

Agatha Christie

the **thirteen**
problems



marple

Agatha Christie

**The Thirteen
Problems**

To Leonard and Katherine Woolley

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Chapter 4

The Bloodstained Pavement

‘It’s curious,’ said Joyce Lemprière, ‘but I hardly like telling you my story. It happened a long time ago – five years ago to be exact – but it’s sort of haunted me ever since. The smiling, bright, top part of it – and the hidden gruesomeness underneath. And the queer thing is that the sketch I painted at the time has become tinged with the same atmosphere. When you look at it first it is just a rough sketch of a little steep Cornish street with the sunlight on it. But if you look long enough at it something sinister creeps in. I have never sold it but I never look at it. It lives in the studio in a corner with its face to the wall.

‘The name of the place was Rathole. It is a queer little Cornish fishing village, very picturesque – too picturesque perhaps. There is rather too much of the atmosphere of “Ye Olde Cornish Tea House” about it. It has shops with bobbed-headed girls in smocks doing

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hand-illuminated mottoes on parchment. It is pretty and it is quaint, but it is very self-consciously so.'

'Don't I know,' said Raymond West, groaning. 'The curse of the charabanc, I suppose. No matter how narrow the lanes leading down to them no picturesque village is safe.'

Joyce nodded.

'They are narrow lanes that lead down to Rathole and very steep, like the side of a house. Well, to get on with my story. I had come down to Cornwall for a fortnight, to sketch. There is an old inn in Rathole, The Polharwith Arms. It was supposed to be the only house left standing by the Spaniards when they shelled the place in fifteen hundred and something.'

'Not shelled,' said Raymond West, frowning. 'Do try to be historically accurate, Joyce.'

'Well, at all events they landed guns somewhere along the coast and they fired them and the houses fell down. Anyway that is not the point. The inn was a wonderful old place with a kind of porch in front built on four pillars. I got a very good pitch and was just settling down to work when a car came creeping and twisting down the hill. Of course, it *would* stop before the inn – just where it was most awkward for me. The people got out – a man and a woman – I didn't notice them particularly. She had a kind of mauve linen dress on and a mauve hat.

‘Presently the man came out again and to my great thankfulness drove the car down to the quay and left it there. He strolled back past me towards the inn. Just at that moment another beastly car came twisting down, and a woman got out of it dressed in the brightest chintz frock I have ever seen, scarlet poinsettias, I think they were, and she had on one of those big native straw hats – Cuban, aren’t they? – in very bright scarlet.

‘This woman didn’t stop in front of the inn but drove the car farther down the street towards the other one. Then she got out and the man seeing her gave an astonished shout. “Carol,” he cried, “in the name of all that is wonderful. Fancy meeting you in this out-of-the-way spot. I haven’t seen you for years. Hello, there’s Margery – my wife, you know. You must come and meet her.”

‘They went up the street towards the inn side by side, and I saw the other woman had just come out of the door and was moving down towards them. I had had just a glimpse of the woman called Carol as she passed by me. Just enough to see a very white powdered chin and a flaming scarlet mouth and I wondered – I just wondered – if Margery would be so very pleased to meet her. I hadn’t seen Margery near to, but in the distance she looked dowdy and extra prim and proper.

‘Well, of course, it was not any of my business but

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you get very queer little glimpses of life sometimes, and you can't help speculating about them. From where they were standing I could just catch fragments of their conversation that floated down to me. They were talking about bathing. The husband, whose name seemed to be Denis, wanted to take a boat and row round the coast. There was a famous cave well worth seeing, so he said, about a mile along. Carol wanted to see the cave too but suggested walking along the cliffs and seeing it from the land side. She said she hated boats. In the end they fixed it that way. Carol was to go along the cliff path and meet them at the cave, and Denis and Margery would take a boat and row round.

‘Hearing them talk about bathing made me want to bathe too. It was a very hot morning and I wasn't doing particularly good work. Also, I fancied that the afternoon sunlight would be far more attractive in effect. So I packed up my things and went off to a little beach that I knew of – it was quite the opposite direction from the cave, and was rather a discovery of mine. I had a ripping bathe there and I lunched off a tinned tongue and two tomatoes, and I came back in the afternoon full of confidence and enthusiasm to get on with my sketch.

