RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Red House Mystery

A. A. Milne

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About the Book

Far from the gentle slopes of the Hundred Acre Wood lies The Red House, the setting for A.A Milne's only detective story, where secret passages, uninvited guests, a sinister valet and a puzzling murder lay the foundations for a classic crime caper. And when the local police prove baffled, it is up to a guest at a local inn to appoint himself 'Sherlock Holmes' and, together with his friend and loyal 'Watson', delve deeper into the mysteries of the dead man.

The Red House Mystery is a lost gem from a time before Tigger and a perfectly crafted whodunit with witty dialogue, deft plotting and a most curious cast of characters.

About the Author

Alan Alexander Milne was born in Hampstead in 1882 and attended an independent school run by his father before studying mathematics at Cambridge. After university he worked as Assistant Editor at the magazine *Punch* and established himself as a successful author of both plays and novels, including *The Red House Mystery*, until, with the publication of *When We Were Very Young* in 1924 and *Winnie-the-Pooh* in 1926, his career took a very different turn.

In 1952 A. A. Milne suffered a stroke after brain surgery and returned to his country home in Sussex as an invalid. He died there four years later.

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VINTAGE BOOKS
London

INTRODUCTION

WHEN I TOLD my agent a few years ago that I was going to write a detective story, he recovered as quickly as could be expected, but made it clear to me (as a succession of editors and publishers made it clear, later, to him) that what the country wanted from “a well-known ‘Punch’ humorist” was a “humorous story.” However, I was resolved upon a life of crime; and the result was such that when, two years afterwards, I announced that I was writing a book of nursery rhymes, my agent and my publisher were equally convinced that what the English-speaking nations most desired was a new detective story. Another two years have gone by; the public appetite has changed once more; and it is obvious now that a new detective story, written in the face of this steady terrestial demand for children’s books, would be in the worst of taste. So I content myself, for the moment, with an introduction to this new edition of “The Red House Mystery.”

I have a passion for detective stories. Of beer an enthusiast has said that it could never be bad, but that some brands might be better than others; in the same spirit (if I may use the word) I approach every new detective story. This is not to say that I am uncritical. On the contrary, I have all sorts of curious preferences, and the author has to satisfy me on many strange matters before I can award him an honorary degree. Thus, to take a point, I prefer that a detective story should be written in English. I remember reading one in which a peculiarly fascinating murder had been committed, and there was much speculation as to how the criminal had broken into the murdered man’s library.

The detective, however (said the author), “was more concerned to discover how the murderer had effected an egress.” It is, to me, a distressing thought that in nine-tenths of the detective stories of the world murderers are continually effecting egresses when they might just as easily go out. The sleuth, the hero, the many suspected all use this same strange tongue, and we may be forgiven for feeling that neither the natural excitement of killing the right man, nor the strain of suspecting the wrong one, is sufficient excuse for so steady a flow of bad language.

On the great Love question opinions may be divided, but for myself I will have none of it. A reader, all agog to know whether the white substance on the muffins was arsenic or face-powder, cannot be held up while Roland clasps Angela’s hand “a moment longer than the customary usages of society dictate.” Much might have happened in that moment, properly spent; footprints made or discovered; cigarette-ends picked up and put in envelopes. By all means let Roland have a book to himself in which to clasp anything he likes, but in a detective story he must attend strictly to business.

For the detective himself I demand first that he be an amateur. In real life, no doubt, the best detectives are the professional police, but then in real life the best criminals are professional criminals. In the best detective stories the villain is an amateur, one of ourselves; we rub shoulders with him in the murdered man’s drawing-room; and no *dossier* nor code-index nor finger-print system is of avail against him. It is the amateur detective who alone can expose the guilty man, by the light of cool inductive reasoning and the logic of stern remorseless facts. Indeed, this light and this logic are all which I will allow him. Away with the scientific detective, the man with the microscope! What satisfaction is it to you or me when the famous Professor examines the small particle of dust which the murderer has left behind him, and infers that he lives

between a brewery and a flour-mill? What thrill do we get when the blood-spot on the missing man's handkerchief proves that he was recently bitten by a camel? Speaking for myself, none. The thing is so much too easy for the author, so much too difficult for his readers.

