

Agatha Christie

the **thirteen**
problems



marple

Agatha Christie

**The Thirteen
Problems**

To Leonard and Katherine Woolley

Contents

About Agatha Christie The Agatha Christie Collection E-Book Extras

- 1 The Tuesday Night Club 9
- 2 The Idol House of Astarte 29
- 3 Ingots of Gold 53
- 4 The Bloodstained Pavement 73
- 5 Motive *v* Opportunity 89
- 6 The Thumb Mark of St Peter 109
- 7 The Blue Geranium 131
- 8 The Companion 157
- 9 The Four Suspects 185
- 10 A Christmas Tragedy 209
- 11 The Herb of Death 237
- 12 The Affair at the Bungalow 261
- 13 Death by Drowning 285

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About the Publisher

Chapter 13

Death by Drowning

I

Sir Henry Clithering, Ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard, was staying with his friends the Bantrys at their place near the little village of St Mary Mead.

On Saturday morning, coming down to breakfast at the pleasant guestly hour of ten-fifteen, he almost collided with his hostess, Mrs Bantry, in the doorway of the breakfast room. She was rushing from the room, evidently in a condition of some excitement and distress.

Colonel Bantry was sitting at the table, his face rather redder than usual.

‘Morning, Clithering,’ he said. ‘Nice day. Help yourself.’

Sir Henry obeyed. As he took his seat, a plate of kidneys and bacon in front of him, his host went on:

‘Dolly’s a bit upset this morning.’

‘Yes – er – I rather thought so,’ said Sir Henry mildly.

Agatha Christie

He wondered a little. His hostess was of a placid disposition, little given to moods or excitement. As far as Sir Henry knew, she felt keenly on one subject only – gardening.

‘Yes,’ said Colonel Bantry. ‘Bit of news we got this morning upset her. Girl in the village – Emmott’s daughter – Emmott who keeps the Blue Boar.’

‘Oh, yes, of course.’

‘Ye-es,’ said Colonel Bantry ruminatively. ‘Pretty girl. Got herself into trouble. Usual story. I’ve been arguing with Dolly about that. Foolish of me. Women never see sense. Dolly was all up in arms for the girl – you know what women are – men are brutes – all the rest of it, etcetera. But it’s not so simple as all that – not in these days. Girls know what they’re about. Fellow who seduces a girl’s not necessarily a villain. Fifty-fifty as often as not. I rather liked young Sandford myself. A young ass rather than a Don Juan, I should have said.’

‘It is this man Sandford who got the girl into trouble?’

‘So it seems. Of course I don’t know anything personally,’ said the Colonel cautiously. ‘It’s all gossip and chat. You know what this place is! As I say, I *know* nothing. And I’m not like Dolly – leaping to conclusions, flinging accusations all over the place. Damn it all, one ought to be careful in what one says. You know – inquest and all that.’

‘Inquest?’

Colonel Bantry stared.

‘Yes. Didn’t I tell you? Girl drowned herself. That’s what all the pother’s about.’

‘That’s a nasty business,’ said Sir Henry.

‘Of course it is. Don’t like to think of it myself. Poor pretty little devil. Her father’s a hard man by all accounts. I suppose she just felt she couldn’t face the music.’

He paused.

‘That’s what’s upset Dolly so.’

‘Where did she drown herself?’

‘In the river. Just below the mill it runs pretty fast. There’s a footpath and a bridge across. They think she threw herself off that. Well, well, it doesn’t bear thinking about.’

And with a portentous rustle, Colonel Bantry opened his newspaper and proceeded to distract his mind from painful matters by an absorption in the newest iniquities of the government.

Sir Henry was only mildly interested by the village tragedy. After breakfast, he established himself on a comfortable chair on the lawn, tilted his hat over his eyes and contemplated life from a peaceful angle.

It was about half past eleven when a neat parlourmaid tripped across the lawn.

‘If you please, sir, Miss Marple has called, and would like to see you.’

‘Miss Marple?’

Agatha Christie

Sir Henry sat up and straightened his hat. The name surprised him. He remembered Miss Marple very well – her gentle quiet old-maidish ways, her amazing penetration. He remembered a dozen unsolved and hypothetical cases – and how in each case this typical ‘old maid of the village’ had leaped unerringly to the right solution of the mystery. Sir Henry had a very deep respect for Miss Marple. He wondered what had brought her to see him.

