

Agatha Christie

the **thirteen**  
problems



marple

*Agatha Christie*

**The Thirteen  
Problems**

To Leonard and Katherine Woolley

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## Chapter 8

### The Companion

‘Now, Dr Lloyd,’ said Miss Helier. ‘Don’t *you* know any creepy stories?’

She smiled at him – the smile that nightly bewitched the theatre-going public. Jane Helier was sometimes called the most beautiful woman in England, and jealous members of her own profession were in the habit of saying to each other: ‘Of course Jane’s not an *artist*. She can’t *act* – if you know what I mean. It’s those eyes!’

And those ‘eyes’ were at this minute fixed appealingly on the grizzled elderly bachelor doctor who, for the last five years, had ministered to the ailments of the village of St Mary Mead.

With an unconscious gesture, the doctor pulled down his waistcoat (inclined of late to be uncomfortably tight) and racked his brains hastily, so as not to disappoint the lovely creature who addressed him so confidently.

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'I feel,' said Jane dreamily, 'that I would like to wallow in crime this evening.'

'Splendid,' said Colonel Bantry, her host. 'Splendid, splendid.' And he laughed a loud hearty military laugh. 'Eh, Dolly?'

His wife, hastily recalled to the exigencies of social life (she had been planning her spring border) agreed enthusiastically.

'Of course it's splendid,' she said heartily but vaguely. 'I always thought so.'

'Did you, my dear?' said old Miss Marple, and her eyes twinkled a little.

'We don't get much in the creepy line – and still less in the criminal line – in St Mary Mead, you know, Miss Helier,' said Dr Lloyd.

'You surprise me,' said Sir Henry Clithering. The ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard turned to Miss Marple. 'I always understood from our friend here that St Mary Mead is a positive hotbed of crime and vice.'

'Oh, Sir Henry!' protested Miss Marple, a spot of colour coming into her cheeks. 'I'm sure I never said anything of the kind. The only thing I ever said was that human nature is much the same in a village as anywhere else, only one has opportunities and leisure for seeing it at closer quarters.'

'But *you* haven't always lived here,' said Jane Helier,

still addressing the doctor. 'You've been in all sorts of queer places all over the world – places where things *happen!*'

'That is so, of course,' said Dr Lloyd, still thinking desperately. 'Yes, of course . . . Yes . . . Ah! I have it!'

He sank back with a sigh of relief.

'It is some years ago now – I had almost forgotten. But the facts were really very strange – very strange indeed. And the final coincidence which put the clue into my hand was strange also.'

Miss Helier drew her chair a little nearer to him, applied some lipstick and waited expectantly. The others also turned interested faces towards him.

'I don't know whether any of you know the Canary Islands,' began the doctor.

'They must be wonderful,' said Jane Helier. 'They're in the South Seas, aren't they? Or is it the Mediterranean?'

'I've called in there on my way to South Africa,' said the Colonel. 'The Peak of Tenerife is a fine sight with the setting sun on it.'

'The incident I am describing happened in the island of Grand Canary, not Tenerife. It is a good many years ago now. I had had a breakdown in health and was forced to give up my practice in England and go abroad. I practised in Las Palmas, which is the principal town of Grand Canary. In many ways

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I enjoyed the life out there very much. The climate was mild and sunny, there was excellent surf bathing (and I am an enthusiastic bather) and the sea life of the port attracted me. Ships from all over the world put in at Las Palmas. I used to walk along the mole every morning far more interested than any member of the fair sex could be in a street of hat shops.

‘As I say, ships from all over the world put in at Las Palmas. Sometimes they stay a few hours, sometimes a day or two. In the principal hotel there, the Metropole, you will see people of all races and nationalities – birds of passage. Even the people going to Tenerife usually come here and stay a few days before crossing to the other island.

‘My story begins there, in the Metropole Hotel, one Thursday evening in January. There was a dance going on and I and a friend had been sitting at a small table watching the scene. There were a fair sprinkling of English and other nationalities, but the majority of the dancers were Spanish; and when the orchestra struck up a tango, only half a dozen couples of the latter nationality took the floor. They all danced well and we looked on and admired. One woman in particular excited our lively admiration. Tall, beautiful and sinuous, she moved with the grace of a half-tamed leopardess. There was something dangerous about her. I said as much to my friend and he agreed.

“Women like that,” he said, “are bound to have a history. Life will not pass them by.”

“Beauty is perhaps a dangerous possession,” I said.

“It’s not only beauty,” he insisted. “There is something else. Look at her again. Things are bound to happen to that woman, or because of her. As I said, life will not pass her by. Strange and exciting events will surround her. You’ve only got to look at her to know it.”

