

They Came to Baghdad 1951

Like many Christie thrillers there is an evil organisation, without a name or a face, which is trying to destabilise the World, pitting Communists against Capitalists. 'The old bad things must destroy each other. The fat old men grasping at their profits, impeding progress. The bigoted stupid Communists, trying to establish their Marxian heaven. There must be total war – total destruction. ...The chosen band of higher beings..- the young Siegfrieds of the New World. All young, all believing in their destiny as Supermen....they would step in and take over.'

The financial whizz kid, Anna Scheele, has uncovered evidence about this organisations' finances, which she intends to put in front of the USSR/USA Summit. Stalin and the President of the USA are expected to attend in Baghdad. Anna Scheele is PA to the head of International Bankers: 'platinum blonde – but not a glamorous blonde' 'made her way in the world not by her charm but by sheer efficiency. She could memorize anything, however complicated, and produce names, dates and times without having to refer to notes...She was discretion itself and her energy, though controlled and disciplined, never flagged.' 'Even germs respected Anna Scheele and kept out of her way.' Spymaster Dakin describes her as 'an exceedingly clever young woman.' Christie has always featured feisty young female heroines who are more competent than their male counterparts, but this is the first one to be respected by the international world of Banking. This is radical feminist content for 1951.

Henry 'Fakir' Carmichael is the prototype James Bond, but more intelligent. Carmichael is described as:

"British Agent. Age about thirty. Brown hair, dark eyes, five-foot-ten. Speaks Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, Armenian, Hindustani, Turkish and many mountain dialects. Befriended by tribesmen. *Dangerous.*'

'Fakir' Carmichael has several exciting scenes. Carmichael was changing from Arab to Western clothes in what should have been a 'safe house', but it has been infiltrated by the evil organisation, who springs a trap for him. Carmichael escaped by glimpsing the gleam of the assassin's 'the long curved knife he had pulled from beneath his garments' reflected in the polished copper coffee pot. This would be brilliant cinema.

The next close scrape was in the British Consulate in Basrah, where Carmichael, still dressed as an Arab, happened to be in the waiting room at the same time as the archaeologist, Richard Baker. Baker and Carmichael had been schoolboys at Eton together, of course. Baker's nickname at Eton had been 'Owl'. Richard Baker suddenly realised that the *Arab* is tapping out O-W-L. F-L-O-R-E-A-T E-T-O-N-A, over and over again on his amber worry beads in Morse code. When Baker understood, the next message in Morse is: 'Fakir here. Stand by. Trouble.' Richard takes out his pipe, pretended to inhale, then tapped out in Morse 'message received' on the ashtray. Richard Baker then saved Carmichael's life by knocking a gun away, as an enemy agent tried to shoot Carmichael. This scene manages to be funny and thrilling at the same time.

At one level 'They Came to Baghdad' is a simple love story. A typist, Victoria Jones, meets a handsome young ex-RAF man, Edward Goring, as she ate a sandwich in a London Square. Victoria fell for his charm, but he is just off to work in Baghdad. A truly brief encounter.

Victoria 'considered herself to be an excellent judge of character', with 'no inhibitions about making friends with strange young men in public places'. In the afternoon, as

Victoria has just been sacked from her present employ, she decided to ask for any agency job going to Baghdad. By *sheer co-incidence*, the next day the agency offers Victoria a one-way ticket to Baghdad to help a disabled traveller, Mrs. Hamilton Clipp. In 1951 it took three days to fly to Baghdad with two overnight stops. Victoria met a number of larger than life characters. They fly out with Sir Rupert Crofton Lee, the famous explorer: he had a 'dark-grey travelling cloak with a capacious hood..a wide sombrero..He had silver grey curling hair..and a beautiful silver grey moustache..The effect was that of a handsome stage bandit.' Victoria disliked Sir Rupert's pomposity.

Victoria's character is an odd mixture of good and ill together. The shrewd Mrs. Clayton describes her as 'an amiable nit-wit with a lot of common sense.' The authorial character sketch is 'a girl with both qualities and defects. On the credit side she was generous, warm-hearted and courageous...Her principal defect was a tendency to tell lies.' She has 'an agreeable figure and first-class legs, Victoria's features might actually have been described as plain.' Victoria has brown hair and dark blue eyes. Victoria is a re-write of previous Christie thriller heroines like Anne Beddingfeld. In *The Man with a Brown Suit* [1924], Anne Beddingfeld takes a one-way ticket out to South Africa after her father dies. Anne is a girl with green 'liquid' eyes, long black hair and 'shapely legs'. Both Anne and Victoria are almost destitute, impulsive, young, single girls in search of love and adventure in exotic, far-flung places.

