Agatha Christie

the thirteen problems

marple

Agatha Christie

The Thirteen Problems

perfectbound

To Leonard and Katherine Woolley

Contents

Chapter 5

Motive *v* Opportunity

Mr Petherick cleared his throat rather more importantly than usual.

'I am afraid my little problem will seem rather tame to you all,' he said apologetically, 'after the sensational stories we have been hearing. There is no bloodshed in mine, but it seems to me an interesting and rather ingenious little problem, and fortunately I am in the position to know the right answer to it.'

'It isn't terribly legal, is it?' asked Joyce Lemprière. 'I mean points of law and lots of Barnaby *v* Skinner in the year 1881, and things like that.'

Mr Petherick beamed appreciatively at her over his eyeglasses.

'No, no, my dear young lady. You need have no fears on that score. The story I am about to tell is a perfectly simple and straightforward one and can be followed by any layman.'

'No legal quibbles, now,' said Miss Marple, shaking a knitting needle at him.

'Certainly not,' said Mr Petherick.

'Ah well, I am not so sure, but let's hear the story.'

'It concerns a former client of mine. I will call him Mr Clode – Simon Clode. He was a man of considerable wealth and lived in a large house not very far from here. He had had one son killed in the War and this son had left one child, a little girl. Her mother had died at her birth, and on her father's death she had come to live with her grandfather who at once became passionately attached to her. Little Chris could do anything she liked with her grandfather. I have never seen a man more completely wrapped up in a child, and I cannot describe to you his grief and despair when, at the age of eleven, the child contracted pneumonia and died.

'Poor Simon Clode was inconsolable. A brother of his had recently died in poor circumstances and Simon Clode had generously offered a home to his brother's children – two girls, Grace and Mary, and a boy, George. But though kind and generous to his nephew and nieces, the old man never expended on them any of the love and devotion he had accorded to his little grandchild. Employment was found for George Clode in a bank near by, and Grace married a clever young research chemist of the name of Philip Garrod. Mary, who was a quiet, self-contained girl, lived at home and

looked after her uncle. She was, I think, fond of him in her quiet undemonstrative way. And to all appearances things went on very peacefully. I may say that after the death of little Christobel, Simon Clode came to me and instructed me to draw up a new will. By this will, his fortune, a very considerable one, was divided equally between his nephew and nieces, a third share to each.

'Time went on. Chancing to meet George Clode one day I inquired for his uncle, whom I had not seen for some time. To my surprise George's face clouded over. "I wish you could put some sense into Uncle Simon," he said ruefully. His honest but not very brilliant countenance looked puzzled and worried. "This spirit business is getting worse and worse."

'"What spirit business?" I asked, very much surprised.

'Then George told me the whole story. How Mr Clode had gradually got interested in the subject and how on the top of this interest he had chanced to meet an American medium, a Mrs Eurydice Spragg. This woman, whom George did not hesitate to characterize as an out and out swindler, had gained an immense ascendancy over Simon Clode. She was practically always in the house and many séances were held in which the spirit of Christobel manifested itself to the doting grandfather.

'I may say here and now that I do not belong to the

ranks of those who cover spiritualism with ridicule and scorn. I am, as I have told you, a believer in evidence. And I think that when we have an impartial mind and weigh the evidence in favour of spiritualism there remains much that cannot be put down to fraud or lightly set aside. Therefore, as I say, I am neither a believer nor an unbeliever. There is certain testimony with which one cannot afford to disagree.

'On the other hand, spiritualism lends itself very easily to fraud and imposture, and from all young George Clode told me about this Mrs Eurydice Spragg I felt more and more convinced that Simon Clode was in bad hands and that Mrs Spragg was probably an imposter of the worst type. The old man, shrewd as he was in practical matters, would be easily imposed on where his love for his dead grandchild was concerned.

'Turning things over in my mind I felt more and more uneasy. I was fond of the young Clodes, Mary and George, and I realized that this Mrs Spragg and her influence over their uncle might lead to trouble in the future.

'At the earliest opportunity I made a pretext for calling on Simon Clode. I found Mrs Spragg installed as an honoured and friendly guest. As soon as I saw her my worst apprehensions were fulfilled. She was a stout woman of middle age, dressed in a flamboyant style. Very full of cant phrases about "Our

dear ones who have passed over," and other things of the kind.

