

Murder for Christmas

By Agatha Christie

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The Story Thus Far:

FOLLOWING some successful diamond deals in South Africa, Simeon Lee returns to his homeland, England, goes into business, accumulates a fortune, and retires. But before he settles down in Addlesfield, at beautiful Gorston Hall, he receives some terrible shocks. His wife dies. His only daughter, Jennifer, elopes with a Spanish artist, and has a child—a girl—and dies. One of his sons, Harry, embezzles a large sum of money, leaves England, and becomes an aimless wanderer. His youngest son, David, goes away, becomes an artist, and makes it quite evident that he feels no love for his father.

Realizing that he cannot live much longer, old Simeon decides to have a family reunion. He issues his orders (old Simeon's word is law in the Lee family); and presently, a day or so before Christmas, three of his four sons and their wives—Alfred and Lydia (who live at Gorston Hall); David and Hilda; George, a Member of Parliament, and Magdalene—arrive for the celebration.

Then come two surprises—for everyone except old Simeon. Harry—harum-scarum as ever, cynical, full of worldly wisdom—puts in an appearance. And Jennifer's daughter—Pilar Estravados, now a young lady—joins the party. Both, it appears, have been invited by the old man; and Pilar, as Alfred and Lydia learn to their disgust, is to make her home, permanently, at Gorston Hall.

Simeon Lee is favorably impressed by his granddaughter, whom he has never before seen. Once, when no one else is around, he shows her a bag of uncut diamonds, which he keeps in a safe near at hand—diamonds that are worth a fortune.

That incident surprises Pilar. But another, and far greater, surprise awaits her. On a train, in England, she had met an attractive man, who informed her that he had come up from South Africa on an important mission. While she and old Simeon are chatting, that man is shown in by Tressilian, the butler. He introduces himself as Stephen Farr, and when Simeon realizes that he is the son of his old partner in South Africa—Ebenezer Farr—he gives him a cordial welcome and insists that he spend Christmas at Gorston Hall.

Pilar's eyes, as she sits there—after she has been introduced to the man from South Africa—are demure and downcast. She gives no sign that she has ever before met Stephen Farr.

III

DO YOU really want me to stay on here, Father?" asked Harry. He tilted his head back. "I'm stirring up rather a hornets' nest, you know."

"What do you mean?" asked Simeon sharply.

"Brother Alfred," said Harry. "Good brother Alfred! He, if I may say so, resents my presence here."

"The devil he does!" snapped Simeon. "I'm master in this house."

"All the same, sir, I expect you're pretty dependent on Alfred. I don't want to upset—"

"You'll do as I tell you," snapped his father.

Harry yawned.

"Don't know that I shall be able to stick to a stay-at-home life. Pretty stifling to a fellow who's knocked about the world."

His father said, "You'd better marry and settle down."

Harry said, "Who shall I marry? Pity one can't marry one's niece. Young Pilar is devilish attractive."

"You've noticed that?"

"Talking of settling down, fat George has done well for himself as far as looks go. Who was she?"

Simeon shrugged his shoulders.

"How should I know? George picked her up at a mannequin parade, I believe. She says her father was a retired naval officer."

Harry said, "Probably a second mate of a coasting steamer. George will have a bit of trouble with her if he's not careful."

"George," said Simeon Lee, "is a fool."

Harry said, "What did she marry him for? His money?"

Simeon shrugged his shoulders.

Harry said, "Well, you think you can square Alfred all right?"

"We'll soon settle that," said Simeon grimly.

He touched a bell that stood on a table near him.

Horbury appeared promptly. Simeon said, "Ask Mr. Alfred to come here."

Horbury went out and Harry drawled, "That fellow listens at doors!"

Simeon shrugged his shoulders.

"Probably."

Alfred hurried in. His face twitched when he saw his brother. Ignoring Harry, he said pointedly, "You wanted me, Father?"

"Yes, sit down. I was just thinking we must reor-



ganize things a bit, now that we have two more people living in the house."

"Two?"

"Pilar will make her home here, naturally. And Harry is home for good."

Alfred said, "Harry is coming to live here?"

"Why not, old boy?" said Harry.

Alfred turned sharply to him.

"I should think that you yourself would see that!"

"Well, sorry—but I don't."

"After everything that has happened? The disgraceful way you behaved. The scandal—"

Harry waved an easy hand.

"All that's in the past, old boy."

"You behaved abominably to Father after all he's done for you."

"LOOK here, Alfred, it strikes me that's Father's business, not yours. If he's willing to forgive and forget—"

"I'm willing," said Simeon. "Harry's my son, after all, you know, Alfred."

