



Agatha Christie

the complete quin & satterthwaite

LOVE DETECTIVES

AGATHA CHRISTIE

The Complete Quin and Satterthwaite

HARPER

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Author's Foreword

The Mr Quin stories were not written as a series. They were written one at a time at rare intervals. Mr Quin, I consider, is an epicure's taste.

A set of Dresden figures on my mother's mantelpiece fascinated me as a child and afterwards. They represented the Italian *commedia dell'arte*: Harlequin, Columbine, Pierrot, Pierette, Punchinello, and Punchinella. As a girl I wrote a series of poems about them, and I rather think that one of the poems, *Harlequin's Song*, was my first appearance in print. It was in the *Poetry Review*, and I got a guinea for it!

After I turned from poetry and ghost stories to crime, Harlequin finally reappeared; a figure invisible except when he chose, not quite human, yet concerned with the affairs of human beings and particularly of lovers. He is also the advocate for the dead.

Though each story about him is quite separate, yet the collection, written over a considerable period of years, outlines in the end the story of Harlequin himself.

With Mr Quin there has been created little Mr Satterthwaite, Mr Quin's friend in this mortal world: Mr Satterthwaite, the gossip, the looker-on at life, the little man who without ever touching the depths of joy and sorrow himself, recognizes drama when he sees it, and is conscious that he has a part to play.

Of the Mr Quin stories, my favourites are: *World's End*, *The Man from the Sea*, and *Harlequin's Lane*.

AGATHA CHRISTIE
1953

1

The Coming of Mr Quin

‘The Coming of Mr Quin’ was first published as ‘The Passing of Mr Quinn’ in *Grand Magazine*, March 1923.

It was New Year’s Eve.

The elder members of the house party at Royston were assembled in the big hall.

Mr Satterthwaite was glad that the young people had gone to bed. He was not fond of young people in herds. He thought them uninteresting and crude. They lacked subtlety and as life went on he had become increasingly fond of subtleties.

Mr Satterthwaite was sixty-two – a little bent, dried-up man with a peering face oddly elflike, and an intense and inordinate interest in other people’s lives. All his life, so to speak, he had sat in the front row of the stalls watching various dramas of human nature unfold before him. His role had always been that of the onlooker. Only now, with old age holding him in its clutch, he found himself increasingly critical of the drama submitted to him. He demanded now something a little out of the common.

There was no doubt that he had a flair for these things. He knew instinctively when the elements of drama were at hand. Like a war horse, he sniffed the scent. Since his arrival at Royston this afternoon, that strange inner sense of his had stirred and bid him be ready. Something interesting was happening or going to happen.

The house party was not a large one. There was Tom Evesham, their genial good-humoured host, and his serious political wife who had been before her marriage Lady Laura Keene. There was Sir Richard Conway, soldier, traveller and sportsman, there were six or seven young people whose names Mr Satterthwaite had not grasped and there were the Portals.

It was the Portals who interested Mr Satterthwaite.

He had never met Alex Portal before, but he knew all about him. Had known his father and his grandfather. Alex Portal ran pretty true to type. He was a man of close on forty, fair-haired, and blue-eyed like all the Portals, fond of sport, good at games, devoid of imagination. Nothing unusual about

Alex Portal. The usual good sound English stock.

But his wife was different. She was, Mr Satterthwaite knew, an Australian. Portal had been out in Australia two years ago, had met her out there and had married her and brought her home. She had never been to England previous to her marriage. All the same, she wasn't at all like any other Australian woman Mr Satterthwaite had met.

He observed her now, covertly. Interesting woman – very. So still, and yet so – alive. Alive! That was just it! Not exactly beautiful – no, you wouldn't call her beautiful, but there was a kind of calamitous magic about her that you couldn't miss – that no man could miss. The masculine side of Mr Satterthwaite spoke there, but the feminine side (for Mr Satterthwaite had a large share of femininity) was equally interested in another question. *Why did Mrs Portal dye her hair?*

No other man would probably have known that she dyed her hair, but Mr Satterthwaite knew. He knew all those things. And it puzzled him. Many dark women dye their hair blonde; he had never before come across a fair woman who dyed her hair black.

Everything about her intrigued him. In a queer intuitive way, he felt certain that she was either very happy or very unhappy – but he didn't know which, and it annoyed him not to know. Furthermore there was the curious effect she had upon her husband.

'He adores her,' said Mr Satterthwaite to himself, 'but sometimes he's – yes, afraid of her! That's very interesting. That's uncommonly interesting.'

Portal drank too much. That was certain. And he had a curious way of watching his wife when she wasn't looking.

'Nerves,' said Mr Satterthwaite. 'The fellow's all nerves. She knows it too, but she won't do anything about it.'

He felt very curious about the pair of them. Something was going on that he couldn't fathom.

He was roused from his meditations on the subject by the solemn chiming of the big clock in the corner.