For this is really what we come to: that the detective must have no more special knowledge than the average reader. The reader must be made to feel that, if he too had used the light of cool inductive reasoning and the logic of stern remorseless facts (as, Heaven bless us, we are quite capable of doing) then he too would have fixed the guilt. It is, of course, impossible for the author so to present the clues that they have the same value for the reader in his library as they had for the detective by the body-side. A scar on the nose of one of the guests might suggest nothing to a detective, but the explicit mention of it by the author gives it at once an importance out of all proportion to its face-value. One cannot be surprised or hurt if the author, aware of this, evens matters up by gliding as lightly as possible over the noses of the other guests, perhaps even more prolific of clues. We shall not complain so long as both the author and the detective have left their microscopes at home.

And now, what about a Watson? Are we to have a Watson? We are. Death to the author who keeps his unravelling for the last chapter, making all the other chapters but prologue to a five-minute drama. This is no way to write a story. Let us know from chapter to chapter what the detective is thinking. For this he must watsonize or soliloquize; the one is merely a dialogue form of the other, and, by that, more readable. A Watson, then, but not of necessity a fool of a Watson. A little slow, let him be, as so many of us are, but friendly, human, likeable. . . .

You can understand now how "The Red House Mystery" came into being. The only excuse which I have yet discovered for writing anything is that I want to write it; and

I should be as proud to be delivered of a Telephone Directory *con amore* as I should be ashamed to create a Blank Verse Tragedy at the bidding of others. Yet I have wished many times that I had not written this book. For I feel that from the point of view of one enthusiast it is very nearly the ideal detective story. Though I have never seen him, I know him so intimately; I know just what he wanted put in, what he wanted left out. I consulted his desires, his prejudices, at every step. . . . It is pathetic to think that this is now the one detective story in the world which he will never be able to read.

A. A. M.

April 1926

CHAPTER I

MRS. STEVENS IS FRIGHTENED

IN THE DROWSY heat of the summer afternoon the Red House was taking its siesta. There was a lazy murmur of bees in the flower-borders, a gentle cooing of pigeons in the tops of the elms. From distant lawns came the whir of a mowing-machine, that most restful of all country sounds; making ease the sweeter in that it is taken while others are working.

It was the hour when even those whose business it is to attend to the wants of others have a moment or two for themselves. In the housekeeper's room Audrey Stevens, the pretty parlourmaid, re-trimmed her best hat, and talked idly to her aunt, the cook-housekeeper of Mr. Mark Ablett's bachelor home.

"For Joe?" said Mrs. Stevens placidly, her eye on the hat.

Audrey nodded. She took a pin from her mouth, found a place in the hat for it, and said, "He likes a bit of pink."

"I don't say I mind a bit of pink myself," said her aunt. "Joe Turner isn't the only one."

"It isn't everybody's colour," said Audrey, holding the hat out at arm's-length, and regarding it thoughtfully. "Stylish, isn't it?"

"Oh, it'll suit *you* all right, and it would have suited me at your age. A bit too dressy for me now, though wearing better than some other people, I daresay. I was never the one to pretend to be what I wasn't. If I'm fifty-five, I'm fifty-five—that's what *I* say."

“Fifty-eight, isn’t it, auntie?”

“I was just giving that as an example,” said Mrs. Stevens with great dignity.

Audrey threaded a needle, held her hand out and looked at her nails critically for a moment, and then began to sew.

“Funny thing that about Mr. Mark’s brother. Fancy not seeing your brother for fifteen years.” She gave a self-conscious laugh and went on, “Wonder what I should do if I didn’t see Joe for fifteen years.”

“As I told you all this morning,” said her aunt, “I’ve been here five years, and never heard of a brother. I could say that before everybody if I was going to die to-morrow. There’s been no brother here while I’ve been here.”