Miss Marple was sitting in the drawing-room – very upright as always, a gaily coloured marketing basket of foreign extraction beside her. Her cheeks were rather pink and she seemed flustered.

‘Sir Henry – I am so glad. So fortunate to find you. I just happened to hear that you were staying down here . . . I do hope you will forgive me . . .’

‘This is a great pleasure,’ said Sir Henry, taking her hand. ‘I’m afraid Mrs Bantry’s out.’

‘Yes,’ said Miss Marple. ‘I saw her talking to Footit, the butcher, as I passed. Henry Footit was run over yesterday – that was his dog. One of those smooth-haired fox terriers, rather stout and quarrelsome, that butchers always seem to have.’

‘Yes,’ said Sir Henry helpfully.

‘I was glad to get here when she wasn’t at home,’ continued Miss Marple. ‘Because it was you I wanted to see. About this sad affair.’

‘Henry Footit?’ asked Sir Henry, slightly bewildered. Miss Marple threw him a reproachful glance.

‘No, no. Rose Emmott, of course. You’ve heard?’
Sir Henry nodded.

‘Bantry was telling me. Very sad.’

He was a little puzzled. He could not conceive why Miss Marple should want to see him about Rose Emmott.

Miss Marple sat down again. Sir Henry also sat. When the old lady spoke her manner had changed. It was grave, and had a certain dignity.

‘You may remember, Sir Henry, that on one or two occasions we played what was really a pleasant kind of game. Propounding mysteries and giving solutions. You were kind enough to say that I – that I did not do too badly.’

‘You beat us all,’ said Sir Henry warmly. ‘You displayed an absolute genius for getting to the truth. And you always instanced, I remember, some village parallel which had supplied you with the clue.’

He smiled as he spoke, but Miss Marple did not smile. She remained very grave.

‘What you said has emboldened me to come to you now. I feel that if I say something to you – at least you will not laugh at me.’

He realized suddenly that she was in deadly earnest. ‘Certainly, I will not laugh,’ he said gently.

Agatha Christie

‘Sir Henry – this girl – Rose Emmott. She did not drown herself – *she was murdered* . . . And I know who murdered her.’

Sir Henry was silent with sheer astonishment for quite three seconds. Miss Marple’s voice had been perfectly quiet and unexcited. She might have been making the most ordinary statement in the world for all the emotion she showed.

‘This is a very serious statement to make, Miss Marple,’ said Sir Henry when he had recovered his breath.

She nodded her head gently several times.

‘I know – I know – that is why I have come to you.’

‘But, my dear lady, I am not the person to come to. I am merely a private individual nowadays. If you have knowledge of the kind you claim, you must go to the police.’

‘I don’t think I can do that,’ said Miss Marple.

‘But why not?’

‘Because, you see, I haven’t got any – what you call *knowledge*.’

‘You mean it’s only a guess on your part?’

‘You can call it that, if you like, but it’s not really that at all. I *know*. I’m in a position to know; but if I gave my reasons for knowing to Inspector Drewitt – well, he’d simply laugh. And really, I don’t know that I’d blame

him. It's very difficult to understand what you might call specialized knowledge.'

'Such as?' suggested Sir Henry.

Miss Marple smiled a little.

'If I were to tell you that I know because of a man called Peasegood leaving turnips instead of carrots when he came round with a cart and sold vegetables to my niece several years ago –'

She stopped eloquently.

'A very appropriate name for the trade,' murmured Sir Henry. 'You mean that you are simply judging from the facts in a parallel case.'

'I know human nature,' said Miss Marple. 'It's impossible not to know human nature living in a village all these years. The question is, do you believe me, or don't you?'

She looked at him very straight. The pink flush had heightened on her cheeks. Her eyes met his steadily without wavering.

Sir Henry was a man with a very vast experience of life. He made his decisions quickly without beating about the bush. Unlikely and fantastic as Miss Marple's statement might seem, he was instantly aware that he accepted it.

'I *do* believe you, Miss Marple. But I do not see what you want me to do in the matter, or why you have come to me.'

Agatha Christie

‘I have thought and thought about it,’ said Miss Marple. ‘As I said, it would be useless going to the police without any facts. I have no facts. What I would ask you to do is to interest yourself in the matter – Inspector Drewitt would be most flattered, I am sure. And, of course, if the matter went farther, Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable, I am sure, would be wax in your hands.’

She looked at him appealingly.

‘And what data are you going to give me to work upon?’