‘He paused and then added with a smile:

“Just as you’ve only got to look at those two women over there, and know that nothing out of the way could ever happen to either of them! They are made for a safe and uneventful existence.”

‘I followed his eyes. The two women he referred to were travellers who had just arrived – a Holland Lloyd boat had put into port that evening, and the passengers were just beginning to arrive.

‘As I looked at them I saw at once what my friend meant. They were two English ladies – the thoroughly nice travelling English that you do find abroad. Their ages, I should say, were round about forty. One was fair and a little – just a little – too plump; the other was dark and a little – again just a little – inclined to scragginess. They were what is called well-preserved, quietly and inconspicuously dressed in well-cut tweeds, and innocent of any kind of make-up. They had that air

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of quiet assurance which is the birthright of well-bred Englishwomen. There was nothing remarkable about either of them. They were like thousands of their sisters. They would doubtless see what they wished to see, assisted by Baedeker, and be blind to everything else. They would use the English library and attend the English Church in any place they happened to be, and it was quite likely that one or both of them sketched a little. And as my friend said, nothing exciting or remarkable would ever happen to either of them, though they might quite likely travel half over the world. I looked from them back to our sinuous Spanish woman with her half-closed smouldering eyes and I smiled.'

'Poor things,' said Jane Helier with a sigh. 'But I do think it's so silly of people not to make the most of themselves. That woman in Bond Street – Valentine – is really wonderful. Audrey Denman goes to her; and have you seen her in "The Downward Step"? As the schoolgirl in the first act she's really marvellous. And yet Audrey is fifty if she's a day. As a matter of fact I happen to know she's really nearer sixty.'

'Go on,' said Mrs Bantry to Dr Lloyd. 'I love stories about sinuous Spanish dancers. It makes me forget how old and fat I am.'

'I'm sorry,' said Dr Lloyd apologetically. 'But you see,

as a matter of fact, this story isn't about the Spanish woman.'

'It isn't?'

'No. As it happens my friend and I were wrong. Nothing in the least exciting happened to the Spanish beauty. She married a clerk in a shipping office, and by the time I left the island she had had five children and was getting very fat.'

'Just like that girl of Israel Peters,' commented Miss Marple. 'The one who went on the stage and had such good legs that they made her principal boy in the pantomime. Everyone said she'd come to no good, but she married a commercial traveller and settled down splendidly.'

'The village parallel,' murmured Sir Henry softly.

'No,' went on the doctor. 'My story is about the two English ladies.'

'Something happened to them?' breathed Miss Helier.

'Something happened to them – and the very next day, too.'

'Yes?' said Mrs Bantry encouragingly.

'Just for curiosity, as I went out that evening I glanced at the hotel register. I found the names easily enough. Miss Mary Barton and Miss Amy Durrant of Little Paddocks, Caughton Weir, Bucks. I little thought then how soon I was to encounter the owners of those names again – and under what tragic circumstances.'

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‘The following day I had arranged to go for a picnic with some friends. We were to motor across the island, taking our lunch, to a place called (as far as I remember – it is so long ago) Las Nieves, a well-sheltered bay where we could bathe if we felt inclined. This programme we duly carried out, except that we were somewhat late in starting, so that we stopped on the way and picnicked, going on to Las Nieves afterwards for a bathe before tea.

‘As we approached the beach, we were at once aware of a tremendous commotion. The whole population of the small village seemed to be gathered on the shore. As soon as they saw us they rushed towards the car and began explaining excitedly. Our Spanish not being very good, it took me a few minutes to understand, but at last I got it.

‘Two of the mad English ladies had gone in to bathe, and one had swum out too far and got into difficulties. The other had gone after her and had tried to bring her in, but her strength in turn had failed and she too would have drowned had not a man rowed out in a boat and brought in rescuer and rescued – the latter beyond help.

‘As soon as I got the hang of things I pushed the crowd aside and hurried down the beach. I did not at first recognize the two women. The plump figure in the black stockinet costume and the tight green

rubber bathing cap awoke no chord of recognition as she looked up anxiously. She was kneeling beside the body of her friend, making somewhat amateurish attempts at artificial respiration. When I told her that I was a doctor she gave a sigh of relief, and I ordered her off at once to one of the cottages for a rub down and dry clothing. One of the ladies in my party went with her. I myself worked unavailingly on the body of the drowned woman in vain. Life was only too clearly extinct, and in the end I had reluctantly to give in.

I rejoined the others in the small fisherman's cottage and there I had to break the sad news. The survivor was attired now in her own clothes, and I immediately recognized her as one of the two arrivals of the night before. She received the sad news fairly calmly, and it was evidently the horror of the whole thing that struck her more than any great personal feeling.

