

Agatha Christie

the **thirteen**
problems



marple

Agatha Christie

**The Thirteen
Problems**

To Leonard and Katherine Woolley

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Chapter 11

The Herb of Death

‘Now then, Mrs B.,’ said Sir Henry Clithering encouragingly.

Mrs Bantry, his hostess, looked at him in cold reproof.

‘I’ve told you before that I will *not* be called Mrs B. It’s not dignified.’

‘Scheherazade, then.’

‘And even less am I Sche – what’s her name! I never can tell a story properly, ask Arthur if you don’t believe me.’

‘You’re quite good at the facts, Dolly,’ said Colonel Bantry, ‘but poor at the embroidery.’

‘That’s just it,’ said Mrs Bantry. She flapped the bulb catalogue she was holding on the table in front of her. ‘I’ve been listening to you all and I don’t know how you do it. “He said, she said, you wondered, they thought, everyone implied” – well, I just couldn’t and

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there it is! And besides I don't know anything to tell a story about.'

'We can't believe that, Mrs Bantry,' said Dr Lloyd. He shook his grey head in mocking disbelief.

Old Miss Marple said in her gentle voice: 'Surely dear –'

Mrs Bantry continued obstinately to shake her head.

'You don't know how banal my life is. What with the servants and the difficulties of getting scullery maids, and just going to town for clothes, and dentists, and Ascot (which Arthur hates) and then the garden –'

'Ah!' said Dr Lloyd. 'The garden. We all know where your heart lies, Mrs Bantry.'

'It must be nice to have a garden,' said Jane Helier, the beautiful young actress. 'That is, if you hadn't got to dig, or to get your hands messed up. I'm ever so fond of flowers.'

'The garden,' said Sir Henry. 'Can't we take that as a starting point? Come, Mrs B. The poisoned bulb, the deadly daffodils, the herb of death!'

'Now it's odd your saying that,' said Mrs Bantry. 'You've just reminded me. Arthur, do you remember that business at Clodderham Court? You know. Old Sir Ambrose Bercy. Do you remember what a courtly charming old man we thought him?'

'Why, of course. Yes, that *was* a strange business. Go ahead, Dolly.'

‘You’d better tell it, dear.’

‘Nonsense. Go ahead. Must paddle your own canoe. I did my bit just now.’

Mrs Bantry drew a deep breath. She clasped her hands and her face registered complete mental anguish. She spoke rapidly and fluently.

‘Well, there’s really not much to tell. The Herb of Death – that’s what put it into my head, though in my own mind I call it *sage and onions*.’

‘Sage and onions?’ asked Dr Lloyd.

Mrs Bantry nodded.

‘That was how it happened you see,’ she explained. ‘We were staying, Arthur and I, with Sir Ambrose Bercy at Clodderham Court, and one day, by mistake (though very stupidly, I’ve always thought) a lot of foxglove leaves were picked with the sage. The ducks for dinner that night were stuffed with it and everyone was very ill, and one poor girl – Sir Ambrose’s ward – died of it.’

She stopped.

‘Dear, dear,’ said Miss Marple, ‘how very tragic.’

‘Wasn’t it?’

‘Well,’ said Sir Henry, ‘what next?’

‘There isn’t any next,’ said Mrs Bantry, ‘that’s all.’

Everyone gasped. Though warned beforehand, they had not expected quite such brevity as this.

‘But, my dear lady,’ remonstrated Sir Henry, ‘it can’t

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be all. What you have related is a tragic occurrence, but not in any sense of the word a problem.'

'Well, of course there's some more,' said Mrs Bantry. 'But if I were to tell you it, you'd know what it was.'

She looked defiantly round the assembly and said plaintively:

'I told you I couldn't dress things up and make it sound properly like a story ought to do.'

'Ah ha!' said Sir Henry. He sat up in his chair and adjusted an eyeglass. 'Really, you know, Scheherazade, this is most refreshing. Our ingenuity is challenged. I'm not so sure you haven't done it on purpose – to stimulate our curiosity. A few brisk rounds of "Twenty Questions" is indicated, I think. Miss Marple, will you begin?'