“You could have knocked me down with a feather when he spoke about him at breakfast this morning. I didn’t hear what went before, naturally, but they was all talking about the brother when I went in—now what was it I went in for—hot milk, was it, or toast?—well, they was all talking, and Mr. Mark turns to me, and says—you know his way—‘Stevens,’ he says, ‘my brother is coming to see me this afternoon; I’m expecting him about three,’ he says. ‘Show him into the office,’ he says, just like that. ‘Yes, sir,’ I says quite quietly, but I was never so surprised in my life, not knowing he had a brother. ‘My brother from Australia,’ he says—there, I’d forgotten that. From Australia.”

“Well, he may have been in Australia,” said Mrs. Stevens, judicially; “I can’t say for that, not knowing the country; but what I do say is he’s never been here. Not while I’ve been here, and that’s five years.”

“Well, but, auntie, he hasn’t been here for fifteen years. I heard Mr. Mark telling Mr. Cayley. ‘Fifteen years,’ he says. Mr. Cayley having arst him when his brother was last in England. Mr. Cayley knew of him, I heard him telling Mr. Beverley, but didn’t know when he was last in England—see? So that’s why he arst Mr. Mark.”

“I’m not saying anything about fifteen years, Audrey. I can only speak for what I know, and that’s five years Whitsuntide. I can take my oath he’s not set foot in the house since five years Whitsuntide. And if he’s been in Australia, as you say, well, I daresay he’s had his reasons.”

“What reasons?” said Audrey lightly.

“Never mind what reasons. Being in the place of a mother to you, since your poor mother died, I say this, Audrey—when a gentleman goes to Australia, he has his reasons. And when he stays in Australia fifteen years, as Mr. Mark says, and as I know for myself for five years, he has his reasons. And a respectably brought-up girl doesn’t ask what reasons.”

“Got into trouble, I suppose,” said Audrey carelessly. “They were saying at breakfast he’d been a wild one. Debts. I’m glad Joe isn’t like that. He’s got fifteen pounds in the post-office savings’ bank. Did I tell you?”

But there was not to be any more talk of Joe Turner that afternoon. The ringing of a bell brought Audrey to her feet—no longer Audrey, but now Stevens. She arranged her cap in front of the glass.

“There, that’s the front door,” she said. “That’s him. ‘Show him into the office,’ said Mr. Mark. I suppose he doesn’t want the other ladies and gentlemen to see him. Well, they’re all out at their golf, anyhow—Wonder if he’s going to stay—P’raps he’s brought back a lot of gold from Australia—I might hear something about Australia, because if *anybody* can get gold there, then I don’t say but what Joe and I—”

“Now, now, get on, Audrey.”

“Just going, darling.” She went out.

To anyone who had just walked down the drive in the August sun, the open door of the Red House revealed a delightfully inviting hall, of which even the mere sight was cooling. It was a big low-roofed, oak-beamed place, with cream-washed walls and diamond-paned windows, blue-curtained. On the right and left were doors leading into

other living-rooms, but on the side which faced you as you came in were windows again, looking on to a small grass court, and from open windows to open windows such air as there was played gently. The staircase went up in broad, low steps along the right-hand wall, and, turning to the left, led you along a gallery, which ran across the width of the hall, to your bedroom. That is, if you were going to stay the night. Mr. Robert Ablett's intentions in this matter were as yet unknown.

As Audrey came across the hall she gave a little start as she saw Mr. Cayley suddenly, sitting unobtrusively in a seat beneath one of the front windows, reading. No reason why he shouldn't be there; certainly a much cooler place than the golf-links on such a day; but somehow there was a deserted air about the house that afternoon, as if all the guests were outside, or—perhaps the wisest place of all—up in their bedrooms, sleeping. Mr. Cayley, the master's cousin, was a surprise; and, having given a little exclamation as she came suddenly upon him, she blushed, and said, "Oh, I beg your pardon, sir, I didn't see you at first," and he looked up from his book and smiled at her. An attractive smile it was on that big ugly face. "Such a gentleman, Mr. Cayley," she thought to herself as she went on, and wondered what the master would do without him. If this brother, for instance, had to be bundled back to Australia, it was Mr. Cayley who would do most of the bundling.

"So this is Mr. Robert," said Audrey to herself, as she came in sight of the visitor.