‘I thought,’ said Miss Marple, ‘of writing a name – *the* name – on a piece of paper and giving it to you. Then if, on investigation, you decided that the – the *person* – is not involved in any way – well, I shall have been quite wrong.’

She paused and then added with a slight shiver. ‘It would be so dreadful – so very dreadful – if an innocent person were to be hanged.’

‘What on earth –’ cried Sir Henry, startled.

She turned a distressed face upon him.

‘I may be wrong about that – though I don’t think so. Inspector Drewitt, you see, is really an intelligent man. But a mediocre amount of intelligence is sometimes most dangerous. It does not take one far enough.’

Sir Henry looked at her curiously.

Fumbling a little, Miss Marple opened a small reticule, took out a little notebook, tore out a leaf, carefully wrote a name on it and folding it in two, handed it to Sir Henry.

He opened it and read the name. It conveyed nothing to him, but his eyebrows lifted a little. He looked across at Miss Marple and tucked the piece of paper in his pocket.

‘Well, well,’ he said. ‘Rather an extraordinary business, this. I’ve never done anything like it before. But I’m going to back my judgment – of *you*, Miss Marple.’

II

Sir Henry was sitting in a room with Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable of the county, and Inspector Drewitt.

The Chief Constable was a little man of aggressively military demeanour. The Inspector was big and broad and eminently sensible.

‘I really do feel I’m butting in,’ said Sir Henry with his pleasant smile. ‘I can’t really tell you why I’m doing it.’ (Strict truth this!)

‘My dear fellow, we’re charmed. It’s a great compliment.’

‘Honoured, Sir Henry,’ said the Inspector.

The Chief Constable was thinking: ‘Bored to death, poor fellow, at the Bantrys. The old man abusing the

Agatha Christie

government and the old woman babbling on about bulbs.’

The Inspector was thinking: ‘Pity we’re not up against a real teaser. One of the best brains in England, I’ve heard it said. Pity it’s all such plain sailing.’

Aloud, the Chief Constable said:

‘I’m afraid it’s all very sordid and straightforward. First idea was that the girl had pitched herself in. She was in the family way, you understand. However, our doctor, Haydock, is a careful fellow. He noticed the bruises on each arm – upper arm. Caused before death. Just where a fellow would have taken her by the arms and flung her in.’

‘Would that require much strength?’

‘I think not. There would be no struggle – the girl would be taken unawares. It’s a footbridge of slippery wood. Easiest thing in the world to pitch her over – there’s no handrail that side.’

‘You know for a fact that the tragedy occurred there?’

‘Yes. We’ve got a boy – Jimmy Brown – aged twelve. He was in the woods on the other side. He heard a kind of scream from the bridge and a splash. It was dusk you know – difficult to see anything. Presently he saw something white floating down in the water and he ran and got help. They got her out, but it was too late to revive her.’

Sir Henry nodded.

‘The boy saw no one on the bridge?’

‘No. But, as I tell you, it was dusk, and there’s mist always hanging about there. I’m going to question him as to whether he saw anyone about just afterwards or just before. You see he naturally assumed that the girl had thrown herself over. Everybody did to start with.’

‘Still, we’ve got the note,’ said Inspector Drewitt. He turned to Sir Henry.

‘Note in the dead girl’s pocket, sir. Written with a kind of artist’s pencil it was, and all of a sop though the paper was we managed to read it.’

‘And what did it say?’

‘It was from young Sandford. “All right,” that’s how it ran. “I’ll meet you at the bridge at eight-thirty. – R.S.” Well, it was near as might be to eight-thirty – a few minutes after – when Jimmy Brown heard the cry and the splash.’

‘I don’t know whether you’ve met Sandford at all?’ went on Colonel Melchett. ‘He’s been down here about a month. One of these modern day young architects who build peculiar houses. He’s doing a house for Allington. God knows what it’s going to be like – full of new-fangled stuff, I suppose. Glass dinner table and surgical chairs made of steel and webbing. Well, that’s neither here nor there, but it shows the kind of chap Sandford is. Bolshie, you know – no morals.’

Agatha Christie

‘Seduction,’ said Sir Henry mildly, ‘is quite an old-established crime though it does not, of course, date back so far as murder.’

Colonel Melchett stared.

‘Oh! yes,’ he said. ‘Quite. Quite.’

