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Agatha
Christie

CROOKED HOUSE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

Crooked House

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Author's Foreword](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Agatha Christie](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Author's Foreword

This book is one of my own special favourites. I saved it up for years, thinking about it, working it out, saying to myself: "One day, when I've plenty of time, and want to really enjoy myself—I'll begin it!" I should say that of one's output, five books are work to one that is real pleasure. *Crooked House* was pure pleasure. I often wonder whether people who read a book can know if it has been hard work or a pleasure to write? Again and again someone says to me: "*How* you must have enjoyed writing so and so!" This about a book that obstinately refused to come out the way you wished, whose characters are sticky, the plot needlessly involved, and the dialogue stilted—or so you think yourself. But perhaps the author isn't the best judge of his or her own work. However, practically everybody has liked *Crooked House*, so I am justified in my own belief that it is one of my best.

I don't know what put the Leonides family into my head—they just came. Then, like Topsy "they grewed."

I feel that I myself was only their scribe.

Agatha Christie

One

I first came to know Sophia Leonides in Egypt towards the end of the war. She held a fairly high administrative post in one of the Foreign Office departments out there. I knew her first in an official capacity, and I soon appreciated the efficiency that had brought her to the position she held, in spite of her youth (she was at that time just twenty-two).

Besides being extremely easy to look at, she had a clear mind and a dry sense of humour that I found very delightful. We became friends. She was a person whom it was extraordinarily easy to talk to and we enjoyed our dinners and occasional dances very much.

All this I knew; it was not until I was ordered East at the close of the European war that I knew something else—that I loved Sophia and that I wanted to marry her.

We were dining at Shepherd's when I made this discovery. It did not come to me with any shock of surprise, but more as the recognition of a fact with which I had been long familiar. I looked at her with new eyes—but I saw what I had already known for a long time. I liked everything I saw. The dark crisp hair that sprang up proudly from her forehead, the vivid blue eyes, the small square fighting chin, and the straight nose. I liked the well-cut light-grey tailor-made, and the crisp white shirt. She looked refreshingly English and that appealed to me strongly after three years without seeing my native land. Nobody, I thought, could be more English—and even as I was thinking exactly that, I suddenly wondered if, in fact, she was, or indeed could be, as English as she looked. Does the real thing ever have the perfection of a stage performance?

I realized that much and freely as we had talked together, discussing ideas, our likes and dislikes, the future, our immediate friends and acquaintances—Sophia had never mentioned her home or her family. She knew all about me (she was, as I have indicated, a good listener) but about her I knew nothing. She had, I supposed, the usual background, but she had never talked about it. And until this moment I had never realized the fact.

Sophia asked me what I was thinking about.

I replied truthfully: "You."

"I see," she said. And she sounded as though she did see.

"We may not meet again for a couple of years," I said. "I don't know when I shall get back to England. But as soon as I do get back, the first thing I shall do will be to come and see you and ask you to marry me."

She took it without batting an eyelash. She sat there, smoking, not looking at me.

For a moment or two I was nervous that she might not understand.

"Listen," I said. "The one thing I'm determined *not* to do, is to ask you to marry me now. That wouldn't work out anyway. First you might turn me down, and then I'd go off miserable and probably tie up with some ghastly woman just to restore my vanity. And if you didn't turn me down what could we do about it? Get married and part at once? Get engaged and settle down to a long waiting period? I couldn't stand your doing that. You might meet someone else and feel bound to be 'loyal' to me. We've been living in a queer hectic get-on-with-it-quickly atmosphere. Marriages and love affairs making and breaking all round us. I'd like to feel you'd gone home, free and independent, to look round you and size up the new post-war world and decide what you want out of it. What is between you and me, Sophia, has got to be *permanent*. I've no use for any other kind of marriage."

"No more have I," said Sophia.

"On the other hand," I said, "I think I'm entitled to let you know how I—well—how I feel."

"But without undue lyrical expression?" murmured Sophia.

"Darling—don't you understand? I've tried *not* to say I love you—"

She stopped me.

"I do understand, Charles. And I like your funny way of doing things. And you may come and see me when you come back—if you still want to—"

It was my turn to interrupt.

"There's no doubt about that."

"There's always a doubt about everything, Charles. There may always be some incalculable factor that upsets the applecart. For one thing, you don't know much about me, do you?"

"I don't even know where you live in England."

"I live at Swinly Dean."