"Yes, but—I resent it—for Father's sake."

Simeon said, "Harry's coming here. I wish it. . . ." He laid a hand gently on the latter's shoulder. "I'm very fond of Harry."

Alfred got up and left the room. His face was white. Harry rose too and went after him, laughing.

Simeon sat chuckling to himself. Then he started and looked around.

"Who the devil's that? Oh, it's you, Horbury. Don't creep about that way."

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"Never mind. Listen, I've got some orders for you. I want everybody to come up here after lunch—everybody."

"Yes, sir."

"There's something else. When they come, you come with them. And when you get halfway along the passage raise your voice, so that I can hear. Any pretext will do. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Horbury went downstairs. He said to Tressilian, "If you ask me, we are going to have a merry Christmas!"

Tressilian said sharply, "What d'you mean?"

"You wait and see, Mr. Tressilian. It's Christmas Eve and a nice Christmas spirit abroad, I don't think."

THEY came into the room and paused at the doorway.

Simeon was speaking into the telephone. He waved a hand to them.

"Sit down, all of you, I shan't be a minute."

He went on speaking into the telephone:

"Is that Charlton, Hodgkins and Brace? Is that you, Charlton? Simeon Lee speaking. Yes, isn't it? . . . Yes. . . . No, I wanted you to make a new will for me. . . . Yes, it's some time since I made the other. . . . Circumstances have altered. . . . Oh, no, no hurry. Don't want you to spoil your Christmas. Say Boxing Day or the day after. Come along and I'll tell you what I want done. No, that's quite all right. I shan't be dying just yet."

He replaced the receiver, then looked round at the eight members of his family. He cackled and said, "You're all looking very glum. What is the matter?"

Alfred said, "You sent for us. . . ."

Simeon said quickly, "Oh, sorry—nothing portentous about it. Did you think it was a family council? No, I'm just rather tired today, that's all. None of you need come up after dinner. I shall go to bed. I want to be fresh for Christmas Day."

He took out the little bag and, pouring the diamonds out, played with them. As the stones tumbled out, his eyes glittered, and he shook with silent laughter

He grinned at them. George said portentously, "Of course. . . . Of course. . . ."

Simeon said, "Grand old institution, Christmas! Promotes solidarity of family feeling. What do you think, Magdalene, my dear?"

Magdalene jumped. Her rather silly mouth flew open and then shut itself. She said, "Oh— Oh, yes!"

Simeon said, "Let me see, you lived with a retired naval officer—" he paused, "your *father*— Don't suppose you made much of Christmas; it needs a big family for that!"

"Well—well—yes, perhaps it does."

Simeon's eyes slid past her.

"Don't want to talk of anything unpleasant at this

time of year, but you know, George, I'm afraid I'll have to cut down your allowance a bit. My establishment here is going to cost me a bit more to run in the future."

George got very red.

"But look here, Father, you can't do that!"

Simeon said softly, "Oh, you think I can't do it?"

Finally they got an oak bench and used it as a battering ram. The lock gave at last, and the door cracked and, shuddering, swung free on its hinges

"My expenses are very heavy already. Very heavy. As it is, I don't know how I make both ends meet. It needs the most rigorous economy."

"Let your wife do a bit more of it," said Simeon. "Women are good at that sort of thing. They often think of economies where a man would never have dreamed of them. And a clever woman can make her own clothes. My wife, I remember, was clever with her needle. About all she was clever with—a good woman but deadly dull—"

David sprang up. His father said, "Sit down, boy, you'll knock something over—"

David said, "My mother—"

Simeon said "Your (Continued on page 64)





Groucho Marx—a caricature in nuts by Sam Berman.

From Nuts to Soup

By Rose and Bob Brown

Nut soup may sound nutty, but it's delicious besides. In fact nuts are a boon to practically any dish, say the Browns, and prove it by whipping up a few you're sure to enjoy

THIS is the time of year we go slightly nutty—but find ourselves in good company, for all over the world the new nut harvest is on. In Italy they're knocking down chestnuts to go with the heady new wine that makes 'em swing in the streets. In Paris they've rushed the season by devouring their almonds green. In England they're polishing up nutcrackers and silver tankards for ale, while we're turning squirrel-minded ourselves, storing up a few bushels of holiday nuts in the attic.

But don't think we're going to be satisfied with just eating them out of hand.

We're going to cook with them, too, and if you'll join us in a bowl of pea-pecan soup we'll all be delighted. Just heat a can of peas and mash them through the colander, strain in a cup and a half of cooked tomatoes, stir in a cupful of grated pecans, some salt, and keep stirring till everything's hot and well blended.