‘Well, Sir Henry,’ said Drewitt, ‘there it is – an ugly business, but plain. This young Sandford gets the girl into trouble. Then he’s all for clearing off back to London. He’s got a girl there – nice young lady – he’s engaged to be married to her. Well, naturally this business, if she gets to hear of it, may cook his goose good and proper. He meets Rose at the bridge – it’s a misty evening, no one about – he catches her by the shoulders and pitches her in. A proper young swine – and deserves what’s coming to him. That’s my opinion.’

Sir Henry was silent for a minute or two. He perceived a strong undercurrent of local prejudice. A new-fangled architect was not likely to be popular in the conservative village of St Mary Mead.

‘There is no doubt, I suppose, that this man, Sandford, was actually the father of the coming child?’ he asked.

‘He’s the father all right,’ said Drewitt. ‘Rose Emmott let out as much to her father. She thought he’d marry her. Marry her! Not he!’

‘Dear me,’ thought Sir Henry. ‘I seem to be back in mid-Victorian melodrama. Unsuspecting girl, the

villain from London, the stern father, the betrayal – we only need the faithful village lover. Yes, I think it's time I asked about him.'

And aloud he said:

'Hadn't the girl a young man of her own down here?'

'You mean Joe Ellis?' said the Inspector. 'Good fellow Joe. Carpentering's his trade. Ah! If she'd stuck to Joe –'

Colonel Melchett nodded approval.

'Stick to your own class,' he snapped.

'How did Joe Ellis take this affair?' asked Sir Henry.

'Nobody knew how he was taking it,' said the Inspector. 'He's a quiet fellow, is Joe. Close. Anything Rose did was right in his eyes. She had him on a string all right. Just hoped she'd come back to him some day – that was his attitude, I reckon.'

'I'd like to see him,' said Sir Henry.

'Oh! We're going to look him up,' said Colonel Melchett. 'We're not neglecting any line. I thought myself we'd see Emmott first, then Sandford, and then we can go on and see Ellis. That suits you, Clithering?'

Sir Henry said it would suit him admirably.

They found Tom Emmott at the Blue Boar. He was a big burly man of middle age with a shifty eye and a truculent jaw.

Agatha Christie

‘Glad to see you, gentlemen – good morning, Colonel. Come in here and we can be private. Can I offer you anything, gentlemen? No? It’s as you please. You’ve come about this business of my poor girl. Ah! She was a good girl, Rose was. Always was a good girl – till this bloody swine – beg pardon, but that’s what he is – till he came along. Promised her marriage, he did. But I’ll have the law on him. Drove her to it, he did. Murdering swine. Bringing disgrace on all of us. My poor girl.’

‘Your daughter distinctly told you that Mr Sandford was responsible for her condition?’ asked Melchett crisply.

‘She did. In this very room she did.’

‘And what did you say to her?’ asked Sir Henry.

‘Say to her?’ The man seemed momentarily taken aback.

‘Yes. You didn’t, for example, threaten to turn her out of the house.’

‘I was a bit upset – that’s only natural. I’m sure you’ll agree that’s only natural. But, of course, I didn’t turn her out of the house. I wouldn’t do such a thing.’ He assumed virtuous indignation. ‘No. What’s the law for – that’s what I say. What’s the law for? He’d got to do the right by her. And if he didn’t, by God, he’d got to pay.’

He brought down his fist on the table.

‘What time did you last see your daughter?’ asked Melchett.

‘Yesterday – tea time.’

‘What was her manner then?’

‘Well, much as usual. I didn’t notice anything. If I’d known –’

‘But you didn’t know,’ said the Inspector drily.

They took their leave.

‘Emmott hardly creates a favourable impression,’ said Sir Henry thoughtfully.

‘Bit of a blackguard,’ said Melchett. ‘He’d have bled Sandford all right if he’d had the chance.’

Their next call was on the architect. Rex Sandford was very unlike the picture Sir Henry had unconsciously formed of him. He was a tall young man, very fair and very thin. His eyes were blue and dreamy, his hair was untidy and rather too long. His speech was a little too ladylike.

Colonel Melchett introduced himself and his companions. Then passing straight to the object of his visit, he invited the architect to make a statement as to his movements on the previous evening.

‘You understand,’ he said warningly. ‘I have no power to compel a statement from you and any statement you make may be used in evidence against you. I want the position to be quite clear to you.’

‘I – I don’t understand,’ said Sandford.

Agatha Christie

‘You understand that the girl Rose Emmott was drowned last night?’

‘I know. Oh! it’s too, too distressing. Really, I haven’t slept a wink. I’ve been incapable of any work today. I feel responsible – terribly responsible.’

