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# **The Man in the Brown Suit**

Written by Agatha Christie

Published by Harper

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*Agatha Christie*

**The Man in  
the Brown Suit**

HARPER

## **HARPER**

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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,

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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 —'

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‘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 war-time), 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?'

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‘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.

'You need suppose nothing of the sort. I am not a fool. The diamonds are in a safe place where no one will dream of looking for them.'

'I never thought you a fool, my dear lady, but may I venture to suggest that you are somewhat foolhardy? The "Colonel" is not the type of man to take kindly to being blackmailed, you know.'

'I am not afraid of him,' she laughed. 'There is only one man I have ever feared – and he is dead.'

The man looked at her curiously.

'Let us hope that he will not come to life again, then,' he remarked lightly.

'What do you mean?' cried the dancer sharply.

The Count looked slightly surprised.

'I only meant that resurrection would be awkward for you,' he explained. 'A foolish joke.'

She gave a sigh of relief.

'Oh, no, he is dead all right. Killed in the war. He was a man who once – loved me.'

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‘In South Africa?’ asked the Count negligently.

‘Yes, since you ask it, in South Africa.’

‘That is your native country, is it not?’

She nodded. Her visitor rose and reached for his hat.

‘Well,’ he remarked, ‘you know your own business best, but, if I were you, I should fear the “Colonel” far more than any disillusioned lover. He is a man whom it is particularly easy to – underestimate.’

She laughed scornfully.

‘As if I did not know him after all these years!’

‘I wonder if you do?’ he said softly. ‘I very much wonder if you do.’

‘Oh, I am not a fool! And I am not alone in this. The South African mail-boat docks at Southampton tomorrow, and on board her is a man who has come specially from Africa at my request and who has carried out certain orders of mine. The “Colonel” will have not one of us to deal with, but two.’

‘Is that wise?’

‘It is necessary.’

‘You are sure of this man?’

A rather peculiar smile played over the dancer’s face.

‘I am quite sure of him. He is inefficient, but perfectly trustworthy.’ She paused, and then added in an indifferent tone of voice: ‘As a matter of fact, he happens to be my husband.’

## Chapter 1

Everybody has been at me, right and left, to write this story, from the great (represented by Lord Nasby) to the small (represented by our late maid-of-all-work, Emily, whom I saw when I was last in England. ‘Lor, miss, what a beyewtiful book you might make out of it all – just like the pictures!’)

I’ll admit that I’ve certain qualifications for the task. I was mixed up in the affair from the very beginning, I was in the thick of it all through, and I was triumphantly ‘in at the death’. Very fortunately, too, the gaps that I cannot supply from my own knowledge are amply covered by Sir Eustace Pedler’s diary, of which he has kindly begged me to make use.

So here goes. Anne Beddingfeld starts to narrate her adventures.

I’d always longed for adventures. You see, my life had such a dreadful sameness. My father, Professor

Beddingfeld, was one of England's greatest living authorities on Primitive Man. He really was a genius – everyone admits that. His mind dwelt in Palaeolithic times, and the inconvenience of life for him was that his body inhabited the modern world. Papa did not care for modern man – even Neolithic Man he despised as a mere herder of cattle, and he did not rise to enthusiasm until he reached the Mousterian period.

Unfortunately one cannot entirely dispense with modern men. One is forced to have some kind of truck with butchers and bakers and milkmen and greengrocers. Therefore, Papa being immersed in the past, Mamma having died when I was a baby, it fell to me to undertake the practical side of living. Frankly, I hate Palaeolithic Man, be he Aurignacian, Mousterian, Chellian, or anything else, and though I typed and revised most of Papa's *Neanderthal Man and his Ancestors*, Neanderthal men themselves fill me with loathing, and I always reflect what a fortunate circumstance it was that they became extinct in remote ages.

I do not know whether Papa guessed my feelings on the subject, probably not, and in any case he would not have been interested. The opinion of other people never interested him in the slightest degree. I think it was really a sign of his greatness. In the same way, he lived quite detached from the necessities of daily life. He ate what was put before him in an exemplary

fashion, but seemed mildly pained when the question of paying for it arose. We never seemed to have any money. His celebrity was not of the kind that brought in a cash return. Although he was a fellow of almost every important society and had rows of letters after his name, the general public scarcely knew of his existence, and his long learned books, though adding signally to the sum-total of human knowledge, had no attraction for the masses. Only on one occasion did he leap into the public gaze. He had read a paper before some society on the subject of the young of the chimpanzee. The young of the human race show some anthropoid features, whereas the young of the chimpanzee approach more nearly to the human than the adult chimpanzee does. That seems to show that whereas our ancestors were more Simian than we are, the chimpanzee's were of a higher type than the present species – in other words, the chimpanzee is a degenerate. That enterprising newspaper, the *Daily Budget*, being hard up for something spicy, immediately brought itself out with large headlines. 'We are not descended from monkeys, but are monkeys descended from *us*? Eminent Professor says chimpanzees are decadent humans.' Shortly afterwards, a reporter called to see Papa, and endeavoured to induce him to write a series of popular articles on the theory. I have seldom seen Papa so angry. He turned the reporter out of

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the house with scant ceremony, much to my secret sorrow, as we were particularly short of money at the moment. In fact, for a moment I meditated running after the young man and informing him that my father had changed his mind and would send the articles in question. I could easily have written them myself, and the probabilities were that Papa would never have learnt of the transaction, not being a reader of the *Daily Budget*. However, I rejected this course as being too risky, so I merely put on my best hat and went sadly down the village to interview our justly irate grocer.