‘The whole of Rathole seemed to be asleep. I had been right about the afternoon sunlight, the shadows

were far more telling. The Polharwith Arms was the principal note of my sketch. A ray of sunlight came slanting obliquely down and hit the ground in front of it and had rather a curious effect. I gathered that the bathing party had returned safely, because two bathing dresses, a scarlet one and a dark blue one, were hanging from the balcony, drying in the sun.

‘Something had gone a bit wrong with one corner of my sketch and I bent over it for some moments doing something to put it right. When I looked up again there was a figure leaning against one of the pillars of The Polharwith Arms, who seemed to have appeared there by magic. He was dressed in seafaring clothes and was, I suppose, a fisherman. But he had a long dark beard, and if I had been looking for a model for a wicked Spanish captain I couldn’t have imagined anyone better. I got to work with feverish haste before he should move away, though from his attitude he looked as though he was perfectly prepared to prop up the pillars through all eternity.

‘He did move, however, but luckily not until I had got what I wanted. He came over to me and he began to talk. Oh, how that man talked.

“‘Rathole,” he said, “was a very interesting place.”

‘I knew that already but although I said so that didn’t save me. I had the whole history of the shelling – I mean the destroying – of the village, and how the

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landlord of the Polharwith Arms was the last man to be killed. Run through on his own threshold by a Spanish captain's sword, and of how his blood spurted out on the pavement and no one could wash out the stain for a hundred years.

'It all fitted in very well with the languorous drowsy feeling of the afternoon. The man's voice was very suave and yet at the same time there was an under-current in it of something rather frightening. He was very obsequious in his manner, yet I felt underneath he was cruel. He made me understand the Inquisition and the terrors of all the things the Spaniards did better than I have ever done before.

'All the time he was talking to me I went on painting, and suddenly I realized that in the excitement of listening to his story I had painted in something that was not there. On that white square of pavement where the sun fell before the door of The Polharwith Arms, I had painted in bloodstains. It seemed extraordinary that the mind could play such tricks with the hand, but as I looked over towards the inn again I got a second shock. My hand had only painted what my eyes saw – drops of blood on the white pavement.

'I stared for a minute or two. Then I shut my eyes, said to myself, "Don't be so stupid, there's nothing there, really," then I opened them again, but the bloodstains were still there.

‘I suddenly felt I couldn’t stand it. I interrupted the fisherman’s flood of language.

“‘Tell me,” I said, “my eyesight is not very good. Are those bloodstains on that pavement over there?”

‘He looked at me indulgently and kindly.

“‘No bloodstains in these days, lady. What I am telling you about is nearly five hundred years ago.”

“‘Yes,” I said, “but now – on the pavement” – the words died away in my throat. I *knew* – I *knew* that he wouldn’t see what I was seeing. I got up and with shaking hands began to put my things together. As I did so the young man who had come in the car that morning came out of the inn door. He looked up and down the street perplexedly. On the balcony above his wife came out and collected the bathing things. He walked down towards the car but suddenly swerved and came across the road towards the fisherman.

“‘Tell me, my man,” he said. “You don’t know whether the lady who came in that second car there has got back yet?”

“‘Lady in a dress with flowers all over it? No, sir, I haven’t seen her. She went along the cliff towards the cave this morning.”

“‘I know, I know. We all bathed there together, and then she left us to walk home and I have not seen her since. It can’t have taken her all this time. The cliffs round here are not dangerous, are they?”

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“It depends, sir, on the way you go. The best way is to take a man what knows the place with you.”

‘He very clearly meant himself and was beginning to enlarge on the theme, but the young man cut him short unceremoniously and ran back towards the inn calling up to his wife on the balcony.

“I say, Margery, Carol hasn’t come back yet. Odd, isn’t it?”

‘I didn’t hear Margery’s reply, but her husband went on. “Well, we can’t wait any longer. We have got to push on to Penrithar. Are you ready? I will turn the car.”