'I'd like to know something about the cook,' said Miss Marple. 'She must have been a very stupid woman, or else very inexperienced.'

'She was just very stupid,' said Mrs Bantry. 'She cried a great deal afterwards and said the leaves had been picked and brought in to her as sage, and how was she to know?'

'Not one who thought for herself,' said Miss Marple.

'Probably an elderly woman and, I dare say, a very good cook?'

'Oh! excellent,' said Mrs Bantry.

'Your turn, Miss Helier,' said Sir Henry.

‘Oh! You mean – to ask a question?’ There was a pause while Jane pondered. Finally she said helplessly, ‘Really – I don’t know what to ask.’

Her beautiful eyes looked appealingly at Sir Henry.

‘Why not *dramatis personae*, Miss Helier?’ he suggested smiling.

Jane still looked puzzled.

‘Characters in order of their appearance,’ said Sir Henry gently.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Jane. ‘That’s a good idea.’

Mrs Bantry began briskly to tick people off on her fingers.

‘Sir Ambrose – Sylvia Keene (that’s the girl who died) – a friend of hers who was staying there, Maud Wye, one of those dark ugly girls who manage to make an effort somehow – I never know how they do it. Then there was a Mr Curle who had come down to discuss books with Sir Ambrose – you know, rare books – queer old things in Latin – all musty parchment. There was Jerry Lorimer – he was a kind of next door neighbour. His place, Fairlies, joined Sir Ambrose’s estate. And there was Mrs Carpenter, one of those middle-aged pussies who always seem to manage to dig themselves in comfortably somewhere. She was by way of being *dame de compagnie* to Sylvia, I suppose.’

‘If it is my turn,’ said Sir Henry, ‘and I suppose it is, as I’m sitting next to Miss Helier, I want a good deal. I

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want a short verbal portrait, please, Mrs Bantry, of all the foregoing.'

'Oh!' Mrs Bantry hesitated.

'Sir Ambrose now,' continued Sir Henry. 'Start with him. What was he like?'

'Oh! he was a very distinguished-looking old man – and not so very old really – not more than sixty, I suppose. But he was very delicate – he had a weak heart, could never go upstairs – he had to have a lift put in, and so that made him seem older than he was. Very charming manners – *courtly* – that's the word that describes him best. You never saw him ruffled or upset. He had beautiful white hair and a particularly charming voice.'

'Good,' said Sir Henry. 'I see Sir Ambrose. Now the girl Sylvia – what did you say her name was?'

'Sylvia Keene. She was pretty – really *very* pretty. Fair-haired, you know, and a lovely skin. Not, perhaps, very clever. In fact, rather stupid.'

'Oh! come, Dolly,' protested her husband.

'Arthur, of course, wouldn't think so,' said Mrs Bantry drily. 'But she *was* stupid – she really never said anything worth listening to.'

'One of the most graceful creatures I ever saw,' said Colonel Bantry warmly. 'See her playing tennis – charming, simply charming. And she was full of fun – most amusing little thing. And such a pretty way with her. I bet the young fellows all thought so.'

‘That’s just where you’re wrong,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘Youth, as such, has no charms for young men nowadays. It’s only old buffers like you, Arthur, who sit maundering on about young girls.’

‘Being young’s no good,’ said Jane. ‘You’ve got to have SA.’

‘What,’ said Miss Marple, ‘is SA?’

‘Sex appeal,’ said Jane.

‘Ah! yes,’ said Miss Marple. ‘What in my day they used to call “having the come hither in your eye”.’

‘Not a bad description,’ said Sir Henry. ‘The *dame de compagnie* you described, I think, as a pussy, Mrs Bantry?’

‘I didn’t mean a *cat*, you know,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘It’s quite different. Just a big soft white purry person. Always very sweet. That’s what Adelaide Carpenter was like.’

‘What sort of aged woman?’

‘Oh! I should say fortyish. She’d been there some time – ever since Sylvia was eleven, I believe. A very tactful person. One of those widows left in unfortunate circumstances with plenty of aristocratic relations, but no ready cash. I didn’t like her myself – but then I never do like people with very white long hands. And I don’t like pussies.’