'Her husband was also staying in the house, Mr Absalom Spragg, a thin lank man with a melancholy expression and extremely furtive eyes. As soon as I could, I got Simon Clode to myself and sounded him tactfully on the subject. He was full of enthusiasm. Eurydice Spragg was wonderful! She had been sent to him directly in answer to a prayer! She cared nothing for money, the joy of helping a heart in affliction was enough for her. She had quite a mother's feeling for little Chris. He was beginning to regard her almost as a daughter. Then he went on to give me details – how he had heard his Chris's voice speaking – how she was well and happy with her father and mother. He went on to tell other sentiments expressed by the child, which in my remembrance of little Christobel seemed to me highly unlikely. She laid stress on the fact that "Father and Mother loved dear Mrs Spragg".

'"But, of course," he broke off, "you are a scoffer, Petherick."

'"No, I am not a scoffer. Very far from it. Some of the men who have written on the subject are men whose testimony I would accept unhesitatingly, and I should accord any medium recommended by them respect and credence. I presume that this Mrs Spragg is well vouched for?"

'Simon went into ecstasies over Mrs Spragg. She had been sent to him by Heaven. He had come across her at the watering place where he had spent two months in the summer. A chance meeting, with what a wonderful result!

'I went away very dissatisfied. My worst fears were realized, but I did not see what I could do. After a good deal of thought and deliberation I wrote to Philip Garrod who had, as I mentioned, just married the eldest Clode girl, Grace. I set the case before him – of course, in the most carefully guarded language. I pointed out the danger of such a woman gaining ascendancy over the old man's mind. And I suggested that Mr Clode should be brought into contact if possible with some reputable spiritualistic circles. This, I thought, would not be a difficult matter for Philip Garrod to arrange.

'Garrod was prompt to act. He realized, which I did not, that Simon Clode's health was in a very precarious condition, and as a practical man he had no intention of letting his wife or her sister and brother be despoiled of the inheritance which was so rightly theirs. He came down the following week, bringing with him as a guest no other than the famous Professor Longman. Longman was a scientist of the first order, a man whose association with spiritualism compelled the latter to be treated with respect. Not only a brilliant scientist; he was a man of the utmost uprightness and probity.

'The result of the visit was most unfortunate. Longman, it seemed, had said very little while he was there. Two séances were held – under what conditions I do not know. Longman was non-committal all the time he was in the house, but after his departure he wrote a letter to Philip Garrod. In it he admitted that he had not been able to detect Mrs Spragg in fraud, nevertheless his private opinion was that the phenomena were not genuine. Mr Garrod, he said, was at liberty to show this letter to his uncle if he thought fit, and he suggested that he himself should put Mr Clode in touch with a medium of perfect integrity.

'Philip Garrod had taken this letter straight to his uncle, but the result was not what he had anticipated. The old man flew into a towering rage. It was all a plot to discredit Mrs Spragg who was a maligned and injured saint! She had told him already what bitter jealousy there was of her in this country. He pointed out that Longman was forced to say he had not detected fraud. Eurydice Spragg had come to him in the darkest hour of his life, had given him help and comfort, and he was prepared to espouse her cause even if it meant quarrelling with every member of his family. She was more to him than anyone else in the world.

'Philip Garrod was turned out of the house with scant ceremony; but as a result of his rage Clode's own health took a decided turn for the worse. For

the last month he had kept to his bed pretty continuously, and now there seemed every possibility of his being a bedridden invalid until such time as death should release him. Two days after Philip's departure I received an urgent summons and went hurriedly over. Clode was in bed and looked even to my layman's eye very ill indeed. He was gasping for breath.

'"This is the end of me," he said. "I feel it. Don't argue with me, Petherick. But before I die I am going to do my duty by the one human being who has done more for me than anyone else in the world. I want to make a fresh will."

'"Certainly," I said, "if you will give me your instructions now I will draft out a will and send it to you."

'"That won't do," he said. "Why, man, I might not live through the night. I have written out what I want here," he fumbled under his pillow, "and you can tell me if it is right."

'He produced a sheet of paper with a few words roughly scribbled on it in pencil. It was quite simple and clear. He left £5000 to each of his nieces and nephew, and the residue of his vast property outright to Eurydice Spragg "in gratitude and admiration".

'I didn't like it, but there it was. There was no question of unsound mind, the old man was as sane as anybody.

'He rang the bell for two of the servants. They came

promptly. The housemaid, Emma Gaunt, was a tall middle-aged woman who had been in service there for many years and who had nursed Clode devotedly. With her came the cook, a fresh buxom young woman of thirty. Simon Clode glared at them both from under his bushy eyebrows.