‘He did as he had said, and presently the two of them drove off together. Meanwhile I had deliberately been nerving myself to prove how ridiculous my fancies were. When the car had gone I went over to the inn and examined the pavement closely. Of course there were no bloodstains there. No, all along it had been the result of my distorted imagination. Yet, somehow, it seemed to make the thing more frightening. It was while I was standing there that I heard the fisherman’s voice.

‘He was looking at me curiously. “You thought you saw bloodstains here, eh, lady?”

‘I nodded.

“That is very curious, that is very curious. We have got a superstition here, lady. If anyone sees those bloodstains –”

‘He paused.

“‘Well?’ I said.

‘He went on in his soft voice, Cornish in intonation, but unconsciously smooth and well-bred in its pronunciation, and completely free from Cornish turns of speech.

“‘They do say, lady, that if anyone sees those blood-stains that there will be a death within twenty-four hours.’”

‘Creepy! It gave me a nasty feeling all down my spine.

‘He went on persuasively. “There is a very interesting tablet in the church, lady, about a death –”

“‘No thanks,” I said decisively, and I turned sharply on my heel and walked up the street towards the cottage where I was lodging. Just as I got there I saw in the distance the woman called Carol coming along the cliff path. She was hurrying. Against the grey of the rocks she looked like some poisonous scarlet flower. Her hat was the colour of blood . . .

‘I shook myself. Really, I had blood on the brain.

‘Later I heard the sound of her car. I wondered whether she too was going to Penrithar; but she took the road to the left in the opposite direction. I watched the car crawl up the hill and disappear, and I breathed somehow more easily. Rathole seemed its quiet sleepy self once more.’

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‘If that is all,’ said Raymond West as Joyce came to a stop, ‘I will give my verdict at once. Indigestion, spots before the eyes after meals.’

‘It isn’t all,’ said Joyce. ‘You have got to hear the sequel. I read it in the paper two days later under the heading of “Sea Bathing Fatality”. It told how Mrs Dacre, the wife of Captain Denis Dacre, was unfortunately drowned at Landeer Cove, just a little farther along the coast. She and her husband were staying at the time at the hotel there, and had declared their intention of bathing, but a cold wind sprang up. Captain Dacre had declared it was too cold, so he and some other people in the hotel had gone off to the golf links near by. Mrs Dacre, however, had said it was not too cold for her and she went off alone down to the cove. As she didn’t return her husband became alarmed, and in company with his friends went down to the beach. They found her clothes lying beside a rock, but no trace of the unfortunate lady. Her body was not found until nearly a week later when it was washed ashore at a point some distance down the coast. There was a bad blow on her head which had occurred before death, and the theory was that she must have dived into the sea and hit her head on a rock. As far as I could make out her death would have occurred just twenty-four hours after the time I saw the bloodstains.’

‘I protest,’ said Sir Henry. ‘This is not a problem – this is a ghost story. Miss Lemprière is evidently a medium.’

Mr Petherick gave his usual cough.

‘One point strikes me –’ he said, ‘that blow on the head. We must not, I think, exclude the possibility of foul play. But I do not see that we have any data to go upon. Miss Lemprière’s hallucination, or vision, is interesting certainly, but I do not see clearly the point on which she wishes us to pronounce.’

‘Indigestion and coincidence,’ said Raymond, ‘and anyway you can’t be sure that they were the same people. Besides, the curse, or whatever it was, would only apply to the actual inhabitants of Rathole.’

‘I feel,’ said Sir Henry, ‘that the sinister seafaring man has something to do with this tale. But I agree with Mr Petherick, Miss Lemprière has given us very little data.’

Joyce turned to Dr Pender who smilingly shook his head.

‘It is a most interesting story,’ he said, ‘but I am afraid I agree with Sir Henry and Mr Petherick that there is very little data to go upon.’

Joyce then looked curiously at Miss Marple, who smiled back at her.

‘I, too, think you are just a little unfair, Joyce dear,’ she said. ‘Of course, it is different for me. I mean, we,

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being women, appreciate the point about clothes. I don't think it is a fair problem to put to a man. It must have meant a lot of rapid changing. What a wicked woman! And a still more wicked man.'