‘Mr Curle?’

‘Oh! one of those elderly stooping men. There are so

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many of them about, you'd hardly know one from the other. He showed enthusiasm when talking about his musty books, but not at any other time. I don't think Sir Ambrose knew him very well.'

'And Jerry next door?'

'A really charming boy. He was engaged to Sylvia. That's what made it so sad.'

'Now I wonder -' began Miss Marple, and then stopped.

'What?'

'Nothing, dear.'

Sir Henry looked at the old lady curiously. Then he said thoughtfully:

'So this young couple were engaged. Had they been engaged long?'

'About a year. Sir Ambrose had opposed the engagement on the plea that Sylvia was too young. But after a year's engagement he had given in and the marriage was to have taken place quite soon.'

'Ah! Had the young lady any property?'

'Next to nothing - a bare hundred or two a year.'

'No rat in that hole, Clithering,' said Colonel Bantry, and laughed.

'It's the doctor's turn to ask a question,' said Sir Henry. 'I stand down.'

'My curiosity is mainly professional,' said Dr Lloyd. 'I should like to know what medical evidence was given

at the inquest – that is, if our hostess remembers, or, indeed, if she knows.’

‘I know roughly,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘It was poisoning by digitalin – is that right?’

Dr Lloyd nodded.

‘The active principle of the foxglove – digitalis – acts on the heart. Indeed, it is a very valuable drug in some forms of heart trouble. A very curious case altogether. I would never have believed that eating a preparation of foxglove leaves could possibly result fatally. These ideas of eating poisonous leaves and berries are very much exaggerated. Very few people realize that the vital principle, or alkaloid, has to be extracted with much care and preparation.’

‘Mrs MacArthur sent some special bulbs round to Mrs Toomie the other day,’ said Miss Marple. ‘And Mrs Toomie’s cook mistook them for onions, and all the Toomies were very ill indeed.’

‘But they didn’t die of it,’ said Dr Lloyd.

‘No. They didn’t die of it,’ admitted Miss Marple.

‘A girl I knew died of ptomaine poisoning,’ said Jane Helier.

‘We must get on with investigating the crime,’ said Sir Henry.

‘Crime?’ said Jane, startled. ‘I thought it was an accident.’

‘If it were an accident,’ said Sir Henry gently, ‘I

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do not think Mrs Bantry would have told us this story. No, as I read it, this was an accident only in appearance – behind it is something more sinister. I remember a case – various guests in a house party were chatting after dinner. The walls were adorned with all kinds of old-fashioned weapons. Entirely as a joke one of the party seized an ancient horse pistol and pointed it at another man, pretending to fire it. The pistol was loaded and went off, killing the man. We had to ascertain in that case, first, who had secretly prepared and loaded that pistol, and secondly who had so led and directed the conversation that that final bit of horseplay resulted – for the man who had fired the pistol was entirely innocent!

‘It seems to me we have much the same problem here. Those digitalin leaves were deliberately mixed with the sage, knowing what the result would be. Since we exonerate the cook – we do exonerate the cook, don’t we? – the question arises: Who picked the leaves and delivered them to the kitchen?’

‘That’s easily answered,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘At least the last part of it is. It was Sylvia herself who took the leaves to the kitchen. It was part of her daily job to gather things like salad or herbs, bunches of young carrots – all the sort of things that gardeners never pick right. They hate giving you anything young and tender – they wait for them to be fine specimens. Sylvia

and Mrs Carpenter used to see to a lot of these things themselves. And there was foxglove actually growing all amongst the sage in one corner, so the mistake was quite natural.'

'But did Sylvia actually pick them herself?'

'That, nobody ever knew. It was assumed so.'

'Assumptions,' said Sir Henry, 'are dangerous things.'

'But I do know that Mrs Carpenter didn't pick them,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Because, as it happened, she was walking with me on the terrace that morning. We went out there after breakfast. It was unusually nice and warm for early spring. Sylvia went alone down into the garden, but later I saw her walking arm-in-arm with Maud Wye.'