She told her aunt afterwards that she would have known him anywhere for Mr. Mark's brother, but she would have said that in any event. Actually she was surprised. Dapper little Mark, with his neat pointed beard and his carefully-curled moustache; with his quick-darting eyes, always moving from one to the other of any company he was in, to register one more smile to his credit when he had said a good thing, one more expectant look when he was only

waiting his turn to say it; he was a very different man from this rough-looking, ill-dressed colonial, staring at her so loweringly.

"I want to see Mr. Mark Ablett," he growled. It sounded almost like a threat.

Audrey recovered herself and smiled reassuringly at him. She had a smile for everybody.

"Yes, sir. He is expecting you, if you will come this way."

"Oh! So you know who I am, eh?"

"Mr. Robert Ablett?"

"Ay, that's right. So he's expecting me, eh? He'll be glad to see me, eh?"

"If you will come this way, sir," said Audrey primly.

She went to the second door on the left, and opened it.

"Mr. Robert Ab—" she began, and then broke off. The room was empty. She turned to the man behind her. "If you will sit down, sir, I will find the master. I know he's in, because he told me that you were coming this afternoon."

"Oh!" He looked round the room. "What d'you call this place, eh?"

"The office, sir."

"The office?"

"The room where the master works, sir."

"Works, eh? That's new. Didn't know he'd ever done a stroke of work in his life."

"Where he *writes*, sir," said Audrey, with dignity. The fact that Mr. Mark "wrote," though nobody knew what, was a matter of pride in the housekeeper's room.

"Not well-dressed enough for the drawing-room, eh?"

"I will tell the master you are here, sir," said Audrey decisively.

She closed the door and left him there.

Well! Here was something to tell auntie! Her mind was busy at once, going over all the things which he had said to her and she had said to him—quiet-like. "Directly I saw him I said to myself—" Why, you could have knocked her over

with a feather. Feathers, indeed, were a perpetual menace to Audrey.

However, the immediate business was to find the master. She walked across the hall to the library, glanced in, came back a little uncertainly, and stood in front of Cayley.

"If you please, sir," she said in a low, respectful voice, "can you tell me where the master is? It's Mr. Robert called."

"What?" said Cayley, looking up from his book. "Who?"

Audrey repeated her question.

"I don't know. Isn't he in the office? He went up to the Temple after lunch. I don't think I've seen him since."

"Thank you, sir. I will go up to the Temple."

Cayley returned to his book.

The "Temple" was a brick summer-house, in the gardens at the back of the house, about three hundred yards away. Here Mark meditated sometimes before retiring to the "office" to put his thoughts upon paper. The thoughts were not of any great value; moreover, they were given off at the dinner-table more often than they got on to paper, and got on to paper more often than they got into print. But that did not prevent the master of The Red House from being a little pained when a visitor treated the Temple carelessly, as if it had been erected for the ordinary purposes of flirtation and cigarette-smoking. There had been an occasion when two of his guests had been found playing fives in it. Mark had said nothing at the time, save to ask—with a little less than his usual point—whether they couldn't find anywhere else for their game, but the offenders were never asked to The Red House again.

Audrey walked slowly up to the Temple, looked in and walked slowly back. All that walk for nothing. Perhaps the master was upstairs in his room. "Not well-dressed enough for the drawing-room." Well, now, Auntie, would *you* like anyone in *your* drawing-room with a red handkerchief round his neck and great big dusty boots, and—listen! One of the men shooting rabbits. Auntie was partial to a nice rabbit,

and onion sauce. How hot it was; she wouldn't say no to a cup of tea. Well, one thing, Mr. Robert wasn't staying the night; he hadn't any luggage. Of course Mr. Mark could lend him things; he had clothes enough for six. She would have known him anywhere for Mr. Mark's brother.

She came into the house. As she passed the housekeeper's room on her way to the hall, the door opened suddenly, and a rather frightened face looked out.

"Hallo, Aud," said Elsie. "It's Audrey," she said, turning into the room.

"Come in, Audrey," called Mrs. Stevens.

