhay's writing saying they'd done all they could for him, and he was afraid he was pegging out, and praising up his headman. That man was devoted to him and so were all the others. Whatever he told them to swear to, they would swear to. So there it is… Maybe Underhay's buried up country in the midst of equatorial Africa but maybe he isn't—and if he isn't Mrs. Gordon Cloade may get a shock one day. And serve her right, I say. I never met her, but I know the sound of a little gold digger! She broke up poor old Underhay all right. It's an interesting story."

Major Porter looked round rather wistfully for confirmation of this assertion. He met two bored and fishy stares, the half-averted gaze of young Mr. Mellon and the polite attention of M. Hercule Poirot.

Then the newspaper rustled and a grey-haired man with a singularly impassive face rose quietly from his armchair by the fire and went out.

Major Porter's jaw dropped, and young Mr. Mellon gave a faint whistle.

"Now you've done it!" he remarked. "Know who that was?"

"God bless my soul," said Major Porter in some agitation. "Of course. I don't know him intimately but we are acquainted…Jeremy Cloade, isn't it, Gordon Cloade's brother? Upon my word, how extremely unfortunate! If I'd had any idea—"

"He's a solicitor," said young Mr. Mellon. "Bet he sues you for slander or defamation of character or something."

For young Mr. Mellon enjoyed creating alarm and despondency in such places as it was not forbidden by the Defence of the Realm Act.

Major Porter continued to repeat in an agitated manner:

"Most unfortunate. *Most* unfortunate!"

"It will be all over Warmsley Heath by this evening," said Mr. Mellon. "That's where all the Cloades hang out. They'll sit up late discussing what action to take."

But at that moment the All Clear sounded, and young Mr. Mellon stopped being malicious, and tenderly piloted his friend Hercule Poirot out into the street.

"Terrible atmosphere, these clubs," he said. "The most crashing collection of old bores. Porter's easily the worst, though. His description of the Indian rope trick takes three-quarters of an hour, and he knows everybody whose mother ever passed through Poona!"

This was in the autumn of 1944. It was in late spring, 1946, that Hercule Poirot received a visit.

II

Hercule Poirot was sitting at his neat writing desk on a pleasant May morning when his manservant George approached him and murmured deferentially:

"There is a lady, sir, asking to see you."

"What kind of a lady?" Poirot asked cautiously.

He always enjoyed the meticulous accuracy of George's descriptions.

"She would be aged between forty and fifty, I should say, sir. Untidy and somewhat artistic in appearance. Good walking shoes, brogues. A tweed coat and skirt—but a lace blouse. Some questionable Egyptian beads and a blue chiffon scarf."

Poirot shuddered slightly.

"I do not think," he said, "that I wish to see her."

"Shall I tell her, sir, that you are indisposed?"

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully.

"You have already, I gather, told her that I am engaged on important business and cannot be disturbed?"

George coughed again.

"She said, sir, that she had come up from the country specially, and did not mind how long she waited."

Poirot sighed.

"One should never struggle against the inevitable," he said. "If a middle-aged lady wearing sham Egyptian beads has made up her mind to see the famous Hercule Poirot, and has come up from the country to do so, nothing will deflect her. She will sit there in the hall till she gets her way. Show her in, George."

George retreated, returning presently to announce formally:

"Mrs. Cloade."

The figure in the worn tweeds and the floating scarf came in with a beaming face. She advanced to Poirot with an outstretched hand, all her bead necklaces swinging and clinking.

"M. Poirot," she said, "I have come to you under spirit guidance."

Poirot blinked slightly.

"Indeed, Madame. Perhaps you will take a seat and tell me—"

He got no further.

"Both ways, M. Poirot. With the automatic writing *and* with the ouija board. It was the night before last. Madame Elvary (a wonderful woman she is) and I were using the board. We got the same initials repeatedly. H.P. H.P. H.P. Of course I did not get the true significance at once. It

takes, you know, a little *time.* One cannot, on this earthly plane, see clearly. I racked my brains thinking of someone with those initials. I knew it must connect up with the last séance—really a most poignant one, but it was some time before I got it. And then I bought a copy of *Picture Post* (Spirit guidance again, you see, because usually I buy the *New Statesman*) and there you were—a picture of you, and described, and on account of what you had done. It is wonderful, don't you think, M. Poirot, how everything has a *purpose?* Clearly, you are the person appointed by the Guides to elucidate this matter."

Poirot surveyed her thoughtfully. Strangely enough the thing that really caught his attention was that she had remarkably shrewd light-blue eyes. They gave point, as it were, to her rambling method of approach.

"And what, Mrs.—Cloade—is that right?" He frowned. "I seem to have heard the name some time ago—"

She nodded vehemently.

"My poor brother-in-law—Gordon. Immensely rich and *often* mentioned in the press. He was killed in the Blitz over a year ago—a great blow to all of us. My husband is his younger brother. He is a doctor. Dr. Lionel Cloade…Of course," she added, lowering her voice, "he has no idea that I am consulting you. He would not approve. Doctors, I find, have a very materialistic outlook. The spiritual seems to be strangely hidden from them. They pin their faith on Science—but what I say is…what *is* Science—what can it do?"

There seemed, to Hercule Poirot, to be no answer to the question other than a meticulous and painstaking description embracing Pasteur, Lister, Humphry Davy's safety lamp—the convenience of electricity in the home and several hundred other kindred items. But that, naturally, was not the answer Mrs. Lionel Cloade wanted. In actual fact her question, like so many questions, was not really a question at all. It was a mere rhetorical gesture.

Hercule Poirot contented himself with inquiring in a practical manner:

"In what way do you believe I can help you, Mrs. Cloade?"

"Do you believe in the reality of the spirit world, M. Poirot?"

"I am a good Catholic," said Poirot cautiously.

Mrs. Cloade waved aside the Catholic faith with a smile of pity.

"Blind! The Church is blind—prejudiced, foolish—not welcoming the reality and beauty of the world that lies behind this one."

"At twelve o'clock," said Hercule Poirot, "I have an important appointment."