'So they were great friends, were they?' asked Miss Marple.

'Yes,' said Mrs Bantry. She seemed as though about to say something, but did not do so.

'Had she been staying there long?' asked Miss Marple.

'About a fortnight,' said Mrs Bantry.

There was a note of trouble in her voice.

'You didn't like Miss Wye?' suggested Sir Henry.

'I did. That's just it. I did.'

The trouble in her voice had grown to distress.

'You're keeping something back, Mrs Bantry,' said Sir Henry accusingly.

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'I wondered just now,' said Miss Marple, 'but I didn't like to go on.'

'When did you wonder?'

'When you said that the young people were engaged. You said that that was what made it so sad. But, if you know what I mean, your voice didn't sound right when you said it – not convincing, you know.'

'What a dreadful person you are,' said Mrs Bantry. 'You always seem to *know*. Yes, I was thinking of something. But I don't really know whether I ought to say it or not.'

'You must say it,' said Sir Henry. 'Whatever your scruples, it mustn't be kept back.'

'Well, it was just this,' said Mrs Bantry. 'One evening – in fact the very evening before the tragedy – I happened to go out on the terrace before dinner. The window in the drawing-room was open. And as it chanced I saw Jerry Lorimer and Maud Wye. He was – well – kissing her. Of course I didn't know whether it was just a sort of chance affair, or whether – well, I mean, one can't *tell*. I knew Sir Ambrose never had really liked Jerry Lorimer – so perhaps he knew he was that kind of young man. But one thing I *am* sure of: that girl, Maud Wye, was *really* fond of him. You'd only to see her looking at him when she was off guard. And I think, too, they were really better suited than he and Sylvia were.'

'I am going to ask a question quickly, before Miss

Marple can,' said Sir Henry. 'I want to know whether, after the tragedy, Jerry Lorimer married Maud Wye?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Bantry. 'He did. Six months afterwards.'

'Oh! Scheherezade, Scheherezade,' said Sir Henry. 'To think of the way you told us this story at first! Bare bones indeed – and to think of the amount of flesh we're finding on them now.'

'Don't speak so ghoulishly,' said Mrs Bantry. 'And don't use the word flesh. Vegetarians always do. They say, "I never eat flesh" in a way that puts you right off your little beefsteak. Mr Curle was a vegetarian. He used to eat some peculiar stuff that looked like bran for breakfast. Those elderly stooping men with beards are often faddy. They have patent kinds of underwear, too.'

'What on earth, Dolly,' said her husband, 'do you know about Mr Curle's underwear?'

'Nothing,' said Mrs Bantry with dignity. 'I was just making a guess.'

'I'll amend my former statement,' said Sir Henry. 'I'll say instead that the dramatis personae in your problem are very interesting. I'm beginning to see them all – eh, Miss Marple?'

'Human nature is always interesting, Sir Henry. And it's curious to see how certain types always tend to act in exactly the same way.'

'Two women and a man,' said Sir Henry. 'The old

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eternal human triangle. Is that the base of our problem here? I rather fancy it is.'

Dr Lloyd cleared his throat.

'I've been thinking,' he said rather diffidently. 'Do you say, Mrs Bantry, that you yourself were ill?'

'Was I not! So was Arthur! So was everyone!'

'That's just it – everyone,' said the doctor. 'You see what I mean? In Sir Henry's story which he told us just now, one man shot another – he didn't have to shoot the whole room full.'

'I don't understand,' said Jane. 'Who shot who?'

'I'm saying that whoever planned this thing went about it very curiously, either with a blind belief in chance, or else with an absolutely reckless disregard for human life. I can hardly believe there is a man capable of deliberately poisoning eight people with the object of removing one amongst them.'

'I see your point,' said Sir Henry, thoughtfully. 'I confess I ought to have thought of that.'

'And mightn't he have poisoned himself too?' asked Jane.

'Was anyone absent from dinner that night?' asked Miss Marple.

Mrs Bantry shook her head.

'Everyone was there.'