"Poor Amy," she said. "Poor, poor Amy. She had been looking forward to the bathing here so much. And she was a good swimmer too. I can't understand it. What do you think it can have been, doctor?"

"Possibly cramp. Will you tell me exactly what happened?"

"We had both been swimming about for some time – twenty minutes, I should say. Then I thought I would go in, but Amy said she was going to swim out once

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more. She did so, and suddenly I heard her call and realized she was crying for help. I swam out as fast as I could. She was still afloat when I got to her, but she clutched at me wildly and we both went under. If it hadn't been for that man coming out with his boat I should have been drowned too."

"That has happened fairly often," I said. "To save anyone from drowning is not an easy affair."

"It seems so awful," continued Miss Barton. "We only arrived yesterday, and were so delighting in the sunshine and our little holiday. And now this – this terrible tragedy occurs."

'I asked her then for particulars about the dead woman, explaining that I would do everything I could for her, but that the Spanish authorities would require full information. This she gave me readily enough.

'The dead woman, Miss Amy Durrant, was her companion and had come to her about five months previously. They had got on very well together, but Miss Durrant had spoken very little about her people. She had been left an orphan at an early age and had been brought up by an uncle and had earned her own living since she was twenty-one.

'And so that was that,' went on the doctor. He paused and said again, but this time with a certain finality in his voice, 'And so that was that.'

'I don't understand,' said Jane Helier. 'Is that all? I

mean, it's very tragic, I suppose, but it isn't – well, it isn't what I call *creepy*.'

'I think there's more to follow,' said Sir Henry.

'Yes,' said Dr Lloyd, 'there's more to follow. You see, right at the time there was one queer thing. Of course I asked questions of the fishermen, etc., as to what they'd seen. They were eye-witnesses. And one woman had rather a funny story. I didn't pay any attention to it at the time, but it came back to me afterwards. She insisted, you see, that Miss Durrant wasn't in difficulties when she called out. The other swam out to her and, according to this woman, deliberately held Miss Durrant's head under water. I didn't, as I say, pay much attention. It was such a fantastic story, and these things look so differently from the shore. Miss Barton might have tried to make her friend lose consciousness, realizing that the latter's panic-stricken clutching would drown them both. You see, according to the Spanish woman's story, it looked as though – well, as though Miss Barton was deliberately trying to drown her companion.

'As I say, I paid very little attention to this story at the time. It came back to me later. Our great difficulty was to find out anything about this woman, Amy Durrant. She didn't seem to have any relations. Miss Barton and I went through her things together. We found one address and wrote there, but it proved to be simply a

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room she had taken in which to keep her things. The landlady knew nothing, had only seen her when she took the room. Miss Durrant had remarked at the time that she always liked to have one place she could call her own to which she could return at any moment. There were one or two nice pieces of old furniture and some bound numbers of Academy pictures, and a trunk full of pieces of material bought at sales, but no personal belongings. She had mentioned to the landlady that her father and mother had died in India when she was a child and that she had been brought up by an uncle who was a clergyman, but she did not say if he was her father's or her mother's brother, so the name was no guide.

'It wasn't exactly mysterious, it was just unsatisfactory. There must be many lonely women, proud and reticent, in just that position. There were a couple of photographs amongst her belongings in Las Palmas – rather old and faded and they had been cut to fit the frames they were in, so that there was no photographer's name upon them, and there was an old daguerreotype which might have been her mother or more probably her grandmother.

'Miss Barton had had two references with her. One she had forgotten, the other name she recollected after an effort. It proved to be that of a lady who was now abroad, having gone to Australia. She was written to.

Her answer, of course, was a long time in coming, and I may say that when it did arrive there was no particular help to be gained from it. She said Miss Durrant had been with her as companion and had been most efficient and that she was a very charming woman, but that she knew nothing of her private affairs or relations.

‘So there it was – as I say, nothing unusual, really. It was just the two things together that aroused my uneasiness. This Amy Durrant of whom no one knew anything, and the Spanish woman’s queer story. Yes, and I’ll add a third thing: When I was first bending over the body and Miss Barton was walking away towards the huts, she looked back. Looked back with an expression on her face that I can only describe as one of poignant anxiety – a kind of anguished uncertainty that imprinted itself on my brain.

‘It didn’t strike me as anything unusual at the time. I put it down to her terrible distress over her friend. But, you see, later I realized that they weren’t on those terms. There was no devoted attachment between them, no terrible grief. Miss Barton was fond of Amy Durrant and shocked by her death – that was all.