"What's up?" said Audrey, looking in at the door.

"Oh, my dear, you gave me such a turn. Where have you been?"

"Up to the Temple."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Hear what?"

"Bangs and explosions and terrible things."

"Oh!" said Audrey, rather relieved. "One of the men shooting rabbits. Why, I said to myself as I came along, 'Auntie's partial to a nice rabbit,' I said, and I shouldn't be surprised if—"

"Rabbits!" said her aunt scornfully. "It was inside the house, my girl."

"Straight it was," said Elsie. She was one of the housemaids. "I said to Mrs. Stevens—didn't I, Mrs. Stevens?—'That was in the house,' I said."

Audrey looked at her aunt and then at Elsie.

"Do you think he had a revolver with him?" she said in a hushed voice.

"Who?" said Elsie excitedly.

"That brother of his. From Australia. I said as soon as I set eyes on him, 'You're a bad lot, my man!' That's what *I* said, Elsie. Even before he spoke to me. Rude!" She turned to her aunt. "Well, I give you *my* word."

“If you remember, Audrey, I always said there was no saying with anyone from Australia.” Mrs. Stevens lay back in her chair, breathing rather rapidly. “I wouldn’t go out of this room now, not if you paid me a hundred thousand pounds.”

“Oh, Mrs. Stevens!” said Elsie, who badly wanted five shillings for a new pair of shoes, “I wouldn’t go as far as that, not myself, but—”

“There!” cried Mrs. Stevens, sitting up with a start.

They listened anxiously, the two girls instinctively coming closer to the older woman’s chair.

A door was being shaken, kicked, rattled.

“Listen!”

Audrey and Elsie looked at each other with frightened eyes.

They heard a man’s voice, loud, angry.

“Open the door!” it was shouting. “Open the door! I say, open the door!”

“Don’t open the door!” cried Mrs. Stevens in a panic, as if it was her door which was threatened. “Audrey! Elsie! Don’t let him in!”

“Damn it, open the door!” came the voice again.

“We’re all going to be murdered in our beds,” she quavered. Terrified, the two girls huddled closer, and with an arm round each, Mrs. Stevens sat there, waiting.

CHAPTER II

MR. GILLINGHAM GETS OUT AT THE WRONG STATION

WHETHER MARK ABLETT was a bore or not depended on the point of view, but it may be said at once that he never bored his company on the subject of his early life. However, stories get about. There is always somebody who knows. It was understood—and this, anyhow, on Mark's own authority—that his father had been a country clergyman. It was said that, as a boy, Mark had attracted the notice, and patronage, of some rich old spinster of the neighbourhood, who had paid for his education, both at school and university. At about the time when he was coming down from Cambridge, his father had died; leaving behind him a few debts, as a warning to his family, and a reputation for short sermons, as an example to his successor. Neither warning nor example seems to have been effective. Mark went to London, with an allowance from his patron, and (it is generally agreed) made acquaintance with the money-lenders. He was supposed, by his patron and any others who inquired, to be "writing"; but what he wrote, other than letters asking for more time to pay, has never been discovered. However, he attended the theatres and music halls very regularly—no doubt with a view to some serious articles in the "Spectator" on the decadence of the English stage.

Fortunately (from Mark’s point of view) his patron died during his third year in London, and left him all the money he wanted. From that moment his life loses its legendary character, and becomes more a matter of history. He settled accounts with the moneylenders, abandoned his crop of wild oats to the harvesting of others, and became in his turn a patron. He patronized the Arts. It was not only usurers who discovered that Mark Ablett no longer wrote for money; editors were now offered free contributions as well as free lunches; publishers were given agreements for an occasional slender volume, in which the author paid all expenses and waived all royalties; promising young painters and poets dined with him; and he even took a theatrical company on tour, playing host and “lead” with equal lavishness.

He was not what most people call a snob. A snob has been defined carelessly as a man who loves a lord; and, more carefully, as a mean lover of mean things—which would be a little unkind to the peerage if the first definition were true. Mark had his vanities undoubtedly; but he would sooner have met an actor-manager than an earl; he would have spoken of his friendship with Dante—had that been possible—more glibly than of his friendship with the Duke. Call him a snob if you like, but not the worst kind of snob; a hanger-on, but to the skirts of Art, not Society; a climber, but in the neighbourhood of Parnassus, not of Hay Hill.