He ran his hands through his hair, making it untidier still.

‘I never meant any harm,’ he said piteously. ‘I never thought. I never dreamt she’d take it that way.’

He sat down at a table and buried his face in his hands.

‘Do I understand you to say, Mr Sandford, that you refuse to make a statement as to where you were last night at eight-thirty?’

‘No, no – certainly not. I was out. I went for a walk.’

‘You went to meet Miss Emmott?’

‘No. I went by myself. Through the woods. A long way.’

‘Then how do you account for this note, sir, which was found in the dead girl’s pocket?’

And Inspector Drewitt read it unemotionally aloud.

‘Now, sir,’ he finished. ‘Do you deny that you wrote that?’

‘No – no. You’re right. I did write it. Rose asked me to meet her. She insisted. I didn’t know what to do. So I wrote that note.’

‘Ah, that’s better,’ said the Inspector.

‘But I didn’t go!’ Sandford’s voice rose high and excited. ‘I didn’t go! I felt it would be much better not. I was returning to town tomorrow. I felt it would be better not – not to meet. I intended to write from London and – and make – some arrangement.’

‘You are aware, sir, that this girl was going to have a child, and that she had named you as its father?’

Sandford groaned, but did not answer.

‘Was that statement true, sir?’

Sandford buried his face deeper.

‘I suppose so,’ he said in a muffled voice.

‘Ah!’ Inspector Drewitt could not disguise the satisfaction. ‘Now about this “walk” of yours. Is there anyone who saw you last night?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think so. As far as I can remember, I didn’t meet anybody.’

‘That’s a pity.’

‘What do you mean?’ Sandford stared wildly at him. ‘What does it matter whether I was out for a walk or not? What difference does that make to Rose drowning herself?’

‘Ah!’ said the Inspector. ‘But you see, *she didn’t*. She was thrown in deliberately, Mr Sandford.’

‘She was –’ It took him a minute or two to take in all the horror of it. ‘My God! Then –’

He dropped into a chair.

Agatha Christie

Colonel Melchett made a move to depart.

'You understand, Sandford,' he said. 'You are on no account to leave this house.'

The three men left together. The Inspector and the Chief Constable exchanged glances.

'That's enough, I think, sir,' said the Inspector.

'Yes. Get a warrant made out and arrest him.'

'Excuse me,' said Sir Henry, 'I've forgotten my gloves.'

He re-entered the house rapidly. Sandford was sitting just as they had left him, staring dazedly in front of him.

'I have come back,' said Sir Henry, 'to tell you that I personally, am anxious to do all I can to assist you. The motive of my interest in you I am not at liberty to reveal. But I am going to ask you, if you will, to tell me as briefly as possible exactly what passed between you and this girl Rose.'

'She was very pretty,' said Sandford. 'Very pretty and very alluring. And – and she made a dead seat at me. Before God, that's true. She wouldn't let me alone. And it was lonely down here, and nobody liked me much, and – and, as I say she was amazingly pretty and she seemed to know her way about and all that –' His voice died away. He looked up. 'And then this happened. She wanted me to marry her. I didn't know what to do. I'm engaged to a girl in London. If

she ever gets to hear of this – and she will, of course – well, it's all up. She won't understand. How could she? And I'm a rotter, of course. As I say, I didn't know what to do. I avoided seeing Rose again. I thought I'd get back to town – see my lawyer – make arrangements about money and so forth, for her. God, what a fool I've been! And it's all so clear – the case against me. But they've made a mistake. She *must* have done it herself.'

'Did she ever threaten to take her life?'

Sandford shook his head.

'Never. I shouldn't have said she was that sort.'

'What about a man called Joe Ellis?'

'The carpenter fellow? Good old village stock. Dull fellow – but crazy about Rose.'

'He might have been jealous?' suggested Sir Henry.

'I suppose he was a bit – but he's the bovine kind. He'd suffer in silence.'

'Well,' said Sir Henry. 'I must be going.'

He rejoined the others.

'You know, Melchett,' he said, 'I feel we ought to have a look at this other fellow – Ellis – before we do anything drastic. Pity if you made an arrest that turned out to be a mistake. After all, jealousy is a pretty good motive for murder – and a pretty common one, too.'

'That's true enough,' said the Inspector. 'But Joe Ellis isn't that kind. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Why,

Agatha Christie

nobody's ever seen him out of temper. Still, I agree we'd better just ask him where he was last night. He'll be at home now. He lodges with Mrs Bartlett – very decent soul – a widow, she takes in a bit of washing.'