'"I want you to witness my will. Emma, get me my fountain pen."

'Emma went over obediently to the desk.

'"Not that left-hand drawer, girl," said old Simon irritably. "Don't you know it is in the right-hand one?"

'"No, it is here, sir," said Emma, producing it.

'"Then you must have put it away wrong last time," grumbled the old man. "I can't stand things not being kept in their proper places."

'Still grumbling he took the pen from her and copied his own rough draught, amended by me, on to a fresh piece of paper. Then he signed his name. Emma Gaunt and the cook, Lucy David, also signed. I folded the will up and put it into a long blue envelope. It was necessarily, you understand, written on an ordinary piece of paper.

'Just as the servants were turning to leave the room Clode lay back on the pillows with a gasp and a distorted face. I bent over him anxiously and Emma Gaunt came quickly back. However, the old man recovered and smiled weakly.

‘“It is all right, Petherick, don’t be alarmed. At any rate I shall die easy now having done what I wanted to.”

‘Emma Gaunt looked inquiringly at me as if to know whether she could leave the room. I nodded reassuringly and she went out – first stopping to pick up the blue envelope which I had let slip to the ground in my moment of anxiety. She handed it to me and I slipped it into my coat pocket and then she went out.

‘“You are annoyed, Petherick,” said Simon Clode. “You are prejudiced, like everybody else.”

‘“It is not a question of prejudice,” I said. “Mrs Spragg may be all that she claims to be. I should see no objection to you leaving her a small legacy as a memento of gratitude; but I tell you frankly, Clode, that to disinherit your own flesh and blood in favour of a stranger is wrong.”

‘With that I turned to depart. I had done what I could and made my protest.

‘Mary Clode came out of the drawing-room and met me in the hall.

‘“You will have tea before you go, won’t you? Come in here,” and she led me into the drawing-room.

‘A fire was burning on the hearth and the room looked cosy and cheerful. She relieved me of my overcoat just as her brother, George, came into the room. He took it from her and laid it across a chair

at the far end of the room, then he came back to the fireside where we drank tea. During the meal a question arose about some point concerning the estate. Simon Clode said he didn't want to be bothered with it and had left it to George to decide. George was rather nervous about trusting to his own judgment. At my suggestion, we adjourned to the study after tea and I looked over the papers in question. Mary Clode accompanied us.

'A quarter of an hour later I prepared to take my departure. Remembering that I had left my overcoat in the drawing-room, I went there to fetch it. The only occupant of the room was Mrs Spragg, who was kneeling by the chair on which the overcoat lay. She seemed to be doing something rather unnecessary to the cretonne cover. She rose with a very red face as we entered.

'"That cover never did sit right," she complained. "My! I could make a better fit myself."

'I took up my overcoat and put it on. As I did so I noticed that the envelope containing the will had fallen out of the pocket and was lying on the floor. I replaced it in my pocket, said goodbye, and took my departure.

'On arrival at my office, I will describe my next actions carefully. I removed my overcoat and took the will from the pocket. I had it in my hand and was standing by the table when my clerk came in.

Somebody wished to speak to me on the telephone, and the extension to my desk was out of order. I accordingly accompanied him to the outer office and remained there for about five minutes engaged in conversation over the telephone.

'When I emerged, I found my clerk waiting for me.

'"Mr Spragg has called to see you, sir. I showed him into your office."

'I went there to find Mr Spragg sitting by the table. He rose and greeted me in a somewhat unctuous manner, then proceeded to a long discursive speech. In the main it seemed to be an uneasy justification of himself and his wife. He was afraid people were saying etc., etc. His wife had been known from her babyhood upwards for the pureness of her heart and her motives . . . and so on and so on. I was, I am afraid, rather curt with him. In the end I think he realized that his visit was not being a success and he left somewhat abruptly. I then remembered that I had left the will lying on the table. I took it, sealed the envelope, and wrote on it and put it away in the safe.

'Now I come to the crux of my story. Two months later Mr Simon Clode died. I will not go into long-winded discussions, I will just state the bare facts. *When the sealed envelope containing the will was opened it was found to contain a sheet of blank paper.*'

He paused, looking round the circle of interested faces. He smiled himself with a certain enjoyment.

'You appreciate the point, of course? For two months the sealed envelope had lain in my safe. It could not have been tampered with then. No, the time limit was a very short one. Between the moment the will was signed and my locking it away in the safe. Now who had had the opportunity, and to whose interests would it be to do so?