Joyce stared at her.

'Aunt Jane,' she said. 'Miss Marple, I mean, I believe – I do really believe you know the truth.'

'Well, dear,' said Miss Marple, 'it is much easier for me sitting here quietly than it was for you – and being an artist you are so susceptible to atmosphere, aren't you? Sitting here with one's knitting, one just sees the facts. Bloodstains dropped on the pavement from the bathing dress hanging above, and being a red bathing dress, of course, the criminals themselves did not realize it was bloodstained. Poor thing, poor young thing!'

'Excuse me, Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry, 'but you do know that I am entirely in the dark still. You and Miss Lemprière seem to know what you are talking about, but we men are still in utter darkness.'

'I will tell you the end of the story now,' said Joyce. 'It was a year later. I was at a little east coast seaside resort, and I was sketching, when suddenly I had that queer feeling one has of something having happened before. There were two people, a man and a woman, on the pavement in front of me, and they were greeting a third person, a woman dressed in a scarlet poinsettia chintz

dress. “Carol, by all that is wonderful! Fancy meeting you after all these years. You don’t know my wife? Joan, this is an old friend of mine, Miss Harding.”

‘I recognized the man at once. It was the same Denis I had seen at Rathole. The wife was different – that is, she was a Joan instead of a Margery; but she was the same type, young and rather dowdy and very inconspicuous. I thought for a minute I was going mad. They began to talk of going bathing. I will tell you what I did. I marched straight then and there to the police station. I thought they would probably think I was off my head, but I didn’t care. And as it happened everything was quite all right. There was a man from Scotland Yard there, and he had come down just about this very thing. It seems – oh, it’s horrible to talk about – that the police had got suspicions of Denis Dacre. That wasn’t his real name – he took different names on different occasions. He got to know girls, usually quiet inconspicuous girls without many relatives or friends, he married them and insured their lives for large sums and then – oh, it’s horrible! The woman called Carol was his real wife, and they always carried out the same plan. That is really how they came to catch him. The insurance companies became suspicious. He would come to some quiet seaside place with his new wife, then the other woman would turn up and they would all go bathing together. Then the wife would

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be murdered and Carol would put on her clothes and go back in the boat with him. Then they would leave the place, wherever it was, after inquiring for the supposed Carol and when they got outside the village Carol would hastily change back into her own flamboyant clothes and her vivid make-up and would go back there and drive off in her own car. They would find out which way the current was flowing and the supposed death would take place at the next bathing place along the coast that way. Carol would play the part of the wife and would go down to some lonely beach and would leave the wife's clothes there by a rock and depart in her flowery chintz dress to wait quietly until her husband could rejoin her.

‘I suppose when they killed poor Margery some of the blood must have spurted over Carol's bathing suit, and being a red one they didn't notice it, as Miss Marple says. But when they hung it over the balcony it dripped. Ugh!’ she gave a shiver. ‘I can see it still.’

‘Of course,’ said Sir Henry, ‘I remember very well now. Davis was the man's real name. It had quite slipped my memory that one of his many aliases was Dacre. They were an extraordinarily cunning pair. It always seemed so amazing to me that no one spotted the change of identity. I suppose, as Miss Marple says, clothes are more easily identified than faces; but it was a very clever scheme, for although we suspected Davis

it was not easy to bring the crime home to him as he always seemed to have an unimpeachable alibi.'

'Aunt Jane,' said Raymond, looking at her curiously, 'how do you do it? You have lived such a peaceful life and yet nothing seems to surprise you.'

'I always find one thing very like another in this world,' said Miss Marple. 'There was Mrs Green, you know, she buried five children – and every one of them insured. Well, naturally, one began to get suspicious.'

She shook her head.

'There is a great deal of wickedness in village life. I hope you dear young people will never realize how very wicked the world is.'

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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* novelised by Charles Osborne

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By the Pricking of My Thumbs
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THE THIRTEEN PROBLEMS by Agatha Christie

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