

Agatha Christie

the **thirteen**
problems



marple

Agatha Christie

**The Thirteen
Problems**

To Leonard and Katherine Woolley

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Chapter 7

The Blue Geranium

‘When I was down here last year –’ said Sir Henry Clithering, and stopped.

His hostess, Mrs Bantry, looked at him curiously.

The Ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard was staying with old friends of his, Colonel and Mrs Bantry, who lived near St Mary Mead.

Mrs Bantry, pen in hand, had just asked his advice as to who should be invited to make a sixth guest at dinner that evening.

‘Yes?’ said Mrs Bantry encouragingly. ‘When you were here last year?’

‘Tell me,’ said Sir Henry, ‘do you know a Miss Marple?’

Mrs Bantry was surprised. It was the last thing she had expected.

‘Know Miss Marple? Who doesn’t! The typical old maid of fiction. Quite a dear, but hopelessly behind

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the times. Do you mean you would like me to ask *her* to dinner?’

‘You are surprised?’

‘A little, I must confess. I should hardly have thought you – but perhaps there’s an explanation?’

‘The explanation is simple enough. When I was down here last year we got into the habit of discussing unsolved mysteries – there were five or six of us – Raymond West, the novelist, started it. We each supplied a story to which we knew the answer, but nobody else did. It was supposed to be an exercise in the deductive faculties – to see who could get nearest the truth.’

‘Well?’

‘Like in the old story – we hardly realized that Miss Marple was playing; but we were very polite about it – didn’t want to hurt the old dear’s feelings. And now comes the cream of the jest. The old lady outdid us every time!’

‘What?’

‘I assure you – straight to the truth like a homing pigeon.’

‘But how extraordinary! Why, dear old Miss Marple has hardly ever been out of St Mary Mead.’

‘Ah! But according to her, that has given her unlimited opportunities of observing human nature – under the microscope as it were.’

‘I suppose there’s something in that,’ conceded Mrs Bantry. ‘One would at least know the petty side of people. But I don’t think we have any really exciting criminals in our midst. I think we must try her with Arthur’s ghost story after dinner. I’d be thankful if she’d find a solution to that.’

‘I didn’t know that Arthur believed in ghosts?’

‘Oh! he doesn’t. That’s what worries him so. And it happened to a friend of his, George Pritchard – a most prosaic person. It’s really rather tragic for poor George. Either this extraordinary story is true – or else –’

‘Or else what?’

Mrs Bantry did not answer. After a minute or two she said irrelevantly:

‘You know, I like George – everyone does. One can’t believe that he – but people do do such extraordinary things.’

Sir Henry nodded. He knew, better than Mrs Bantry, the extraordinary things that people did.

So it came about that that evening Mrs Bantry looked round her dinner table (shivering a little as she did so, because the dining-room, like most English dining-rooms, was extremely cold) and fixed her gaze on the very upright old lady sitting on her husband’s right. Miss Marple wore black lace mittens; an old lace fichu was draped round her shoulders and another

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piece of lace surmounted her white hair. She was talking animatedly to the elderly doctor, Dr Lloyd, about the Workhouse and the suspected shortcomings of the District Nurse.

Mrs Bantry marvelled anew. She even wondered whether Sir Henry had been making an elaborate joke – but there seemed no point in that. Incredible that what he had said could be really true.

Her glance went on and rested affectionately on her red-faced broad-shouldered husband as he sat talking horses to Jane Helier, the beautiful and popular actress. Jane, more beautiful (if that were possible) off the stage than on, opened enormous blue eyes and murmured at discreet intervals: ‘Really?’ ‘Oh fancy!’ ‘How extraordinary!’ She knew nothing whatever about horses and cared less.

‘Arthur,’ said Mrs Bantry, ‘you’re boring poor Jane to distraction. Leave horses alone and tell her your ghost story instead. You know . . . George Pritchard.’

‘Eh, Dolly? Oh! but I don’t know –’

‘Sir Henry wants to hear it too. I was telling him something about it this morning. It would be interesting to hear what everyone has to say about it.’

‘Oh do!’ said Jane. ‘I love ghost stories.’

‘Well –’ Colonel Bantry hesitated. ‘I’ve never believed much in the supernatural. But this –’

‘I don’t think any of you know George Pritchard.’