'Except Mr Lorimer, I suppose, my dear. He wasn't staying in the house, was he?'

‘No; but he was dining there that evening,’ said Mrs Bantry.

‘Oh!’ said Miss Marple in a changed voice. ‘That makes all the difference in the world.’

She frowned vexedly to herself.

‘I’ve been very stupid,’ she murmured. ‘Very stupid indeed.’

‘I confess your point worries me, Lloyd,’ said Sir Henry.

‘How ensure that the girl, and the girl only, should get a fatal dose?’

‘You can’t,’ said the doctor. ‘That brings me to the point I’m going to make. *Supposing the girl was not the intended victim after all?*’

‘What?’

‘In all cases of food poisoning, the result is very uncertain. Several people share a dish. What happens? One or two are slightly ill, two more, say, are seriously indisposed, one dies. That’s the way of it – there’s no certainty anywhere. But there are cases where another factor might enter in. Digitalin is a drug that acts directly on the heart – as I’ve told you it’s prescribed in certain cases. *Now, there was one person in that house who suffered from a heart complaint.* Suppose he was the victim selected? What would not be fatal to the rest *would* be fatal to him – or so the murderer might reasonably suppose. That the thing turned out

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differently is only a proof of what I was saying just now – the uncertainty and unreliability of the effects of drugs on human beings.’

‘Sir Ambrose,’ said Sir Henry, ‘you think *he* was the person aimed at? Yes, yes – and the girl’s death was a mistake.’

‘Who got his money after he was dead?’ asked Jane.

‘A very sound question, Miss Helier. One of the first we always ask in my late profession,’ said Sir Henry.

‘Sir Ambrose had a son,’ said Mrs Bantry slowly. ‘He had quarrelled with him many years previously. The boy was wild, I believe. Still, it was not in Sir Ambrose’s power to disinherit him – Clodderham Court was entailed. Martin Bercy succeeded to the title and estate. There was, however, a good deal of other property that Sir Ambrose could leave as he chose, and that he left to his ward Sylvia. I know this because Sir Ambrose died less than a year after the events I am telling you of, and he had not troubled to make a new will after Sylvia’s death. I think the money went to the Crown – or perhaps it was to his son as next of kin – I don’t really remember.’

‘So it was only to the interest of a son who wasn’t there and the girl who died herself to make away with him,’ said Sir Henry thoughtfully. ‘That doesn’t seem very promising.’

‘Didn’t the other woman get anything?’ asked Jane. ‘The one Mrs Bantry calls the Pussy woman.’

‘She wasn’t mentioned in the will,’ said Mrs Bantry.

‘Miss Marple, you’re not listening,’ said Sir Henry. ‘You’re somewhere far away.’

‘I was thinking of old Mr Badger, the chemist,’ said Miss Marple. ‘He had a very young housekeeper – young enough to be not only his daughter, but his grand-daughter. Not a word to anyone, and his family, a lot of nephews and nieces, full of expectations. And when he died, would you believe it, he’d been secretly married to her for two years? Of course Mr Badger was a chemist, and a very rude, common old man as well, and Sir Ambrose Bercy was a very courtly gentleman, so Mrs Bantry says, but for all that human nature is much the same everywhere.’

There was a pause. Sir Henry looked very hard at Miss Marple who looked back at him with gently quizzical blue eyes. Jane Helier broke the silence.

‘Was this Mrs Carpenter good-looking?’ she asked.

‘Yes, in a very quiet way. Nothing startling.’

‘She had a very sympathetic voice,’ said Colonel Bantry.

‘Purring – that’s what I call it,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘Purring!’

‘You’ll be called a cat yourself one of these days, Dolly.’

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‘I like being a cat in my home circle,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘I don’t much like women anyway, and you know it. I like men and flowers.’

‘Excellent taste,’ said Sir Henry. ‘Especially in putting men first.’

‘That was tact,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘Well, now, what about my little problem? I’ve been quite fair, I think. Arthur, don’t you think I’ve been fair?’

‘Yes, my dear. I don’t think there’ll be any inquiry into the running by the stewards of the Jockey Club.’