The little cottage to which they bent their footsteps was spotlessly clean and neat. A big stout woman of middle age opened the door to them. She had a pleasant face and blue eyes.

'Good morning, Mrs Bartlett,' said the Inspector. 'Is Joe Ellis here?'

'Came back not ten minutes ago,' said Mrs Bartlett. 'Step inside, will you, please, sirs.'

Wiping her hands on her apron she led them into a tiny front parlour with stuffed birds, china dogs, a sofa and several useless pieces of furniture.

She hurriedly arranged seats for them, picked up a whatnot bodily to make further room and went out calling:

'Joe, there's three gentlemen want to see you.'

A voice from the back kitchen replied:

'I'll be there when I've cleaned myself.'

Mrs Bartlett smiled.

'Come in, Mrs Bartlett,' said Colonel Melchett. 'Sit down.'

'Oh, no, sir, I couldn't think of it.'

Mrs Bartlett was shocked at the idea.

‘You find Joe Ellis a good lodger?’ inquired Melchett in a seemingly careless tone.

‘Couldn’t have a better, sir. A real steady young fellow. Never touches a drop of drink. Takes a pride in his work. And always kind and helpful about the house. He put up those shelves for me, and he’s fixed a new dresser in the kitchen. And any little thing that wants doing in the house – why, Joe does it as a matter of course, and won’t hardly take thanks for it. Ah! there aren’t many young fellows like Joe, sir.’

‘Some girl will be lucky some day,’ said Melchett carelessly. ‘He was rather sweet on that poor girl, Rose Emmott, wasn’t he?’

Mrs Bartlett sighed.

‘It made me tired, it did. Him worshipping the ground she trod on and her not caring a snap of the fingers for him.’

‘Where does Joe spend his evenings, Mrs Bartlett?’

‘Here, sir, usually. He does some odd piece of work in the evenings, sometimes, and he’s trying to learn book-keeping by correspondence.’

‘Ah! really. Was he in yesterday evening?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You’re sure, Mrs Bartlett?’ said Sir Henry sharply.

She turned to him.

Agatha Christie

‘Quite sure, sir.’

‘He didn’t go out, for instance, somewhere about eight to eight-thirty?’

‘Oh, no.’ Mrs Barlett laughed. ‘He was fixing the kitchen dresser for me nearly all the evening, and I was helping him.’

Sir Henry looked at her smiling assured face and felt his first pang of doubt.

A moment later Ellis himself entered the room.

He was a tall broad-shouldered young man, very good-looking in a rustic way. He had shy, blue eyes and a good-tempered smile. Altogether an amiable young giant.

Melchett opened the conversation. Mrs Bartlett withdrew to the kitchen.

‘We are investigating the death of Rose Emmott. You knew her, Ellis.’

‘Yes.’ He hesitated, then muttered, ‘Hoped to marry her one day. Poor lass.’

‘You have heard of what her condition was?’

‘Yes.’ A spark of anger showed in his eyes. ‘Let her down, he did. But ’twere for the best. She wouldn’t have been happy married to him. I reckoned she’d come to me when this happened. I’d have looked after her.’

‘In spite of –’

‘Tweren’t her fault. He led her astray with fine

promises and all. Oh! she told me about it. She'd no call to drown herself. He weren't worth it.'

'Where were you, Ellis, last night at eight-thirty?'

Was it Sir Henry's fancy, or was there really a shade of constraint in the ready – almost too ready – reply.

'I was here. Fixing up a contraption in the kitchen for Mrs B. You ask her. She'll tell you.'

'He was too quick with that,' thought Sir Henry. 'He's a slow-thinking man. That popped out so pat that I suspect he'd got it ready beforehand.'

Then he told himself that it was imagination. He was imagining things – yes, even imagining an apprehensive glint in those blue eyes.

A few more questions and answers and they left. Sir Henry made an excuse to go to the kitchen. Mrs Bartlett was busy at the stove. She looked up with a pleasant smile. A new dresser was fixed against the wall. It was not quite finished. Some tools lay about and some pieces of wood.

'That's what Ellis was at work on last night?' said Sir Henry.

'Yes, sir, it's a nice bit of work, isn't it? He's a very clever carpenter, Joe is.'

No apprehensive gleam in her eye – no embarrassment.

But Ellis – had he imagined it? No, there *had* been something.

Agatha Christie

‘I must tackle him,’ thought Sir Henry.