'I will recapitulate the vital points in a brief summary: The will was signed by Mr Clode, placed by me in an envelope – so far so good. It was then put by me in my overcoat pocket. That overcoat was taken from me by Mary and handed by her to George, who was in full sight of me whilst handling the coat. During the time that I was in the study Mrs Eurydice Spragg would have had plenty of time to extract the envelope from the coat pocket and read its contents and, as a matter of fact, finding the envelope on the ground and not in the pocket seemed to point to her having done so. But here we come to a curious point: she had the *opportunity* of substituting the blank paper, but no *motive*. The will was in her favour, and by substituting a blank piece of paper she despoiled herself of the heritage she had been so anxious to gain. The same applied to Mr Spragg. He, too, had the opportunity. He was left alone with the document in question for some two or three minutes

in my office. But again, it was not to his advantage to do so. So we are faced with this curious problem: the two people who had the *opportunity* of substituting a blank piece of paper had no *motive* for doing so, and the two people who had a *motive* had no *opportunity*. By the way, I would not exclude the housemaid, Emma Gaunt, from suspicion. She was devoted to her young master and mistress and detested the Spraggs. She would, I feel sure, have been quite equal to attempting the substitution if she had thought of it. But although she actually handled the envelope when she picked it up from the floor and handed it to me, she certainly had no opportunity of tampering with its contents and she could not have substituted another envelope by some sleight of hand (of which anyway she would not be capable) because the envelope in question was brought into the house by me and no one there would be likely to have a duplicate.'

He looked round, beaming on the assembly.

'Now, there is my little problem. I have, I hope, stated it clearly. I should be interested to hear your views.'

To everyone's astonishment Miss Marple gave vent to a long and prolonged chuckle. Something seemed to be amusing her immensely.

'What *is* the matter, Aunt Jane? Can't we share the joke?' said Raymond.

'I was thinking of little Tommy Symonds, a naughty little boy, I am afraid, but sometimes very amusing. One of those children with innocent childlike faces who are always up to some mischief or other. I was thinking how last week in Sunday School he said, "Teacher, do you say yolk of eggs *is* white or yolk of eggs *are* white?" And Miss Durston explained that anyone would say "yolks of eggs *are* white, or yolk of egg *is* white" – and naughty Tommy said: "Well, *I* should say yolk of egg is yellow!" Very naughty of him, of course, and as old as the hills. I knew that one as a child.'

'Very funny, my dear Aunt Jane,' Raymond said gently, 'but surely that has nothing to do with the very interesting story that Mr Petherick has been telling us.'

'Oh yes, it has,' said Miss Marple. 'It is a catch! And so is Mr Petherick's story a catch. So like a lawyer! Ah, my dear old friend!' She shook a reproving head at him.

'I wonder if you really know,' said the lawyer with a twinkle.

Miss Marple wrote a few words on a piece of paper, folded them up and passed them across to him.

Mr Petherick unfolded the paper, read what was written on it and looked across at her appreciatively.

'My dear friend,' he said, 'is there anything you do not know?'

'I knew that as a child,' said Miss Marple. 'Played with it too.'

'I feel rather out of this,' said Sir Henry. 'I feel sure that Mr Petherick has some clever legal legerdemain up his sleeve.'

'Not at all,' said Mr Petherick. 'Not at all. It is a perfectly fair straightforward proposition. You must not pay any attention to Miss Marple. She has her own way of looking at things.'

'We *should* be able to arrive at the truth,' said Raymond West a trifle vexedly. 'The facts certainly seem plain enough. Five persons actually touched that envelope. The Spraggs clearly could have meddled with it but equally clearly they did not do so. There remains the other three. Now, when one sees the marvellous ways that conjurers have of doing a thing before one's eyes, it seems to me that the paper could have been extracted and another substituted by George Clode during the time he was carrying the overcoat to the far end of the room.'

'Well, *I* think it was the girl,' said Joyce. 'I think the housemaid ran down and told her what was happening and she got hold of another blue envelope and just substituted the one for the other.'