He's one of the best. His wife – well, she's dead now, poor woman. I'll just say this much: she didn't give George any too easy a time when she was alive. She was one of those semi-invalids – I believe she had really something wrong with her, but whatever it was she played it for all it was worth. She was capricious, exacting, unreasonable. She complained from morning to night. George was expected to wait on her hand and foot, and every thing he did was always wrong and he got cursed for it. Most men, I'm fully convinced, would have hit her over the head with a hatchet long ago. Eh, Dolly, isn't that so?

'She was a dreadful woman,' said Mrs Bantry with conviction. 'If George Pritchard had brained her with a hatchet, and there had been any woman on the jury, he would have been triumphantly acquitted.'

'I don't quite know how this business started. George was rather vague about it. I gather Mrs Pritchard had always had a weakness for fortune tellers, palmists, clairvoyantes – anything of that sort. George didn't mind. If she found amusement in it well and good. But he refused to go into rhapsodies himself, and that was another grievance.

'A succession of hospital nurses was always passing through the house, Mrs Pritchard usually becoming dissatisfied with them after a few weeks. One young nurse had been very keen on this fortune telling stunt,

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and for a time Mrs Pritchard had been very fond of her. Then she suddenly fell out with her and insisted on her going. She had back another nurse who had been with her previously – an older woman, experienced and tactful in dealing with a neurotic patient. Nurse Copling, according to George, was a very good sort – a sensible woman to talk to. She put up with Mrs Pritchard’s tantrums and nervestorms with complete indifference.

‘Mrs Pritchard always lunched upstairs, and it was usual at lunch time for George and the nurse to come to some arrangement for the afternoon. Strictly speaking, the nurse went off from two to four, but “to oblige” as the phrase goes, she would sometimes take her time off after tea if George wanted to be free for the afternoon. On this occasion, she mentioned that she was going to see a sister at Golders Green and might be a little late returning. George’s face fell, for he had arranged to play a round of golf. Nurse Copling, however, reassured him.

“We’ll neither of us be missed, Mr Pritchard.” A twinkle came into her eye. “Mrs Pritchard’s going to have more exciting company than ours.”

“Who’s that?”

“Wait a minute,” Nurse Copling’s eyes twinkled more than ever. “Let me get it right. *Zarida, Psychic Reader of the Future.*”

“Oh Lord!” groaned George. “That’s a new one, isn’t it?”

“Quite new. I believe my predecessor, Nurse Carstairs, sent her along. Mrs Pritchard hasn’t seen her yet. She made me write, fixing an appointment for this afternoon.”

“Well, at any rate, I shall get my golf,” said George, and he went off with the kindest feelings towards Zarida, the Reader of the Future.

‘On his return to the house, he found Mrs Pritchard in a state of great agitation. She was, as usual, lying on her invalid couch, and she had a bottle of smelling salts in her hand which she sniffed at frequent intervals.

“George,” she exclaimed. “What did I tell you about this house? The moment I came into it, I *felt* there was something wrong! Didn’t I tell you so at the time?”

‘Repressing his desire to reply, “You always do,” George said, “No, I can’t say I remember it.”

“You never do remember anything that has to do with me. Men are all extraordinarily callous – but I really believe that you are even more insensitive than most.”

“Oh, come now, Mary dear, that’s not fair.”

“Well, as I was telling you, this woman *knew* at once! She – she actually blenched – if you know

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what I mean – as she came in at the door, and she said: “There is evil here – evil and danger. I feel it.””

‘Very unwisely George laughed.

“‘Well, you have had your money’s worth this afternoon.”

‘His wife closed her eyes and took a long sniff from her smelling bottle.

“‘How you hate me! You would jeer and laugh if I were dying.”

‘George protested and after a minute or two she went on.

“‘You may laugh, but I shall tell you the whole thing. This house is definitely dangerous to me – the woman said so.”

‘George’s formerly kind feeling towards Zarida underwent a change. He knew his wife was perfectly capable of insisting on moving to a new house if the caprice got hold of her.

“‘What else did she say?’” he asked.

“‘She couldn’t tell me very much. She was so upset. One thing she did say. I had some violets in a glass. She pointed at them and cried out:

“‘Take those away. No blue flowers – never have blue flowers. *Blue flowers are fatal to you – remember that.*””

“‘And you know,” added Mrs Pritchard, “I always

have told you that blue as a colour is repellent to me. I feel a natural instinctive sort of warning against.”

