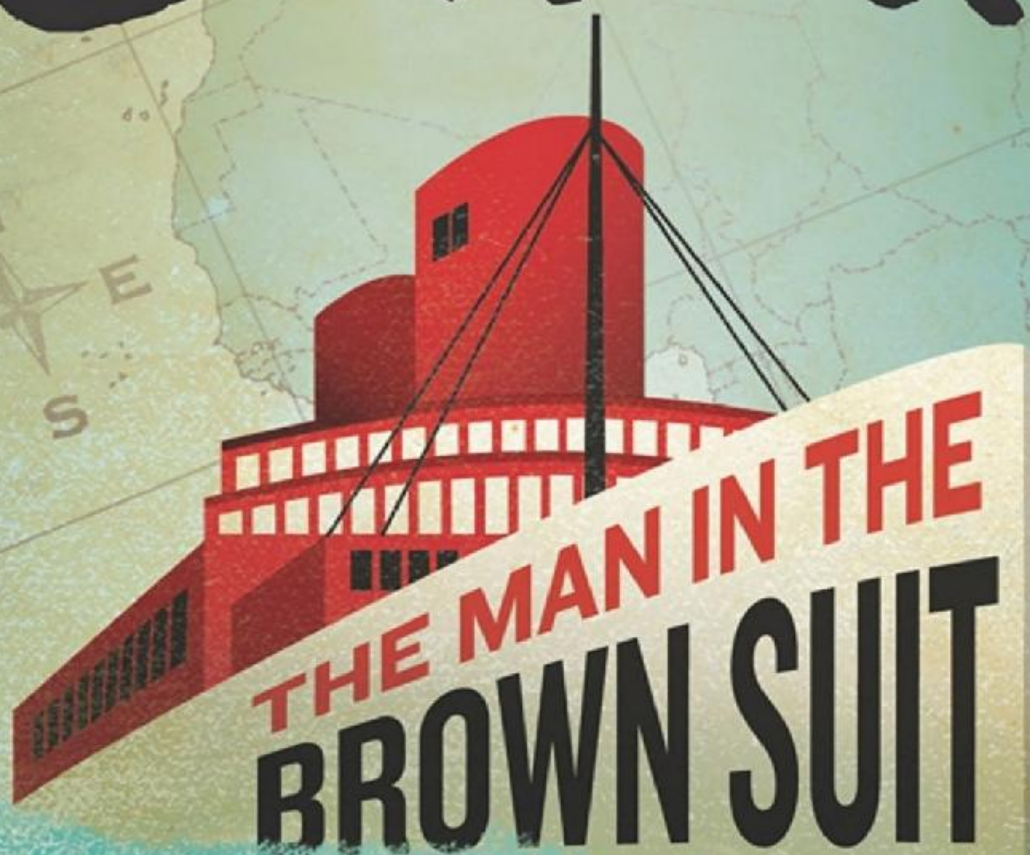


THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

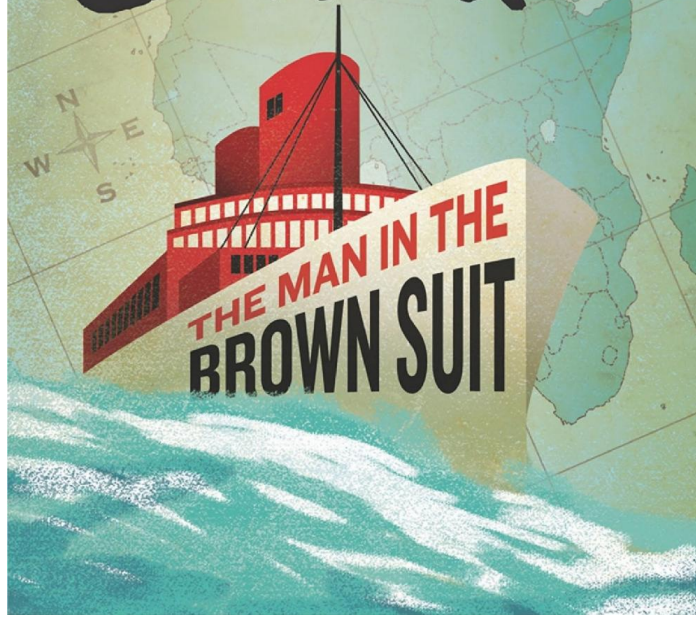
# Agatha Christie



**THE MAN IN THE  
BROWN SUIT**

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

# Agatha Christie



Agatha Christie

The Man in the  
Brown Suit

*wm*

WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers*

## Dedication

*To E.A.B*

*In memory of a journey, some lion stories  
and a request that I should some day write  
the “Mystery of the Mill House”*

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## Prologue

Nadina, the Russian dancer who had taken Paris by storm, swayed to the sound of the applause, bowed and bowed again. Her narrow black eyes narrowed themselves still more, the long line of her scarlet mouth curved faintly upwards. Enthusiastic Frenchmen continued to beat the ground appreciatively as the curtain fell with a swish, hiding the reds and blues and magentas of the bizarre *décor*. In a swirl of blue and orange draperies the dancer left the stage. A bearded gentleman received her enthusiastically in his arms. It was the Manager.

“Magnificent, *petite*, magnificent,” he cried. “Tonight you have surpassed yourself.” He kissed her gallantly on both cheeks in a somewhat matter-of-fact manner.

Madame Nadina accepted the tribute with the ease of long habit and passed on to her dressing room, where bouquets were heaped carelessly everywhere, marvellous garments of futuristic design hung on pegs, and the air was hot and sweet with the scent of the massed blossoms and with the more sophisticated perfumes and essences. Jeanne, the dresser, ministered to her mistress, talking incessantly and pouring out a stream of fulsome compliments.