I nodded at the mention of the well-known outer suburb of London which boasts three excellent golf courses for the city financier.

She added softly in a musing voice: "*In a little crooked house....*"

I must have looked slightly startled, for she seemed amused, and explained by elaborating the quotation. “‘*And they all lived together in a little crooked house.*’ That’s us. Not really such a little house either. But definitely crooked—running to gables and half timbering!”

“Are you one of a large family? Brothers and sisters?”

“One brother, one sister, a mother, a father, an uncle, an aunt by marriage, a grandfather, a great-aunt, and a step-grandmother.”

“Good gracious!” I exclaimed, slightly overwhelmed.

She laughed.

“Of course we don’t normally all live together. The war and blitzes have brought that about—but I don’t know”—she frowned reflectively—“perhaps spiritually the family has always lived together—under my grandfather’s eye and protection. He’s rather a Person, my grandfather. He’s over eighty, about four-foot ten, and everybody else looks rather dim beside him.”

“He sounds interesting,” I said.

“He is interesting. He’s a Greek from Smyrna. Aristide Leonides.” She added, with a twinkle, “He’s extremely rich.”

“Will anybody be rich after this is over?”

“My grandfather will,” said Sophia with assurance. “No soak-the-rich tactics would have any effect on him. He’d just soak the soakers.”

“I wonder,” she added, “if you’ll like him?”

“Do you?” I asked.

“Better than anyone in the world,” said Sophia.

Two

It was over two years before I returned to England. They were not easy years. I wrote to Sophia and heard from her fairly frequently. Her letters, like mine, were not love letters. They were letters written to each other by close friends—they dealt with ideas and thoughts and with comments on the daily trend of life. Yet I know that as far as I was concerned, and I believed as far as Sophia was concerned too, our feelings for each other grew and strengthened.

I returned to England on a soft grey day in September. The leaves on the trees were golden in the evening light. There were playful gusts of wind. From the airfield I sent a telegram to Sophia.

“Just arrived back. Will you dine this evening Mario’s nine o’clock Charles.”

A couple of hours later I was sitting reading the *Times*; and scanning the Births, Marriages and Deaths column my eye was caught by the name Leonides:

On Sept. 19th, at Three Gables, Swinly Dean, Aristide Leonides, beloved husband of Brenda Leonides, in his eighty-eighth year. Deeply regretted.

There was another announcement immediately below:

Leonides—Suddenly, at his residence, Three Gables, Swinly Dean, Aristide Leonides. Deeply mourned by his loving children and grandchildren. Flowers to St. Eldred’s Church, Swinly Dean.

I found the two announcements rather curious. There seemed to have been some faulty staff work resulting in overlapping. But my main preoccupation was Sophia. I hastily sent her a second telegram:

“Just seen news of your grandfather’s death. Very sorry. Let me know when I can see you. Charles.”

A telegram from Sophia reached me at six o’clock at my father’s house. It said:

“Will be at Mario’s nine o’clock. Sophia.”

The thought of meeting Sophia again made me both nervous and excited. The time crept by with maddening slowness. I was at Mario’s waiting twenty minutes too early. Sophia herself was only five minutes late.

It is always a shock to meet again someone whom you have not seen for a long time but who has been very much present in your mind during that period. When at last Sophia came through the swing doors our meeting seemed completely unreal. She was wearing black, and that, in some curious way, startled me. Most other women were wearing black, but I got it into my head that it was definitely mourning—and it surprised me that Sophia should be the kind of person who did wear black—even for a near relative.

We had cocktails—then went and found our table. We talked rather fast and feverishly—asking after old friends of the Cairo days. It was artificial conversation, but it tided us over the first awkwardness. I expressed commiseration for her grandfather’s death and Sophia said quietly that it had been “very sudden.” Then we started off again reminiscing. I began to feel, uneasily, that something was the matter—something, I mean, other than the first natural awkwardness of meeting again. There was something wrong, definitely wrong, with Sophia herself. Was she, perhaps, going to tell me that she had found some other man whom she cared for more than she did for me? That her feeling for me had been “all a mistake?”

Somehow I didn’t think it was that—I didn’t know what it was. Meanwhile we continued our artificial talk.

Then, quite suddenly, as the waiter placed coffee on the table and retired bowing, everything swung into focus. Here were Sophia and I sitting together as so often before at a small table in a restaurant. The years of our separation might never have been.

“Sophia,” I said.

And immediately she said, “Charles!”