‘But, then, why that terrible poignant anxiety? That was the question that kept coming back to me. I had not been mistaken in that look. And almost against my will, an answer began to shape itself in my mind. Supposing

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the Spanish woman's story were true; supposing that Mary Barton wilfully and in cold blood tried to drown Amy Durrant. She succeeds in holding her under water whilst pretending to be saving her. She is rescued by a boat. They are on a lonely beach far from anywhere. And then I appear – the last thing she expects. A doctor! And an English doctor! She knows well enough that people who have been under water far longer than Amy Durrant have been revived by artificial respiration. But she has to play her part – to go off leaving me alone with her victim. And as she turns for one last look, a terrible poignant anxiety shows in her face. Will Amy Durrant come back to life *and tell what she knows?*'

'Oh!' said Jane Helier. 'I'm thrilled now.'

'Viewed in that aspect the whole business seemed more sinister, and the personality of Amy Durrant became more mysterious. Who was Amy Durrant? Why should she, an insignificant paid companion, be murdered by her employer? What story lay behind that fatal bathing expedition? She had entered Mary Barton's employment only a few months before. Mary Barton had brought her abroad, and the very day after they landed the tragedy had occurred. And they were both nice, commonplace, refined Englishwomen! The whole thing was fantastic, and I told myself so. I had been letting my imagination run away with me.'

'You didn't do anything, then?' asked Miss Helier.

‘My dear young lady, what could I do? There was no evidence. The majority of the eye-witnesses told the same story as Miss Barton. I had built up my own suspicions out of a fleeting expression which I might possibly have imagined. The only thing I could and did do was to see that the widest inquiries were made for the relations of Amy Durrant. The next time I was in England I even went and saw the landlady of her room, with the results I have told you.’

‘But you felt there was something wrong,’ said Miss Marple.

Dr Lloyd nodded.

‘Half the time I was ashamed of myself for thinking so. Who was I to go suspecting this nice, pleasant-mannered English lady of a foul and cold-blooded crime? I did my best to be as cordial as possible to her during the short time she stayed on the island. I helped her with the Spanish authorities. I did everything I could do as an Englishman to help a compatriot in a foreign country; and yet I am convinced that she knew I suspected and disliked her.’

‘How long did she stay out there?’ asked Miss Marple.

‘I think it was about a fortnight. Miss Durrant was buried there, and it must have been about ten days later when she took a boat back to England. The shock had upset her so much that she felt she couldn’t

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spend the winter there as she had planned. That's what she said.'

'Did it seem to have upset her?' asked Miss Marple. The doctor hesitated.

'Well, I don't know that it affected her appearance at all,' he said cautiously.

'She didn't, for instance, grow fatter?' asked Miss Marple.

'Do you know – it's a curious thing your saying that. Now I come to think back, I believe you're right. She – yes, she did seem, if anything, to be putting on weight.'

'How horrible,' said Jane Helier with a shudder. 'It's like – it's like fattening on your victim's blood.'

'And yet, in another way, I may be doing her an injustice,' went on Dr Lloyd. 'She certainly said something before she left, which pointed in an entirely different direction. There may be, I think there are, consciences which work very slowly – which take some time to awaken to the enormity of the deed committed.'

'It was the evening before her departure from the Canaries. She had asked me to go and see her, and had thanked me very warmly for all I had done to help her. I, of course, made light of the matter, said I had only done what was natural under the circumstances, and so on. There was a pause after that, and then she suddenly asked me a question.'

“Do you think,” she asked, “that one is ever justified in taking the law into one’s own hands?”

‘I replied that that was rather a difficult question, but that on the whole, I thought not. The law was the law, and we had to abide by it.

“Even when it is powerless?”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“It’s difficult to explain; but one might do something that is considered definitely wrong – that is considered a crime, even, for a good and sufficient reason.”

‘I replied drily that possibly several criminals had thought that in their time, and she shrank back.

“But that’s horrible,” she murmured. “Horrible.”

‘And then with a change of tone she asked me to give her something to make her sleep. She had not been able to sleep properly since – she hesitated – since that terrible shock.

“You’re sure it is that? There is nothing worrying you? Nothing on your mind?”

“On my mind? What should be on my mind?”

‘She spoke fiercely and suspiciously.

“Worry is a cause of sleeplessness sometimes,” I said lightly.

‘She seemed to brood for a moment.

“Do you mean worrying over the future, or worrying over the past, which can’t be altered?”

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“Either.”

“Only it wouldn’t be any good worrying over the past. You couldn’t bring back – Oh! what’s the use! One mustn’t think. One must not think.”

‘I prescribed her a mild sleeping draught and made my adieu. As I went away I wondered not a little over the words she had spoken. “You couldn’t bring back –” What? Or *who*?’