The reporter from the *Daily Budget* was the only young man who ever came to our house. There were times when I envied Emily, our little servant, who ‘walked out’ whenever occasion offered with a large sailor to whom she was affianced. In between times, to ‘keep her hand in’, as she expressed it, she walked out with the greengrocer’s young man, and the chemist’s assistant. I reflected sadly that I had no one to ‘keep my hand in’ with. All Papa’s friends were aged Professors – usually with long beards. It is true that Professor Peterson once clasped me affectionately and said I had a ‘neat little waist’ and then tried to kiss me. The phrase alone dated him hopelessly. No self-respecting female has had a ‘neat little waist’ since I was in my cradle.

I yearned for adventure, for love, for romance, and I seemed condemned to an existence of drab utility.

The village possessed a lending library, full of tattered works of fiction, and I enjoyed perils and love-making at second hand, and went to sleep dreaming of stern silent Rhodesians, and of strong men who always ‘felled their opponent with a single blow’. There was no one in the village who even looked as though they could ‘fell’ an opponent, with a single blow or several.

There was the cinema too, with a weekly episode of ‘The Perils of Pamela’. Pamela was a magnificent young woman. Nothing daunted her. She fell out of aeroplanes, adventured in submarines, climbed skyscrapers and crept about in the Underworld without turning a hair. She was not really clever, The Master Criminal of the Underworld caught her each time, but as he seemed loath to knock her on the head in a simple way, and always doomed her to death in a sewer-gas-chamber or by some new and marvellous means, the hero was always able to rescue her at the beginning of the following week’s episode. I used to come out with my head in a delirious whirl – and then I would get home and find a notice from the Gas Company threatening to cut us off if the outstanding account was not paid!

And yet, though I did not suspect it, every moment was bringing adventure nearer to me.

It is possible that there are many people in the world who have never heard of the finding of an antique skull

at the Broken Hill Mine in Northern Rhodesia. I came down one morning to find Papa excited to the point of apoplexy. He poured out the whole story to me.

‘You understand, Anne? There are undoubtedly certain resemblances to the Java skull, but superficial – superficial only. No, here we have what I have always maintained – the ancestral form of the Neanderthal race. You grant that the Gibraltar skull is the most primitive of the Neanderthal skulls found? Why? The cradle of the race was in Africa. They passed to Europe –’

‘Not marmalade on kippers, Papa,’ I said hastily, arresting my parent’s absent-minded hand. ‘Yes, you were saying?’

‘They passed to Europe on –’

Here he broke down with a bad fit of choking, the result of an immoderate mouthful of kipper bones.

‘But we must start at once,’ he declared, as he rose to his feet at the conclusion of the meal. ‘There is no time to be lost. We must be on the spot – there are doubtless incalculable finds to be found in the neighbourhood. I shall be interested to note whether the implements are typical of the Mousterian period – there will be the remains of the primitive ox, I should say, but not those of the woolly rhinoceros. Yes, a little army will be starting soon. We must get ahead of them. You will write to Cook’s today, Anne?’

‘What about money, Papa?’ I hinted delicately.

He turned a reproachful eye upon me.

‘Your point of view always depresses me, my child. We must not be sordid. No, no, in the cause of science one must not be sordid.’

‘I feel Cook’s might be sordid, Papa.’

Papa looked pained.

‘My dear Anne, you will pay them in ready money.’

‘I haven’t got any ready money.’

Papa looked thoroughly exasperated.

‘My child, I really cannot be bothered with these vulgar money details. The bank – I had something from the Manager yesterday, saying I had twenty-seven pounds.’

‘That’s your overdraft, I fancy.’

‘Ah, I have it! Write to my publishers.’

I acquiesced doubtfully, Papa’s books bringing in more glory than money. I liked the idea of going to Rhodesia immensely. ‘Stern silent men,’ I murmured to myself in an ecstasy. Then something in my parent’s appearance struck me as unusual.

‘You have odd boots on, Papa,’ I said. ‘Take off the brown one and put on the other black one. And don’t forget your muffler. It’s a very cold day.’

In a few minutes Papa stalked off, correctly booted and well muffled.

He returned late that evening, and, to my dismay, I saw his muffler and overcoat were missing.

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‘Dear me, Anne, you are quite right. I took them off to go into the cavern. One gets so dirty there.’

I nodded feelingly, remembering an occasion when Papa had returned literally plastered from head to foot with rich Pleistocene clay.

Our principal reason for settling in Little Hampsley had been the neighbourhood of Hampsley Cavern, a buried cave rich in deposits of the Aurignacian culture. We had a tiny museum in the village, and the curator and Papa spent most of their days messing about underground and bringing to light portions of woolly rhinoceros and cave bear.

Papa coughed badly all the evening, and the following morning I saw he had a temperature and sent for the doctor.

Poor Papa, he never had a chance. It was double pneumonia. He died four days later.