Victoria blundered into a British Spy network, as the unfortunate Carmichael is stabbed in the heart and crawled into her bed to die. Victoria was recruited by the Spy Master, Dakin, to gather information from a suspicious organisation, *The Olive Branch*, where 'her Edward' was a secretary. Victoria leapt at the chance to earn money, as she was impecunious, just as Anne Beddingfeld had been. When Victoria started to probe too deeply into things at The Olive Branch, she was kidnapped. Suddenly Victoria's character changed under pressure from the naïve typist into the smart, courageous Christie heroine with 'determined cheerfulness – she was alive.' Victoria found herself held prisoner in a locked room: 'clearly, in her present predicament, brains were going to be needed' 'alive to the inventive faculties of a European young woman in imminent fear of extinction. 'I'm getting out of here somehow,' said Victoria to herself.' She managed to escape in the night when her captors are snoring, bravely walking 'a steady three and a half miles an hour towards the unknown'.

Victoria was extremely lucky in that she walks into the desert, and the first car that stops has the 'supercilious' archaeologist, Richard Baker, in it. Victoria disliked Baker, but he takes her to the safest of safe havens; an archaeological dig in the middle of nowhere. Since Agatha Christie was married to the archaeologist Max Mallowan, there are some interesting, detailed descriptions of what a dig was like in the middle of the desert in the 1950s. It also allowed Christie scope to crack lots of archaeological jokes:

'Once archaeologists start to dig, they go on digging like mad, and don't stop.'

'Rather like terriers.'

Victoria is also introduced to the amiable boffin Dr Pouncefoot Jones, who is the head of the dig. Victoria Jones, in one of her many lies, states she is Dr Pouncefoot Jones' niece; Richard Baker is rightly dubious. Fortunately for Victoria, Pouncefoot Jones is a true absent-minded but brilliant academic.

'Dr Pouncefoot Jones greeted his colleague.

'Hallo Richard my boy, so you've turned up. I had an idea you were arriving on Tuesday. I don't know why.'

'This is Tuesday,' said Richard.

'Is it really now? Said Dr Pouncefoot Jones without interest.....Richard leapt down into the trench and the two archaeologists enjoyed themselves in a highly technical manner...

'By the way,' said Richard, 'I've brought a girl....She says she's your niece.'

'My niece? Dr Pouncefoot Jones brought his mind back with a struggle from his contemplation of mud-brick walls. 'I don't think I have a niece,' he said doubtfully, as though he might have had one and forgotten about her.

'She's coming out to work with you here. I gathered.'

'Oh.' Dr Pouncefoot Jones' face cleared. 'Of course. That will be Veronica.'

'Victoria, I think she said.'

'Yes, yes, Victoria.'

Dr Pouncefoot Jones only thinks about archaeology. After a week at the dig, Victoria drives in with them to Baghdad but doesn't come back:

'God bless me, we came back without her yesterday.'

'I wondered if you'd noticed it,' said Richard.

'Very remiss of me. I was so interested by that report of the Excavations at Tell Bamdar.'

There are eight separate clues to the perpetrator, and no serious red herrings. Edward takes a picture of Victoria, the first time they meet, 'after staring at her intensely'. These were the days before digital photography, when taking a photograph was expensive and time consuming to get the pictures developed. It was not something that happened frequently, especially not at a first, random meeting. Victoria was offered a job by her agency, taking Mrs Clipp to Baghdad the day after meeting Edward; too much of a coincidence.

Victoria thinks she can see 'a flicker in Edward's eye' when Mrs Clayton jokes about shipping bombs as books.

Edward suddenly reacts, holding Victoria painfully by the arm, when she mentions Anna Schele by name. This is the first seriously concrete clue that Edward is interested in Anna Schele.