‘George was much too wise to remark that he had never heard her say so before. Instead he asked what the mysterious Zarida was like. Mrs Pritchard entered with gusto upon a description.

“Black hair in coiled knobs over her ears – her eyes were half closed – great black rims round them – she had a black veil over her mouth and chin – and she spoke in a kind of singing voice with a marked foreign accent – Spanish, I think –”

“In fact all the usual stock-in-trade,” said George cheerfully.

‘His wife immediately closed her eyes.

“I feel extremely ill,” she said. “Ring for nurse. Unkindness upsets me, as you know only too well.”

‘It was two days later that Nurse Copling came to George with a grave face.

“Will you come to Mrs Pritchard, please. She has had a letter which upsets her greatly.”

‘He found his wife with the letter in her hand. She held it out to him.

“Read it,” she said.

‘George read it. It was on heavily scented paper, and the writing was big and black.

‘I have seen the future. Be warned before it is too late. Beware of the Full Moon. The Blue Primrose means

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Warning; the Blue Hollyhock means Danger; the Blue Geranium means Death . . .

‘Just about to burst out laughing, George caught Nurse Copling’s eye. She made a quick warning gesture. He said rather awkwardly, “The woman’s probably trying to frighten you, Mary. Anyway there aren’t such things as blue primroses and blue geraniums.”

‘But Mrs Pritchard began to cry and say her days were numbered. Nurse Copling came out with George upon the landing.

“Of all the silly tomfoolery,” he burst out.

“I suppose it is.”

‘Something in the nurse’s tone struck him, and he stared at her in amazement.

“Surely, nurse, you don’t believe –”

“No, no, Mr Pritchard. I don’t believe in reading the future – that’s nonsense. What puzzles me is the *meaning* of this. Fortune-tellers are usually out for what they can get. But this woman seems to be frightening Mrs Pritchard with no advantage to herself. I can’t see the point. There’s another thing –”

“Yes?”

“Mrs Pritchard says that something about Zarida was faintly familiar to her.”

“Well?”

“Well, I don’t like it, Mr Pritchard, that’s all.”

“I didn’t know you were so superstitious, nurse.”

“I’m not superstitious; but I know when a thing is fishy.”

‘It was about four days after this that the first incident happened. To explain it to you, I shall have to describe Mrs Pritchard’s room –’

‘You’d better let me do that,’ interrupted Mrs Bantry. ‘It was papered with one of those new wall-papers where you apply clumps of flowers to make a kind of herbaceous border. The effect is almost like being in a garden – though, of course, the flowers are all wrong. I mean they simply couldn’t be in bloom all at the same time –’

‘Don’t let a passion for horticultural accuracy run away with you, Dolly,’ said her husband. ‘We all know you’re an enthusiastic gardener.’

‘Well, it *is* absurd,’ protested Mrs Bantry. ‘To have bluebells and daffodils and lupins and hollyhocks and Michaelmas daisies all grouped together.’

‘Most unscientific,’ said Sir Henry. ‘But to proceed with the story.’

‘Well, among these massed flowers were primroses, clumps of yellow and pink primroses and – oh go on, Arthur, this is your story –’

Colonel Bantry took up the tale.

‘Mrs Pritchard rang her bell violently one morning. The household came running – thought she was in extremis; not at all. She was violently excited and

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pointing at the wallpaper; and there sure enough was *one blue primrose* in the midst of the others . . .’

‘Oh!’ said Miss Helier, ‘how creepy!’

‘The question was: Hadn’t the blue primrose always been there? That was George’s suggestion and the nurse’s. But Mrs Pritchard wouldn’t have it at any price. She had never noticed it till that very morning and the night before had been full moon. She was very upset about it.’

‘I met George Pritchard that same day and he told me about it,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘I went to see Mrs Pritchard and did my best to ridicule the whole thing; but without success. I came away really concerned, and I remember I met Jean Instow and told her about it. Jean is a queer girl. She said, “So she’s really upset about it?” I told her that I thought the woman was perfectly capable of dying of fright – she was really abnormally superstitious.