‘I think that last interview prepared me in a way for what was to come. I didn’t expect it, of course, but when it happened, I wasn’t surprised. Because, you see, Mary Barton struck me all along as a conscientious woman – not a weak sinner, but a woman with convictions, who would act up to them, and who would not relent as long as she still believed in them. I fancied that in the last conversation we had she was beginning to doubt her own convictions. I know her words suggested to me that she was feeling the first faint beginnings of that terrible soul-searcher – remorse.

‘The thing happened in Cornwall, in a small watering-place, rather deserted at that season of the year. It must have been – let me see – late March. I read about it in the papers. A lady had been staying at a small hotel there – a Miss Barton. She had been very odd and peculiar in her manner. That had been noticed by all. At night she would walk up and down her room, muttering to herself, and not allowing

the people on either side of her to sleep. She had called on the vicar one day and had told him that she had a communication of the gravest importance to make to him. She had, she said, committed a crime. Then, instead of proceeding, she had stood up abruptly and said she would call another day. The vicar put her down as being slightly mental, and did not take her self-accusation seriously.

‘The very next morning she was found to be missing from her room. A note was left addressed to the coroner. It ran as follows:

*‘I tried to speak to the vicar yesterday, to confess all, but was not allowed. She would not let me. I can make amends only one way – a life for a life; and my life must go the same way as hers did. I, too, must drown in the deep sea. I believed I was justified. I see now that that was not so. If I desire Amy’s forgiveness I must go to her. Let no one be blamed for my death –  
Mary Barton.*

‘Her clothes were found lying on the beach in a secluded cove nearby, and it seemed clear that she had undressed there and swum resolutely out to sea where the current was known to be dangerous, sweeping one down the coast.

‘The body was not recovered, but after a time leave

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was given to presume death. She was a rich woman, her estate being proved at a hundred thousand pounds. Since she died intestate it all went to her next of kin – a family of cousins in Australia. The papers made discreet references to the tragedy in the Canary Islands, putting forward the theory that the death of Miss Durrant had unhinged her friend's brain. At the inquest the usual verdict of *Suicide whilst temporarily insane* was returned.

‘And so the curtain falls on the tragedy of Amy Durrant and Mary Barton.’

There was a long pause and then Jane Helier gave a great gasp.

‘Oh, but you mustn't stop there – just at the most interesting part. Go on.’

‘But you see, Miss Helier, this isn't a serial story. This is real life; and real life stops just where it chooses.’

‘But I don't want it to,’ said Jane. ‘I want to know.’

‘This is where we use our brains, Miss Helier,’ explained Sir Henry. ‘Why did Mary Barton kill her companion? That's the problem Dr Lloyd has set us.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Miss Helier, ‘she might have killed her for lots of reasons. I mean – oh, I don't know. She might have got on her nerves, or else she got jealous, although Dr Lloyd doesn't mention any men, but still on the boat out – well, you know what everyone says about boats and sea voyages.’

Miss Helier paused, slightly out of breath, and it was borne in upon her audience that the outside of Jane's charming head was distinctly superior to the inside.

'I would like to have a lot of guesses,' said Mrs Bantry. 'But I suppose I must confine myself to one. Well, I think that Miss Barton's father made all his money out of ruining Amy Durrant's father, so Amy determined to have her revenge. Oh, no, that's the wrong way round. How tiresome! Why does the rich employer kill the humble companion? I've got it. Miss Barton had a young brother who shot himself for love of Amy Durrant. Miss Barton waits her time. Amy comes down in the world. Miss B. engages her as companion and takes her to the Canaries and accomplishes her revenge. How's that?'

'Excellent,' said Sir Henry. 'Only we don't know that Miss Barton ever had a young brother.'

'We deduce that,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Unless she had a young brother there's no motive. So she must have had a young brother. Do you see, Watson?'

'That's all very fine, Dolly,' said her husband. 'But it's only a guess.'

'Of course it is,' said Mrs Bantry. 'That's all we can do – guess. We haven't got any clues. Go on, dear, have a guess yourself.'

'Upon my word, I don't know what to say. But I think there's something in Miss Helier's suggestion that they

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fell out about a man. Look here, Dolly, it was probably some high church parson. They both embroidered him a cope or something, and he wore the Durrant woman's first. Depend upon it, it was something like that. Look how she went off to a parson at the end. These women all lose their heads over a good-looking clergyman. You hear of it over and over again.'

'I think I must try to make my explanation a little more subtle,' said Sir Henry, 'though I admit it's only a guess. I suggest that Miss Barton was always mentally unhinged. There are more cases like that than you would imagine. Her mania grew stronger and she began to believe it her duty to rid the world of certain persons – possibly what is termed unfortunate females. Nothing much is known about Miss Durrant's past. So very possibly she *had* a past – an "unfortunate" one. Miss Barton learns of this and decides on extermination. Later, the righteousness of her act begins to trouble her and she is overcome by remorse. Her end shows her to be completely unhinged. Now, do say you agree with me, Miss Marple.'