Sir Henry shook his head. 'I disagree with you both,' he said slowly. 'These sort of things are done by conjurers, and they are done on the stage and in

novels, but I think they would be impossible to do in real life, especially under the shrewd eyes of a man like my friend Mr Petherick here. But I have an idea – it is only an idea and nothing more. We know that Professor Longman had just been down for a visit and that he said very little. It is only reasonable to suppose that the Spraggs may have been very anxious as to the result of that visit. If Simon Clode did not take them into his confidence, which is quite probable, they may have viewed his sending for Mr Petherick from quite another angle. They may have believed that Mr Clode had already made a will which benefited Eurydice Spragg and that this new one might be made for the express purpose of cutting her out as a result of Professor Longman's revelations, or alternatively, as you lawyers say, Philip Garrod had impressed on his uncle the claims of his own flesh and blood. In that case, suppose Mrs Spragg prepared to effect a substitution. This she does, but Mr Petherick coming in at an unfortunate moment she had no time to read the real document and hastily destroys it by fire in case the lawyer should discover his loss.'

Joyce shook her head very decidedly.

'She would never burn it without reading it.'

'The solution is rather a weak one,' admitted Sir Henry. 'I suppose – er – Mr Petherick did not assist Providence himself.'

The suggestion was only a laughing one, but the little lawyer drew himself up in offended dignity.

'A most improper suggestion,' he said with some asperity.

'What does Dr Pender say?' asked Sir Henry.

'I cannot say I have any very clear ideas. I think the substitution must have been effected by either Mrs Spragg or her husband, possibly for the motive that Sir Henry suggests. If she did not read the will until after Mr Petherick had departed, she would then be in somewhat of a dilemma, since she could not own up to her action in the matter. Possibly she would place it among Mr Clode's papers where she thought it would be found after his death. But why it wasn't found I don't know. It *might* be a mere speculation this – that Emma Gaunt came across it – and out of misplaced devotion to her employers – deliberately destroyed it.'

'I think Dr Pender's solution is the best of all,' said Joyce. 'Is it right, Mr Petherick?'

The lawyer shook his head.

'I will go on where I left off. I was dumbfounded and quite as much at sea as all of you are. I don't think I should ever have guessed the truth – probably not – but I was enlightened. It was cleverly done too.

'I went and dined with Philip Garrod about a month

later and in the course of our after-dinner conversation he mentioned an interesting case that had recently come to his notice.'

'"I should like to tell you about it, Petherick, in confidence, of course."

'"Quite so," I replied.

'"A friend of mine who had expectations from one of his relatives was greatly distressed to find that that relative had thoughts of benefiting a totally unworthy person. My friend, I am afraid, is a trifle unscrupulous in his methods. There was a maid in the house who was greatly devoted to the interests of what I may call the legitimate party. My friend gave her very simple instructions. He gave her a fountain pen, duly filled. She was to place this in a drawer in the writing table in her master's room, but not the usual drawer where the pen was generally kept. If her master asked her to witness his signature to any document and asked her to bring him his pen, she was to bring him not the right one, but this one which was an exact duplicate of it. That was all she had to do. He gave her no other information. She was a devoted creature and she carried out his instructions faithfully."

'He broke off and said:

'"I hope I am not boring you, Petherick."

'"Not at all," I said. "I am keenly interested."

'Our eyes met.

‘“My friend is, of course, not known to you,” he said.

‘“Of course not,” I replied.

‘“Then that is all right,” said Philip Garrod.

‘He paused then said smilingly, “You see the point? The pen was filled with what is commonly known as Evanescent Ink – a solution of starch in water to which a few drops of iodine has been added. This makes a deep blue-black fluid, but the writing disappears entirely in four or five days.”’

Miss Marple chuckled.

‘Disappearing ink,’ she said. ‘I know it. Many is the time I have played with it as a child.’

And she beamed round on them all, pausing to shake a finger once more at Mr Petherick.

‘But all the same it’s a catch, Mr Petherick,’ she said. ‘Just like a lawyer.’

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 upperclasses 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.

[13]Agatha Christie: *op. cit.*

About Agatha Christie

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

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

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

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

The Agatha Christie Collection

Christie Crime Classics

The Man in the Brown Suit
The Secret of Chimneys
The Seven Dials Mystery
The Mysterious Mr Quin
The Sittaford Mystery
The Hound of Death
The Listerdale Mystery
Why Didn't They Ask Evans?
Parker Pyne Investigates
Murder Is Easy
And Then There Were None
Towards Zero
Death Comes as the End
Sparkling Cyanide
Crooked House
They Came to Baghdad
Destination Unknown
Spider's Web *
The Unexpected Guest *
Ordeal by Innocence
The Pale Horse
Endless Night
Passenger To Frankfurt
Problem at Pollensa Bay
While the Light Lasts

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

The Murder at the Vicarage
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

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