‘I remember Jean rather startled me with what she said next. She said, “Well, that might be all for the best, mightn’t it?” And she said it so coolly, in so matter-of-fact a tone that I was really – well, shocked. Of course I know it’s done nowadays – to be brutal and outspoken; but I never get used to it. Jean smiled at me rather oddly and said, “You don’t like my saying that – but it’s true. What use is Mrs Pritchard’s life to her? None at all; and it’s hell for George Pritchard. To have

his wife frightened out of existence would be the best thing that could happen to him.” I said, “George is most awfully good to her always.” And she said, “Yes, he deserves a reward, poor dear. He’s a very attractive person, George Pritchard. The last nurse thought so – the pretty one – what was her name? Carstairs. That was the cause of the row between her and Mrs P.”

‘Now I didn’t like hearing Jean say that. Of course one had *wondered* –’

Mrs Bantry paused significantly.

‘Yes, dear,’ said Miss Marple placidly. ‘One always does. Is Miss Instow a pretty girl? I suppose she plays golf?’

‘Yes. She’s good at all games. And she’s nice-looking, attractive-looking, very fair with a healthy skin, and nice steady blue eyes. Of course we always have felt that she and George Pritchard – I mean if things had been different – they are so well suited to one another.’

‘And they were friends?’ asked Miss Marple.

‘Oh yes. Great friends.’

‘Do you think, Dolly,’ said Colonel Bantry plaintively, ‘that I might be allowed to go on with my story?’

‘Arthur,’ said Mrs Bantry resignedly, ‘wants to get back to his ghosts.’

‘I had the rest of the story from George himself,’

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went on the Colonel. ‘There’s no doubt that Mrs Pritchard got the wind up badly towards the end of the next month. She marked off on a calendar the day when the moon would be full, and on that night she had both the nurse and then George into her room and made them study the wallpaper carefully. There were pink hollyhocks and red ones, but there were no blue amongst them. Then when George left the room she locked the door –’

‘And in the morning there was a large blue hollyhock,’ said Miss Helier joyfully.

‘Quite right,’ said Colonel Bantry. ‘Or at any rate, nearly right. One flower of a hollyhock just above her head had turned blue. It staggered George; and of course the more it staggered him the more he refused to take the thing seriously. He insisted that the whole thing was some kind of practical joke. He ignored the evidence of the locked door and the fact that Mrs Pritchard discovered the change before anyone – even Nurse Copling – was admitted.

‘It staggered George; and it made him unreasonable. His wife wanted to leave the house, and he wouldn’t let her. He was inclined to believe in the supernatural for the first time, but he wasn’t going to admit it. He usually gave in to his wife, but this time he wouldn’t. Mary was not to make a fool of herself, he said. The whole thing was the most infernal nonsense.

‘And so the next month sped away. Mrs Pritchard made less protest than one would have imagined. I think she was superstitious enough to believe that she couldn’t escape her fate. She repeated again and again: “The blue primrose – warning. The blue hollyhock – danger. The blue geranium – *death*.” And she would lie looking at the clump of pinky-red geraniums nearest her bed.

‘The whole business was pretty nervy. Even the nurse caught the infection. She came to George two days before full moon and begged him to take Mrs Pritchard away. George was angry.

“If all the flowers on that damned wall turned into blue devils it couldn’t kill anyone!” he shouted.

“It might. Shock has killed people before now.”

“Nonsense,” said George.

‘George has always been a shade pig-headed. You can’t drive him. I believe he had a secret idea that his wife worked the change herself and that it was all some morbid hysterical plan of hers.

‘Well, the fatal night came. Mrs Pritchard locked the door as usual. She was very calm – in almost an exalted state of mind. The nurse was worried by her state – wanted to give her a stimulant, an injection of strychnine, but Mrs Pritchard refused. In a way, I believe, she was enjoying herself. George said she was.’

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'I think that's quite possible,' said Mrs Bantry. 'There must have been a strange sort of glamour about the whole thing.'

'There was no violent ringing of a bell the next morning. Mrs Pritchard usually woke about eight. When, at eight-thirty, there was no sign from her, nurse rapped loudly on the door. Getting no reply, she fetched George, and insisted on the door being broken open. They did so with the help of a chisel.

'One look at the still figure on the bed was enough for Nurse Copling. She sent George to telephone for the doctor, but it was too late. Mrs Pritchard, he said, must have been dead at least eight hours. Her smelling salts lay by her hand on the bed, *and on the wall beside her one of the pinky-red geraniums was a bright deep blue.*'

'Horrible,' said Miss Helier with a shiver.