'I'm afraid I don't, Sir Henry,' said Miss Marple, smiling apologetically. 'I think her end shows her to have been a very clever and resourceful woman.'

Jane Helier interrupted with a little scream.

'Oh! I've been so stupid. May I guess again? Of

course it must have been that. Blackmail! The companion woman was blackmailing her. Only I don't see why Miss Marple says it was clever of her to kill herself. I can't see that at all.'

'Ah!' said Sir Henry. 'You see, Miss Marple knew a case just like it in St Mary Mead.'

'You always laugh at me, Sir Henry,' said Miss Marple reproachfully. 'I must confess it does remind me, just a little, of old Mrs Trout. She drew the old age pension, you know, for three old women who were dead, in different parishes.'

'It sounds a most complicated and resourceful crime,' said Sir Henry. 'But it doesn't seem to me to throw any light upon our present problem.'

'Of course not,' said Miss Marple. 'It wouldn't – to you. But some of the families were very poor, and the old age pension was a great boon to the children. I know it's difficult for anyone outside to understand. But what I really meant was that the whole thing hinged upon one old woman being so like any other old woman.'

'Eh?' said Sir Henry, mystified.

'I always explain things so badly. What I mean is that when Dr Lloyd described the two ladies first, he didn't know which was which, and I don't suppose anyone else in the hotel did. They would have, of course, after a day or so, but the very next day one of the two was drowned, and if the one who was left said she was Miss

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Barton, I don't suppose it would ever occur to anyone that she mightn't be.'

'You think – Oh! I see,' said Sir Henry slowly.

'It's the only natural way of thinking of it. Dear Mrs Bantry began that way just now. Why *should* the rich employer kill the humble companion? It's so much more likely to be the other way about. I mean – that's the way things happen.'

'Is it?' said Sir Henry. 'You shock me.'

'But of course,' went on Miss Marple, 'she would have to wear Miss Barton's clothes, and they would probably be a little tight on her, so that her general appearance would look as though she had got a little fatter. That's why I asked that question. A gentleman would be sure to think it was the lady who had got fatter, and not the clothes that had got smaller – though that isn't quite the right way of putting it.'

'But if Amy Durrant killed Miss Barton, what did she gain by it?' asked Mrs Bantry. 'She couldn't keep up the deception for ever.'

'She only kept it up for another month or so,' pointed out Miss Marple. 'And during that time I expect she travelled, keeping away from anyone who might know her. That's what I meant by saying that one lady of a certain age looks so like another. I don't suppose the different photograph on her passport was ever noticed – you know what passports are. And then in March,

she went down to this Cornish place and began to act queerly and draw attention to herself so that when people found her clothes on the beach and read her last letter they shouldn't think of the commonsense conclusion.'

'Which was?' asked Sir Henry.

'No *body*,' said Miss Marple firmly. 'That's the thing that would stare you in the face, if there weren't such a lot of red herrings to draw you off the trail – including the suggestion of foul play and remorse. *No body*. That was the real significant fact.'

'Do you mean –' said Mrs Bantry – 'do you mean that there wasn't any remorse? That there wasn't – that she didn't drown herself?'

'Not she!' said Miss Marple. 'It's just Mrs Trout over again. Mrs Trout was very good at red herrings, but she met her match in me. And I can see through your remorse-driven Miss Barton. Drown herself? Went off to Australia, if I'm any good at guessing.'

'You are, Miss Marple,' said Dr Lloyd. 'Undoubtedly you are. Now it again took me quite by surprise. Why, you could have knocked me down with a feather that day in Melbourne.'

'Was that what you spoke of as a final coincidence?'

Dr Lloyd nodded.

'Yes, it was rather rough luck on Miss Barton – or Miss Amy Durrant – whatever you like to call her. I

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became a ship's doctor for a while, and landing in Melbourne, the first person I saw as I walked down the street was the lady I thought had been drowned in Cornwall. She saw the game was up as far as I was concerned, and she did the bold thing – took me into her confidence. A curious woman, completely lacking, I suppose, in some moral sense. She was the eldest of a family of nine, all wretchedly poor. They had applied once for help to their rich cousin in England and been repulsed, Miss Barton having quarrelled with their father. Money was wanted desperately, for the three youngest children were delicate and wanted expensive medical treatment. Amy Barton then and there seems to have decided on her plan of cold-blooded murder. She set out for England, working her passage over as a children's nurse. She obtained the situation of companion to Miss Barton, calling herself Amy Durrant. She engaged a room and put some furniture into it so as to create more of a personality for herself. The drowning plan was a sudden inspiration. She had been waiting for some opportunity to present itself. Then she staged the final scene of the drama and returned to Australia, and in due time she and her brothers and sisters inherited Miss Barton's money as next of kin.'