Nut soups may sound strange if you haven't tried them, but they're as tasty as clam chowder and very comforting on a cold fall day, because they're full of nutriment, including fat and protein. In fact, their food value is so high that one Brazil nut or two pecans is equal to a whole slice of bread, and a bowl of peanut-butter soup is a meal in itself—anyway if you're watching your waistline. Start with a tablespoon of chopped onion mixed with another of chopped pimienta and half a cup of thinly sliced celery. Boil these tender in half a cup of water, then stir in a cup of good peanut butter and three of milk thickened with a tablespoon of flour. Sweeten with a teaspoon of sugar, let everything sim-

mer together for two minutes—and you've got something!

With peanut butter alone you can work wonders, but there's no need limiting our culinary scope to goobers, which aren't really nuts anyway, but a kind of pea. So let's get along to walnuts, which have always been second in popularity.

Begin with half a cup of walnut kernels heated slowly in the oven with two teaspoons of butter and very little salt. Cool, break into small pieces and mix with a cup and a half of cold chicken meat and about three quarters of a cup of diced celery, sluiced with French dressing and set on lettuce leaves.

But the nut that's been steadily climbing in popularity is the pecan. This is the nut for nougats, creole pralines, clusters and, to our mind, best of all—pecan waffles. Whip up your batter with two cups of flour, two eggs, one cup of grated pecans, a cup and a third of milk, four tablespoons of melted butter, two of sugar, four teaspoons of baking powder and some salt. And when cooking them be sure to close the kitchen

window or the neighbors will be right over.

Try drizzling honey, too, over moist buttered toast and then powdering it thick with some such preparation as half pecans and half cashews powdered together, which you can find ready packaged.

We came back to America with the recipe for a parfait that's more buttery than buttered pecan itself. Simply cook a scant cup of sugar in a quarter as much water until it spins in a thread, and pour this syrup, piping hot, over four egg whites beaten stiff, with a spot of salt. Use your rotary mixer to beat syrup and eggs together and let them cool before folding in a cup of cashews, broken to bits, with a cup of cream whipped and flavored with the seeds scraped out of an inch length of real vanilla bean, which you can get in a glass tube for two bits in any well-stocked grocery. The real trick of this frozen dessert is that haunting flavor from the vanilla bean.

But there's no need for us to go abroad for such things as cashews, since we have more native nuts than any other country. Almonds, for instance, are now raised in California by the billions and they're just as fine as imported Jordans or Valencias.

Drink 'Em, Too

We take our almonds in liquid form, too—in that milky Cuban cooler called Havana Amade. You need about forty sweet almonds for this, and two quarts of milk. First blanch and skin the meats, then pound them to a paste, plop them right into the milk with half a pound of sugar and a short piece of vanilla bean. Let everything cook together while you stir, take the pan off just before it reaches the boiling point, let it cool, then strain into a pitcher through a fine sieve and tuck it away out of sight in the refrigerator to ripen.

You may try Brazilian *picetostes*, too. Simply decrust four or five slices of bread and cut them into fingers an inch thick. Dip these in a batter made with a beaten egg whipped up with a quarter cup of milk, a teaspoon of sugar and half as much salt. Roll them in a cup of Brazil nuts chopped fine and then either fry them golden in deep fat or bake twelve or more minutes in a beastly hot oven. Maple sugar or honey is nice to drizzle over these.

As unusual entree is hickory corn, as easy to make as popovers and much more tasty. Simply douse a can of corn with a cup of milk, beat two eggs to a froth and stir them in with a tablespoon of flour, a teaspoon of salt, and then the chief thing, a cup of chopped hickory nuts—or butternuts, if you want something richer. All you have to do is bake the mixture in a buttered casserole until it's firm as cheesecake. You might use a can of succotash in place of the corn and go Indian by substituting pine nuts.

Oriental lychee nuts are worth playing around with, too, in some such thing as a nougat where you boil two cups of sugar with half a cup each of corn syrup and water, remembering not to stir and taking it off the flame at the hard-ball stage. Beat two egg whites stiff and whip in two teaspoons of cold coffee, then pour your hot syrup on slowly, beating strenuously until everything is velvety smooth for finishing off with half a cup each of shredded lychee nuts and pecans, or walnuts, or anything you say. Beat the nuts in until your nougat is stiff and heavy and spread it out to cool in a buttered pan.

Paradise nuts sell for the same price as Brazils in fancy grocery stores, but their texture and flavor is truly celestial and they come in a satiny brown shell that makes you want to crack them with your teeth, no matter what the dentist told you. ★★★