‘First boy,’ said Mrs Bantry, pointing a finger at Sir Henry.

‘I’m going to be long-winded. Because, you see, I haven’t really got any feeling of certainty about the matter. First, Sir Ambrose. Well, he wouldn’t take such an original method of committing suicide – and on the other hand he certainly had nothing to gain by the death of his ward. Exit Sir Ambrose. Mr Curle. No motive for death of girl. If Sir Ambrose was intended victim, he might possibly have purloined a rare manuscript or two that no one else would miss. Very thin and most unlikely. So I think, that in spite of Mrs Bantry’s suspicions as to his underclothing, Mr Curle is cleared. Miss Wye. Motive for death of Sir Ambrose – none. Motive for death of Sylvia pretty strong. She wanted Sylvia’s young man, and wanted him rather badly – from Mrs Bantry’s account. She was with Sylvia

that morning in the garden, so had opportunity to pick leaves. No, we can't dismiss Miss Wye so easily. Young Lorimer. He's got a motive in either case. If he gets rid of his sweetheart, he can marry the other girl. Still it seems a bit drastic to kill her – what's a broken engagement these days? If Sir Ambrose dies, he will marry a rich girl instead of a poor one. That might be important or not – depends on his financial position. If I find that his estate was heavily mortgaged and that Mrs Bantroy has deliberately withheld that fact from us, I shall claim a foul. Now Mrs Carpenter. You know, I have suspicions of Mrs Carpenter. Those white hands, for one thing, and her excellent alibi at the time the herbs were picked – I always distrust alibis. And I've got another reason for suspecting her which I will keep to myself. Still, on the whole, if I've got to plump, I shall plump for Miss Maude Wye, because there's more evidence against her than anyone else.'

'Next boy,' said Mrs Bantroy, and pointed at Dr Lloyd.

'I think you're wrong, Clithering, in sticking to the theory that the girl's death was meant. I am convinced that the murderer intended to do away with Sir Ambrose. I don't think that young Lorimer had the necessary knowledge. I am inclined to believe that Mrs Carpenter was the guilty party. She had been a long time with the family, knew all about the state of

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Sir Ambrose's health, and could easily arrange for this girl Sylvia (who, you said yourself, was rather stupid) to pick the right leaves. Motive, I confess, I don't see; but I hazard the guess that Sir Ambrose had at one time made a will in which she was mentioned. That's the best I can do.'

Mrs Bantry's pointing finger went on to Jane Helier.

'I don't know what to say,' said Jane, 'except this: Why shouldn't the girl herself have done it? She took the leaves into the kitchen after all. And you say Sir Ambrose had been sticking out against her marriage. If he died, she'd get the money and be able to marry at once. She'd know just as much about Sir Ambrose's health as Mrs Carpenter would.'

Mrs Bantry's finger came slowly round to Miss Marple.

'Now then, School Marm,' she said.

'Sir Henry has put it all very clearly – very clearly indeed,' said Miss Marple. 'And Dr Lloyd was so right in what he said. Between them they seem to have made things so very clear. Only I don't think Dr Lloyd quite realized one aspect of what he said. You see, not being Sir Ambrose's medical adviser, he couldn't know just what kind of heart trouble Sir Ambrose had, could he?'

'I don't quite see what you mean, Miss Marple,' said Dr Lloyd.

‘You’re assuming – aren’t you? – that Sir Ambrose had the kind of heart that digitalin would affect adversely? But there’s nothing to prove that that’s so. It might be just the other way about.’

‘The other way about?’

‘Yes, you did say that it was often prescribed for heart trouble?’

‘Even then, Miss Marple, I don’t see what that leads to?’

‘Well, it would mean that he would have digitalin in his possession quite naturally – without having to account for it. What I am trying to say (I always express myself so badly) is this: Supposing you wanted to poison anyone with a fatal dose of digitalin. Wouldn’t the simplest and easiest way be to arrange for everyone to be poisoned – actually by digitalin leaves? It wouldn’t be fatal in anyone else’s case, of course, but no one would be surprised at one victim because, as Dr Lloyd said, these things are so uncertain. No one would be likely to ask whether the girl had actually had a fatal dose of infusion of digitalis or something of that kind. He might have put it in a cocktail, or in her coffee or even made her drink it quite simply as a tonic.’