'Twelve o'clock,' said Evesham. 'New Year's Day. Happy New Year – everybody. As a matter of fact that clock's five minutes fast ... I don't know why the children wouldn't wait up and see the New Year in?'

'I don't suppose for a minute they've really gone to bed,' said his wife placidly. 'They're probably putting hairbrushes or something in our beds. That sort of thing does so amuse them. I can't think why. We should never have been allowed to do such a thing in my young days.'

'*Autre temps, autres moeurs,*' said Conway, smiling.

He was a tall soldierly-looking man. Both he and Evesham were much of

the same type – honest upright kindly men with no great pretensions to brains.

‘In my young days we all joined hands in a circle and sang “Auld Lang Syne”,’ continued Lady Laura. “Should auld acquaintance be forgot” – so touching, I always think the words are.’

Evesham moved uneasily.

‘Oh! drop it, Laura,’ he muttered. ‘*Not here.*’

He strode across the wide hall where they were sitting, and switched on an extra light.

‘Very stupid of me,’ said Lady Laura, *sotto voce*. ‘Reminds him of poor Mr Capel, of course. My dear, is the fire too hot for you?’

Eleanor Portal made a brusque movement.

‘Thank you. I’ll move my chair back a little.’

What a lovely voice she had – one of those low murmuring echoing voices that stay in your memory, thought Mr Satterthwaite. Her face was in shadow now. What a pity.

From her place in the shadow she spoke again.

‘Mr – Capel?’

‘Yes. The man who originally owned this house. He shot himself you know – oh! very well, Tom dear, I won’t speak of it unless you like. It was a great shock for Tom, of course, because he was here when it happened. So were you, weren’t you, Sir Richard?’

‘Yes, Lady Laura.’

An old grandfather clock in the corner groaned, wheezed, snorted asthmatically, and then struck twelve.

‘Happy New Year, Tom,’ grunted Evesham perfunctorily.

Lady Laura wound up her knitting with some deliberation.

‘Well, we’ve seen the New Year in,’ she observed, and added, looking towards Mrs Portal, ‘What do you think, my dear?’

Eleanor Portal rose quickly to her feet.

‘Bed, by all means,’ she said lightly.

‘She’s very pale,’ thought Mr Satterthwaite, as he too rose, and began busying himself with candlesticks. ‘She’s not usually as pale as that.’

He lighted her candle and handed it to her with a funny little old-fashioned bow. She took it from him with a word of acknowledgment and went slowly up the stairs.

Suddenly a very odd impulse swept over Mr Satterthwaite. He wanted to go after her – to reassure her – he had the strangest feeling that she was in danger of some kind. The impulse died down, and he felt ashamed. *He* was getting nervy too.

She hadn’t looked at her husband as she went up the stairs, but now she

turned her head over her shoulder and gave him a long searching glance which had a queer intensity in it. It affected Mr Satterthwaite very oddly.

He found himself saying goodnight to his hostess in quite a flustered manner.

‘I’m sure I hope it *will* be a happy New Year,’ Lady Laura was saying. ‘But the political situation seems to me to be fraught with grave uncertainty.’

‘I’m sure it is,’ said Mr Satterthwaite earnestly. ‘I’m sure it is.’

‘I only hope,’ continued Lady Laura, without the least change of manner, ‘that it will be a dark man who first crosses the threshold. You know that superstition, I suppose, Mr Satterthwaite? No? You surprise me. To bring luck to the house it must be a dark man who first steps over the door step on New Year’s Day. Dear me, I hope I shan’t find anything *very* unpleasant in my bed. I never trust the children. They have such very high spirits.’

Shaking her head in sad foreboding, Lady Laura moved majestically up the staircase.

With the departure of the women, chairs were pulled in closer round the blazing logs on the big open hearth.

‘Say when,’ said Evesham, hospitably, as he held up the whisky decanter.

When everybody had said when, the talk reverted to the subject which had been tabooed before.

‘You knew Derek Capel, didn’t you, Satterthwaite?’ asked Conway.

‘Slightly – yes.’

‘And you, Portal?’

‘No, I never met him.’

So fiercely and defensively did he say it, that Mr Satterthwaite looked up in surprise.

‘I always hate it when Laura brings up the subject,’ said Evesham slowly. ‘After the tragedy, you know, this place was sold to a big manufacturer fellow. He cleared out after a year – didn’t suit him or something. A lot of tommy rot was talked about the place being haunted of course, and it gave the house a bad name. Then, when Laura got me to stand for West Kidleby, of course it meant living up in these parts, and it wasn’t so easy to find a suitable house. Royston was going cheap, and – well, in the end I bought it. Ghosts are all tommy rot, but all the same one doesn’t exactly care to be reminded that you’re living in a house where one of your own friends shot himself. Poor old Derek – we shall never know why he did it.’

‘He won’t be the first or the last fellow who’s shot himself without being able to give a reason,’ said Alex Portal heavily.

He rose and poured himself out another drink, splashing the whisky in with a liberal hand.