'A very bold and perfect crime,' said Sir Henry. 'Almost *the* perfect crime. If it had been Miss Barton who had died in the Canaries, suspicion might attach

to Amy Durrant and her connection with the Barton family might have been discovered; but the change of identity and the double crime, as you may call it, effectually did away with that. Yes, almost the perfect crime.'

'What happened to her?' asked Mrs Bantry. 'What did you do in the matter, Dr Lloyd?'

'I was in a very curious position, Mrs Bantry. Of evidence as the law understands it, I still have very little. Also, there were certain signs, plain to me as a medical man, that though strong and vigorous in appearance, the lady was not long for this world. I went home with her and saw the rest of the family – a charming family, devoted to their eldest sister and without an idea in their heads that she might prove to have committed a crime. Why bring sorrow on them when I could prove nothing? The lady's admission to me was unheard by anyone else. I let Nature take its course. Miss Amy Barton died six months after my meeting with her. I have often wondered if she was cheerful and unrepentant up to the last.'

'Surely not,' said Mrs Bantry.

'I expect so,' said Miss Marple. 'Mrs Trout was.'

Jane Helier gave herself a little shake.

'Well,' she said. 'It's very, very thrilling. I don't quite understand now who drowned which. And how does this Mrs Trout come into it?'

## *Agatha Christie*

‘She doesn’t, my dear,’ said Miss Marple. ‘She was only a person – not a very nice person – in the village.’

‘Oh!’ said Jane. ‘In the village. But nothing ever happens in a village, does it?’ She sighed. ‘I’m sure I shouldn’t have any brains at all if I lived in a village.’

## Charles Osborne on

### *The Thirteen Problems*

Alternative title: *The Tuesday Club Murders*

MISS MARPLE (1932)

Having successfully introduced her amateur detective, Miss Jane Marple, in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), Agatha Christie wrote for a magazine a series of six short stories featuring Miss Marple. In the first story, 'The Tuesday Night Club', the old lady is entertaining a group of friends at her house in the village of St Mary Mead. Her guests are her nephew Raymond West, the novelist, and his fiancé, an artist named Joyce Lemprière; Dr Pender, the elderly clergyman of the parish (what, one wonders, has happened to the Rev. Leonard Clement, the vicar in *The Murder at the Vicarage*?); Mr Petherick, a local solicitor; and a visitor to St Mary Mead, Sir Henry Clithering, who is a retired Commissioner of Scotland Yard.

The talk turns to crime, and Joyce Lemprière suggests that they form a club, to meet every Tuesday evening. Each week, a different member of the group will propound a problem, some mystery or other of which they have personal knowledge, which the others will be invited to solve. In the first story, Sir Henry is invited to start the ball rolling. Of course, Miss Marple is the one to arrive at the correct solution every time, not because she possesses any brilliant deductive powers but because, as she puts it, 'human nature is much the same everywhere, and, of course, one has opportunities of observing it at closer quarters in a village'.

In a second series of six stories, Mrs Christie repeated the formula, the setting this time being the country house of Colonel and Mrs Bantry, near St Mary Mead, and the assembled company including Sir Henry again, the local doctor, a famous actress and, of course, Miss Marple. A separate, single story, in

which Sir Henry visits St Mary Mead yet again, to stay with his friends the Bantrys, and finds himself drawn by Miss Marple into the investigation of a local crime, was added to the earlier twelve, and the collection, dedicated to Leonard and Katherine Woolley, with whom Agatha Christie had stayed in the Middle East, was published in Great Britain as *The Thirteen Problems* and in the United States as *The Tuesday Club Murders*, though only the first six cases appear to have been discussed at meetings of the Tuesday Club.

Some of the stories are especially ingenious, and all are entertaining, though if more than one or two are read at one sitting they can become monotonous, for they are all very sedentary stories whose action is recounted in retrospect. Miss Marple solves most of the mysteries without rising from her chair, and almost without dropping a stitch in her knitting. The exception is the final story, 'Death by Drowning', which is also one of the few occasions when Agatha Christie strayed into workingclass territory. Usually, it is only the crimes of the middle and upper-classes which commend themselves to her investigators.