‘You mean Sir Ambrose poisoned his ward, the charming girl whom he loved?’

‘That’s just it,’ said Miss Marple. ‘Like Mr Badger and his young housekeeper. Don’t tell me it’s absurd

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for a man of sixty to fall in love with a girl of twenty. It happens every day – and I dare say with an old autocrat like Sir Ambrose, it might take him queerly. These things become a madness sometimes. He couldn't bear the thought of her getting married – did his best to oppose it – and failed. His mad jealousy became so great that he preferred killing her to letting her go to young Lorimer. He must have thought of it some time beforehand, because that foxglove seed would have to be sown among the sage. He'd pick it himself when the time came, and send her into the kitchen with it. It's horrible to think of, but I suppose we must take as merciful a view of it as we can. Gentlemen of that age are sometimes very peculiar indeed where young girls are concerned. Our last organist – but there, I mustn't talk scandal.'

'Mrs Bantry,' said Sir Henry. 'Is this so?'

Mrs Bantry nodded.

'Yes. I'd no idea of it – never dreamed of the thing being anything but an accident. Then, after Sir Ambrose's death, I got a letter. He had left directions to send it to me. He told me the truth in it. I don't know why – but he and I always got on very well together.'

In the momentary silence, she seemed to feel an unspoken criticism and went on hastily:

'You think I'm betraying a confidence – but that isn't so. I've changed all the names. He wasn't really

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called Sir Ambrose Bercy. Didn't you see how Arthur stared stupidly when I said that name to him? He didn't understand at first. I've changed everything. It's like they say in magazines and in the beginning of books: "All the characters in this story are purely fictitious." You never know who they really are.'

Charles Osborne on

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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.¹³

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.

¹³Agatha 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.

The Agatha Christie Collection

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The Mysterious Mr Quin
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They Came to Baghdad
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Ordeal by Innocence
The Pale Horse
Endless Night
Passenger To Frankfurt
Problem at Pollensa Bay
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Hercule Poirot Investigates

The Mysterious Affair at Styles
The Murder on the Links
Poirot Investigates
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd
The Big Four
The Mystery of the Blue Train
Black Coffee *
Peril at End House
Lord Edgware Dies
Murder on the Orient Express
Three-Act Tragedy
Death in the Clouds
The ABC Murders
Murder in Mesopotamia
Cards on the Table
Murder in the Mews
Dumb Witness
Death on the Nile
Appointment with Death
Hercule Poirot's Christmas
Sad Cypress
One, Two, Buckle My Shoe
Evil Under the Sun
Five Little Pigs

* novelised by Charles Osborne

The Hollow
The Labours of Hercules
Taken at the Flood
Mrs McGinty's Dead
After the Funeral
Hickory Dickory Dock
Dead Man's Folly
Cat Among the Pigeons
The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding
The Clocks
Third Girl
Hallowe'en Party
Elephants Can Remember
Poirot's Early Cases
Curtain: Poirot's Last Case

Miss Marple Mysteries

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The Thirteen Problems
The Body in the Library
The Moving Finger
A Murder Is Announced
They Do It with Mirrors
A Pocket Full of Rye
4.50 from Paddington
The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side
A Caribbean Mystery
At Bertram's Hotel
Nemesis
Sleeping Murder
Miss Marple's Final Cases

Tommy & Tuppence

The Secret Adversary
Partners in Crime
N or M?
By the Pricking of My Thumbs
Postern of Fate

Published as Mary Westmacott

Giant's Bread
Unfinished Portrait
Absent in the Spring
The Rose and the Yew Tree
A Daughter's a Daughter
The Burden

Memoirs

An Autobiography
Come, Tell Me How You Live

Play Collections

The Mousetrap and Selected Plays
Witness for the Prosecution and
Selected Plays

THE THIRTEEN PROBLEMS by Agatha Christie

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