A knock at the door interrupted the flow, Jeanne went to answer it, and returned with a card in her hand.

“Madame will receive?”

“Let me see.”

The dancer stretched out a languid hand, but at the sight of the name on the card, “Count Sergius Paulovitch,” a sudden flicker of interest came into her eyes.

“I will see him. The maize *peignoir*, Jeanne, and quickly. And when the Count comes you may go.”

“*Bien, Madame.*”

Jeanne brought the *peignoir*, an exquisite wisp of corn-coloured chiffon and ermine. Nadina slipped into it, and sat smiling to herself, whilst one long white hand beat a slow tattoo on the glass of the dressing table.

The Count was prompt to avail himself of the privilege accorded to him—a man of medium height, very slim, very elegant, very pale, extraordinarily weary. In feature, little to take hold of, a man difficult to recognize again if one left his mannerisms out of account. He bowed over the dancer’s hand with exaggerated courtliness.

“Madame, this is a pleasure indeed.”

So much Jeanne heard before she went out, closing the door behind her. Alone with her visitor, a subtle change came over Nadina’s smile.

“Compatriots though we are, we will not speak Russian, I think,” she observed.

“Since we neither of us know a word of the language, it might be as well,” agreed her guest.

By common consent, they dropped into English, and nobody, now that the Count’s mannerisms had dropped from him, could doubt that it was his native language. He had, indeed, started life as a quick-change music-hall artiste in London.

“You had great success tonight,” he remarked. “I congratulate you.”

“All the same,” said the woman, “I am disturbed. My position is not what it was. The suspicions aroused during the War have never died down. I am continually watched and spied upon.”

“But no charge of espionage was ever brought against you?”

“Our chief lays his plans too carefully for that.”

“Long life to the ‘Colonel,’ ” said the Count, smiling. “Amazing news, is it not, that he means to retire? To retire! Just like a doctor, or a butcher, or a plumber—”

“Or any other business man,” finished Nadina. “It should not surprise us. That is what the ‘Colonel’ has always been—an excellent man of business. He has organized crime as another man might organize a boot

factory. Without committing himself, he has planned and directed a series of stupendous *coups*, embracing every branch of what we might call his 'profession.' Jewel robberies, forgery, espionage (the latter very profitable in wartime), sabotage, discreet assassination, there is hardly anything he has not touched. Wisest of all, he knows when to stop. The game begins to be dangerous?—he retires gracefully—with an enormous fortune!”

“H’m!” said the Count doubtfully. “It is rather—upsetting for all of us. We are at a loose end, as it were.”

“But we are being paid off—on a most generous scale!”

Something, some undercurrent of mockery in her tone, made the man look at her sharply. She was smiling to herself, and the quality of her smile aroused his curiosity. But he proceeded diplomatically:

“Yes, the ‘Colonel’ has always been a great paymaster. I attribute much of his success to that—and to his invariable plan of providing a suitable scapegoat. A great brain, undoubtedly a great brain! And an apostle of the maxim, ‘If you want a thing done safely, do not do it yourself!’ Here are we, every one of us incriminated up to the hilt and absolutely in his power, and not one of us has anything on him.”

He paused, almost as though he were expecting her to disagree with him, but she remained silent, smiling to herself as before.

“Not one of us,” he mused. “Still, you know, he is superstitious, the old man. Years ago, I believe, he went to one of these fortune-telling people. She prophesied a lifetime of success, but declared that his downfall would be brought about through a woman.”

He had interested her now. She looked up eagerly.

“That is strange, very strange! Through a woman you say?”

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“Doubtless, now that he has—retired, he will marry. Some young society beauty, who will disperse his millions faster than he acquired them.”

Nadina shook her head.

“No, no, that is not the way of it. Listen, my friend, tomorrow I go to London.”

“But your contract here?”

“I shall be away only one night. And I go incognito, like Royalty. No one will ever know that I have left France. And why do you think that I go?”

“Hardly for pleasure at this time of the year. January, a detestable foggy month! It must be for profit, eh?”

“Exactly.” She rose and stood in front of him, every graceful line of her arrogant with pride. “You said just now that none of us had anything on the chief. You were wrong. I have. I, a woman, have had the wit and, yes, the courage—for it needs courage—to double-cross him. You remember the De Beer diamonds?”

“Yes, I remember. At Kimberley, just before the war broke out? I had nothing to do with it, and I never heard the details, the case was hushed up for some reason, was it not? A fine haul too.”

“A hundred thousand pounds” worth of stones. Two of us worked it—under the ‘Colonel’s’ orders, of course. And it was then that I saw my chance. You see, the plan was to substitute some of the De Beer diamonds for some sample diamonds brought from South America by two young prospectors who happened to be in Kimberley at the time. Suspicion was then bound to fall on them.”

“Very clever,” interpolated the Count approvingly.

“The ‘Colonel’ is always clever. Well, I did my part—but I also did one thing which the ‘Colonel’ had not foreseen. I kept back some of the South American stones—one or two are unique and could easily be proved never to have passed through De Beers’ hands. With these diamonds in my possession, I have the whip-hand of my esteemed chief. Once the two young men are cleared, his part in the matter is bound to be suspected. I have said nothing all these years, I have been content to know that I had this weapon in reverse, but now matters are different. I want my price—and it will be big, I might almost say a staggering price.”

“Extraordinary,” said the Count. “And doubtless you carry these diamonds about with you everywhere?”

His eyes roamed gently around the disordered room.

Nadina laughed softly.