His patronage did not stop at the Arts. It also included Matthew Cayley, a small cousin of thirteen, whose circumstances were as limited as had been Mark’s own before his patron had rescued him. He sent the Cayley cousin to school and Cambridge. His motives, no doubt, were unworldly enough at first; a mere repaying to his account in the Recording Angel’s book of the generosity which had been lavished on himself; a laying-up of treasure in heaven. But it is probable that, as the boy grew up, Mark’s designs for his future were based on his own

interests as much as those of his cousin, and that a suitably educated Matthew Cayley of twenty-three was felt by him to be a useful property for a man in his position; a man, that is to say, whose vanities left him so little time for his affairs.

Cayley, then, at twenty-three, looked after his cousin's affairs. By this time Mark had bought The Red House and the considerable amount of land which went with it. Cayley superintended the necessary staff. His duties, indeed, were many. He was not quite secretary, not quite land-agent, not quite business-adviser, not quite companion, but something of all four. Mark leant upon him and called him "Cay," objecting quite rightly in the circumstances to the name of Matthew. Cay, he felt was, above all, dependable; a big, heavy-jawed, solid fellow, who didn't bother you with unnecessary talk—a boon to a man who liked to do most of the talking himself.

Cayley was now twenty-eight, but had all the appearance of forty, which was his patron's age. Spasmodically they entertained a good deal at The Red House, and Mark's preference—call it kindliness or vanity, as you please—was for guests who were not in a position to repay his hospitality. Let us have a look at them as they came down to that breakfast, of which Stevens, the parlourmaid, has already given us a glimpse.

The first to appear was Major Rumbold, a tall, grey-haired, grey-moustached, silent man, wearing a Norfolk coat and grey flannel trousers, who lived on his retired pay and wrote natural history articles for the papers. He inspected the dishes on the side-table, decided carefully on kedgeree, and got to work on it. He had passed on to a sausage by the time of the next arrival. This was Bill Beverley, a cheerful young man in white flannel trousers and a blazer.

"Hallo, Major," he said as he came in, "how's the gout?"

"It isn't gout," said the Major gruffly.

"Well, whatever it is."

The Major grunted.

“I make a point of being polite at breakfast,” said Bill, helping himself largely to porridge. “Most people are so rude. That’s why I asked you. But don’t tell me if it’s a secret. Coffee?” he added, as he poured himself out a cup.

“No, thanks. I never drink till I’ve finished eating.”

“Quite right, Major; it’s only manners.” He sat down opposite to the other. “Well, we’ve got a good day for our game. It’s going to be dashed hot, but that’s where Betty and I score. On the fifth green, your old wound, the one you got in that frontier skirmish in ’43, will begin to trouble you; on the eighth, your liver, undermined by years of curry, will drop to pieces; on the twelfth—”

“Oh, shut up, you ass!”

“Well, I’m only warning you. Hallo; good morning, Miss Norris. I was just telling the Major what was going to happen to you and him this morning. Do you want any assistance, or do you prefer choosing your own breakfast?”

“Please don’t get up,” said Miss Norris. “I’ll help myself. Good morning, Major.” She smiled pleasantly at him.

The Major nodded.

“Good morning. Going to be hot.”

“As I was telling him,” began Bill, “that’s where—Hallo, here’s Betty. Morning, Cayley.”

Betty Calladine and Cayley had come in together. Betty was the eighteen-year-old daughter of Mrs. John Calladine, widow of the painter, who was acting hostess on this occasion for Mark. Ruth Norris took herself seriously as an actress and, on her holidays, seriously as a golfer. She was quite competent as either. Neither the Stage Society nor Sandwich had any terrors for her.

“By the way, the car will be round at 10.30,” said Cayley, looking up from his letters. “You’re lunching there, and driving back directly afterwards. Isn’t that right?”

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t have two rounds,” said Bill hopefully.