Turning to leave the kitchen, he collided with a perambulator.

‘Not woken the baby up, I hope,’ he said.

Mrs Bartlett’s laugh rang out.

‘Oh, no, sir. I’ve no children – more’s the pity. That’s what I take the laundry on, sir.’

‘Oh! I see –’

He paused then said on an impulse:

‘Mrs Bartlett. You knew Rose Emmott. Tell me what you really thought of her.’

She looked at him curiously.

‘Well, sir, I thought she was flighty. But she’s dead – and I don’t like to speak ill of the dead.’

‘But I have a reason – a very good reason for asking.’

He spoke persuasively.

She seemed to consider, studying him attentively. Finally she made up her mind.

‘She was a bad lot, sir,’ she said quietly. ‘I wouldn’t say so before Joe. She took *him* in good and proper. That kind can – more’s the pity. You know how it is, sir.’

Yes, Sir Henry knew. The Joe Ellises of the world were peculiarly vulnerable. They trusted blindly. But for that very cause the shock of discovery might be greater.

He left the cottage baffled and perplexed. He was up against a blank wall. Joe Ellis had been working indoors all yesterday evening. Mrs Bartlett had actually been there watching him. Could one possibly get round that? There was nothing to set against it – except possibly that suspicious readiness in replying on Joe Ellis's part – that suggestion of having a story pat.

'Well,' said Melchett, 'that seems to make the matter quite clear, eh?'

'It does, sir,' agreed the Inspector. 'Sandford's our man. Not a leg to stand upon. The thing's as plain as daylight. It's my opinion as the girl and her father were out to – well – practically blackmail him. He's no money to speak of – he didn't want the matter to get to his young lady's ears. He was desperate and he acted accordingly. What do you say, sir?' he added, addressing Sir Henry deferentially.

'It seems so,' admitted Sir Henry. 'And yet – I can hardly picture Sandford committing any violent action.'

But he knew as he spoke that that objection was hardly valid. The meekest animal, when cornered, is capable of amazing actions.

'I should like to see the boy, though,' he said suddenly. 'The one who heard the cry.'

Jimmy Brown proved to be an intelligent lad, rather

Agatha Christie

small for his age, with a sharp, rather cunning face. He was eager to be questioned and was rather disappointed when checked in his dramatic tale of what he had heard on the fatal night.

‘You were on the other side of the bridge, I understand,’ said Sir Henry. ‘Across the river from the village. Did you see anyone on that side as you came over the bridge?’

‘There was someone walking up in the woods. Mr Sandford, I think it was, the architecting gentleman who’s building the queer house.’

The three men exchanged glances.

‘That was about ten minutes or so before you heard the cry?’

The boy nodded.

‘Did you see anyone else – on the village side of the river?’

‘A man came along the path that side. Going slow and whistling he was. Might have been Joe Ellis.’

‘You couldn’t possibly have seen who it was,’ said the Inspector sharply. ‘What with the mist and its being dusk.’

‘It’s on account of the whistle,’ said the boy. ‘Joe Ellis always whistles the same tune – “I wanner be happy” – it’s the only tune he knows.’

He spoke with the scorn of the modernist for the old-fashioned.

‘Anyone might whistle a tune,’ said Melchett. ‘Was he going towards the bridge?’

‘No. Other way – to village.’

‘I don’t think we need concern ourselves with this unknown man,’ said Melchett. ‘You heard the cry and the splash and a few minutes later you saw the body floating downstream and you ran for help, going back to the bridge, crossing it, and making straight for the village. You didn’t see anyone near the bridge as you ran for help?’

‘I think as there were two men with a wheelbarrow on the river path; but they were some way away and I couldn’t tell if they were going or coming and Mr Giles’s place was nearest – so I ran there.’

‘You did well, my boy,’ said Melchett. ‘You acted very creditably and with presence of mind. You’re a scout, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Very good. Very good indeed.’

Sir Henry was silent – thinking. He took a slip of paper from his pocket, looked at it, shook his head. It didn’t seem possible – and yet –

He decided to pay a call on Miss Marple.

She received him in her pretty, slightly overcrowded old-style drawing-room.

‘I’ve come to report progress,’ said Sir Henry. ‘I’m afraid that from our point of view things aren’t going

Agatha Christie

well. They are going to arrest Sandford. And I must say I think they are justified.'