Edward knows Victoria's lie to the Clipp about being niece to the Bishop of Llangow. Since Victoria only told the Clipp about this fictitious relative, it's further evidence that Victoria's wonderful serendipitous job bringing Mrs Clipp out to Baghdad was a sham simply to get Victoria there. The evil organisation want to use Victoria as a stooge impersonator of Anna Schele at a high level USSR/USA conference summit about to take place, having assassinated the real Miss Schele.

Victoria works out that Sir Rupert Crofton Lee was killed in Cairo and an impersonator substituted for the final stage of the journey, the plane to Baghdad. The real Sir Rupert had a boil on his neck the day before and then in Baghdad he didn't have one. 'The hat – and the cape- and the swashbuckling attitude. He'd be a very easy man to impersonate.' When they were in Cairo at the hotel Victoria had witnesses Sir Rupert going to a room that said BOAC on it, and when he came out he walked differently. Victoria later reflected the looks are easy to get right, but a person's walk was not. Later that day the BOAC notice was gone from the door. The 'pretend' air stewardess who had summoned the real Sir Rupert to his death in Cairo, Victoria later saw talking to Catherine at the Olive Branch in Baghdad.

Edward advises Victoria NOT to tell Dakin this information. This really gives the game away. There was no reason why Victoria should not have immediately informed the British agent.

'Do you think it was because I was coming to tell you this that they kidnapped me? But nobody knew except Edward.'

Victoria naively confesses to Dakin about the boil on the back of Sir Rupert's neck. Dakin, and the reader, tumble to the truth long before poor besotted Victoria.

When Edward meets Victoria again at Tio's Hotel, after her escape from her kidnapers, he says:

"Oh there you are, Victoria" and only afterwards says 'haven't you done something to your hair?' It is not his first response, which should have been surprise, whereas Dakin mentions Victoria's change of hair colour immediately. The kidnapers have dyed her hair blonde to resemble Anna Schele. Edward must have known she'd be blonde. When Victoria says she wants to change her clothes, Edward persuades her to go immediately out of the Hotel in his car, before changing. Why does Victoria agree to do this? It's not clear if she is being unbelievably brave, in order to get incontrovertible evidence that Edward is evil, or if she is still suppressing her conclusions for the sake of true love.

Finally the penny drops about Edward. 'He must have known all along..that Victoria was coming out [to Baghdad] . It was planned and intended.' 'As she looked at that beautiful evil face, all her silly adolescent calf love faded away' 'same feeling experienced some hours earlier for Humphrey Bogart, and later for the Duke of Edinburgh. It had been glamour.' 'She had been a sucker.'

The scarf Carmichael was carrying, had knitted in code, the name of Sheikh Hussein el Ziyara of Kerbela. Carmichael's dying words were 'Defarge': the tricoteuse from a Tale of Two Cities, only Victoria had not understood since she had never bothered with Charles Dickens. Victoria only realises what Carmichael's dying gasp meant much later, since 'A Tale Of Two Cities' was one of the few non-archaeological books at the dig.

The chit Carmichael trust into Richard Baker's pocket as he was being shot at, were the words to induce the Sheikh to part with the microfilm package Carmichael had entrusted to him.

The character of Baghdad in 1950 comes across very strongly in this book. Agatha Christie describes the place vividly: 'There was the persistent honking of motor horns, the cries of vendors of various wares. There were hot disputes between small groups of people who seemed ready to murder each other but were really fast friends; men, boys, children selling every type of tree, sweetmeats, oranges and bananas, bath towels, combs, razor blades and other assorted merchandise carried rapidly through the streets on trays.'

'There was also the perpetual and ever renewed sound of throat clearing and spitting'. It is not the exotically romantic place of Victoria's imagination. Mrs Clipp prepares her: 'The filth of the streets and the bazaars you wouldn't believe. And the unhygienic rags the people wear. And some of the toilets – why, you just couldn't call them toilets at all'. Similarly Babylon is a huge disappointment: 'The meaningless pile of ruined mud and burnt brick'

Agatha Christie finishes by being fair to the archaeologist Dr Pouncefoot Jones, even though he never gets Victoria's name correct, to show that he really is a very astute chap:

'So there are, my dear Veronica,' said Dr Pouncefoot Jones. 'Richard went off in a great state about you. Well, well – I hope you'll both be very happy.'

'What does he mean?' asked Victoria bewildered, as Dr Pouncefoot Jones pattered away.
'Nothing,' said Richard. 'You know what he's like. He's being – just a little – premature.'

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