For all her old-world charm, and the twinkle which is never far from her china-blue eyes, Miss Marple can be stern in her opinions. Talking of a murderer whom she had brought to justice and who had been hanged, she remarks that it was a good job and that she had no patience with modern humanitarian scruples about capital punishment. Miss Marple is speaking not only for herself but also for her creator, for many years later Mrs Christie was to write:

I can suspend judgment on those who kill – but I think they are evil for the community; they bring in nothing except hate, and take from it all they can. I am

willing to believe that they are made that way, that they are born with a disability, for which, perhaps, one should pity them; but even then, I think, not spare them – because you cannot spare them any more than you could spare the man who staggers out from a plague-stricken village in the Middle Ages to mix with innocent and healthy children in a nearby village. The *innocent* must be protected; they must be able to live at peace and charity with their neighbours.

It frightens me that nobody seems to care about the innocent. When you read about a murder case, nobody seems to be horrified by the picture, say, of a fragile old woman in a small cigarette shop, turning away to get a packet of cigarettes for a young thug, and being attacked and battered to death. No one seems to care about her terror and her pain, and the final merciful unconsciousness. Nobody seems to go through the agony of the *victim* – they are only full of pity for the young killer, because of his youth.

Why should they not execute him? We have taken the lives of wolves, in this country; we didn't try to teach the wolf to lie down with the lamb – I doubt really if we could have. We hunted down the wild boar in the mountains before he came down and killed the children by the brook. Those were our enemies – and we destroyed them.<sup>13</sup>

Imprisonment for life, Mrs Christie goes on to say, is more cruel than the cup of hemlock in ancient Greece. The best answer ever found, she suspects, was transportation: 'A vast land of emptiness, peopled only with primitive human beings, where man could live in simpler surroundings.' Well, yes, but of course the price one pays for that is the Australia of today!

Five minor points about *The Thirteen Problems*, two concerned with Christie carelessness and three with Christie parsimony: (i) in one of the stories, 'phenomena' is used as though it were a singular, and not the plural of 'phenomenon'; (ii) in *The Thirteen Problems*, Raymond West's fiancée is called Joyce

but, in later Christie stories, after they are married, she is always referred to as Joan; (iii) variations on the plot of one of the stories, 'The Blood-Stained Pavement', will be presented in the story 'Triangle at Rhodes' in *Murder in the Mews* (1937) and in the novel, *Evil Under the Sun* (1941); (iv) the plot of another story, 'The Companion', will be made use of again in the novel, *A Murder is Announced* (1950); (v) an element in the plot of 'The Herb of Death' will re-occur in *Postern of Fate* (1973).

Agatha Christie always considered that Miss Marple was at her best in the solving of short problems, which did not involve her in doing anything other than sitting and thinking, and that the real essence of her character was to be found in the stories collected together in *The Thirteen Problems*.

## About Charles Osborne

This essay was adapted from Charles Osborne's *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie: A Biographical Companion to the Works of Agatha Christie* (1982, rev. 1999). Mr. Osborne was born in Brisbane in 1927. He is known internationally as an authority on opera, and has written a number of books on musical and literary subjects, among them *The Complete Operas of Verdi* (1969); *Wagner and His World* (1977); and *W.H. Auden: The Life of a Poet* (1980). An addict of crime fiction and the world's leading authority on Agatha Christie, Charles Osborne adapted the Christie plays *Black Coffee* (Poirot); *Spider's Web*; and *The Unexpected Guest* into novels. He lives in London.

<sup>13</sup>Agatha Christie: *op. cit.*

## About Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie is known throughout the world as the Queen of Crime. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English and another billion in 100 foreign languages. She is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Mrs Christie is the author of eighty crime novels and short story collections, nineteen plays, and six novels written under the name of Mary Westmacott.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was written towards the end of World War I (during which she served in the Voluntary Aid Detachments). In it she created Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian investigator who was destined to become the most popular detective in crime fiction since Sherlock Holmes. After having been rejected by a number of houses, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was eventually published by The Bodley Head in 1920.

In 1926, now averaging a book a year, Agatha Christie wrote her masterpiece. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was the first of her books to be published by William Collins and marked the beginning of an author-publisher relationship that lasted for fifty years and produced over seventy books. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was also the first of Agatha Christie's works to be dramatised — as *Alibi* — and to have a successful run in London's West End. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play, opened in 1952 and runs to this day at St Martin's Theatre in the West End; it is the longest-running play in history.

Agatha Christie was made a Dame in 1971. She died in 1976, since when a number of her books have been published: the bestselling novel *Sleeping Murder* appeared in 1976, followed by *An Autobiography* and the short story collections *Miss Marple's Final Cases*; *Problem at Pollensa Bay*; and *While the Light Lasts*. In 1998, *Black Coffee* was the first of her plays to be novelised by Charles Osborne, Mrs Christie's biographer.

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\* novelised by Charles Osborne

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THE THIRTEEN PROBLEMS by Agatha Christie

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