'You have found nothing in – what shall I say – support of my theory, then?' She looked perplexed – anxious. 'Perhaps I have been wrong – quite wrong. You have such wide experience – you would surely detect it if it were so.'

'For one thing,' said Sir Henry, 'I can hardly believe it. And for another we are up against an unbreakable alibi. Joe Ellis was fixing shelves in the kitchen all the evening and Mrs Bartlett was watching him do it.'

Miss Marple leaned forward, taking in a quick breath.

'But that can't be so,' she said. 'It was Friday night.'

'Friday night?'

'Yes – Friday night. On Friday evenings Mrs Bartlett takes the laundry she has done round to the different people.'

Sir Henry leaned back in his chair. He remembered the boy Jimmy's story of the whistling man and – yes – it would all fit in.

He rose, taking Miss Marple warmly by the hand.

'I think I see my way,' he said. 'At least I can try . . .'

Five minutes later he was back at Mrs Bartlett's cottage and facing Joe Ellis in the little parlour among the china dogs.

‘You lied to us, Ellis, about last night,’ he said crisply. ‘You were not in the kitchen here fixing the dresser between eight and eight-thirty. You were seen walking along the path by the river towards the bridge a few minutes before Rose Emmott was murdered.’

The man gasped.

‘She weren’t murdered – she weren’t. I had naught to do with it. She threw herself in, she did. She was desperate like. I wouldn’t have harmed a hair on her head, I wouldn’t.’

‘Then why did you lie as to where you were?’ asked Sir Henry keenly.

The man’s eyes shifted and lowered uncomfortably.

‘I was scared. Mrs B. saw me around there and when we heard just afterwards what had happened – well, she thought it might look bad for me. I fixed I’d say I was working here, and she agreed to back me up. She’s a rare one, she is. She’s always been good to me.’

Without a word Sir Henry left the room and walked into the kitchen. Mrs Bartlett was washing up at the sink.

‘Mrs Bartlett,’ he said, ‘I know everything. I think you’d better confess – that is, unless you want Joe Ellis hanged for something he didn’t do . . . No. I see you don’t want that. I’ll tell you what happened. You were out taking the laundry home. You came across Rose Emmott. You thought she’d given Joe the chuck

Agatha Christie

and was taking up with this stranger. Now she was in trouble – Joe was prepared to come to the rescue – marry her if need be, and if she'd have him. He's lived in your house for four years. You've fallen in love with him. You want him for yourself. You hated this girl – you couldn't bear that this worthless little slut should take your man from you. You're a strong woman, Mrs Bartlett. You caught the girl by the shoulders and shoved her over into the stream. A few minutes later you met Joe Ellis. The boy Jimmy saw you together in the distance – but in the darkness and the mist he assumed the perambulator was a wheelbarrow and two men wheeling it. You persuaded Joe that he might be suspected and you concocted what was supposed to be an alibi for him, but which was really an alibi for *you*. Now then, I'm right, am I not?'

He held his breath. He had staked all on this throw.

She stood before him rubbing her hands on her apron, slowly making up her mind.

'It's just as you say, sir,' she said at last, in her quiet subdued voice (a dangerous voice, Sir Henry suddenly felt it to be). 'I don't know what came over me. Shameless – that's what she was. It just came over me – she shan't take Joe from me. I haven't had a happy life, sir. My husband, he was a poor lot – an invalid and cross-grained. I nursed and looked after him true. And then Joe came here to lodge. I'm not

such an old woman, sir, in spite of my grey hair. I'm just forty, sir. Joe's one in a thousand. I'd have done anything for him – anything at all. He was like a little child, sir, so gentle and believing. He was mine, sir, to look after and see to. And this – this –' She swallowed – checked her emotion. Even at this moment she was a strong woman. She stood up straight and looked at Sir Henry curiously. 'I'm ready to come, sir. I never thought anyone would find out. I don't know how you knew, sir – I don't, I'm sure.'

Sir Henry shook his head gently.

'It was not I who knew,' he said – and he thought of the piece of paper still reposing in his pocket with the words on it written in neat old-fashioned handwriting.

'Mrs Bartlett, with whom Joe Ellis lodges at 2 Mill Cottages.'

Miss Marple had been right again.

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.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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The Pale Horse
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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
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Miss Marple Mysteries

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The Moving Finger
A Murder Is Announced
They Do It with Mirrors
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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

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Giant's Bread
Unfinished Portrait
Absent in the Spring
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Play Collections

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

THE THIRTEEN PROBLEMS by Agatha Christie

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