Sir Henry was frowning.

'No additional details?'

Colonel Bantry shook his head, but Mrs Bantry spoke quickly.

'The gas.'

'What about the gas?' asked Sir Henry.

'When the doctor arrived there was a slight smell of gas, and sure enough he found the gas ring in the fireplace very slightly turned on; but so little it couldn't have mattered.'

‘Did Mr Pritchard and the nurse not notice it when they first went in?’

‘The nurse said she did notice a slight smell. George said he didn’t notice gas, but something made him feel very queer and overcome; but he put that down to shock – and probably it was. At any rate there was no question of gas poisoning. The smell was scarcely noticeable.’

‘And that’s the end of the story?’

‘No, it isn’t. One way and another, there was a lot of talk. The servants, you see, had overheard things – had heard, for instance, Mrs Pritchard telling her husband that he hated her and would jeer if she were dying. And also more recent remarks. She had said one day, apropos of his refusing to leave the house: “Very well, when I am dead, I hope everyone will realize that you have killed me.” And as ill luck would have it, he had been mixing some weed killer for the garden paths the day before. One of the younger servants had seen him and had afterwards seen him taking up a glass of hot milk for his wife.

‘The talk spread and grew. The doctor had given a certificate – I don’t know exactly in what terms – shock, syncope, heart failure, probably some medical terms meaning nothing much. However the poor lady had not been a month in her grave before an exhumation order was applied for and granted.’

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‘And the result of the autopsy was nil, I remember,’ said Sir Henry gravely. ‘A case, for once, of smoke without fire.’

‘The whole thing is really very curious,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘That fortune-teller, for instance – Zarida. At the address where she was supposed to be, no one had ever heard of any such person!’

‘She appeared once – out of the blue,’ said her husband, ‘and then utterly vanished. Out of the *blue* – that’s rather good!’

‘And what is more,’ continued Mrs Bantry, ‘little Nurse Carstairs, who was supposed to have recommended her, had never even heard of her.’

They looked at each other.

‘It’s a mysterious story,’ said Dr Lloyd. ‘One can make guesses; but to guess –’

He shook his head.

‘Has Mr Pritchard married Miss Instow?’ asked Miss Marple in her gentle voice.

‘Now why do you ask that?’ inquired Sir Henry.

Miss Marple opened gentle blue eyes.

‘It seems to me so important,’ she said. ‘Have they married?’

Colonel Bantry shook his head.

‘We – well, we expected something of the kind – but it’s eighteen months now. I don’t believe they even see much of each other.’

‘That is important,’ said Miss Marple. ‘Very important.’

‘Then you think the same as I do,’ said Mrs Bantry. ‘You think –’

‘Now, Dolly,’ said her husband. ‘It’s unjustifiable – what you’re going to say. You can’t go about accusing people without a shadow of proof.’

‘Don’t be so – so manly, Arthur. Men are always afraid to say *anything*. Anyway, this is all between ourselves. It’s just a wild fantastic idea of mine that possibly – only *possibly* – Jean Instow disguised herself as a fortune-teller. Mind you, she may have done it for a joke. I don’t for a minute think that she meant any harm; but if she did do it, and if Mrs Pritchard was foolish enough to die of fright – well, that’s what Miss Marple meant, wasn’t it?’

‘No, dear, not quite,’ said Miss Marple. ‘You see, if I were going to kill anyone – which, of course, I wouldn’t dream of doing for a minute, because it would be very wicked, and besides I don’t like killing – not even wasps, though I know it has to be, and I’m sure the gardener does it as humanely as possible. Let me see, what was I saying?’

‘If you wished to kill anyone,’ prompted Sir Henry.

‘Oh yes. Well, if I did, I shouldn’t be at all satisfied to trust to *fright*. I know one reads of people dying of

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it, but it seems a very uncertain sort of thing, and the most nervous people are far more brave than one really thinks they are. I should like something definite and certain, and make a thoroughly good plan about it.'

'Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry, 'you frighten me. I hope you will never wish to remove me. Your plans would be too good.'

Miss Marple looked at him reproachfully.

'I thought I had made it clear that I would never contemplate such wickedness,' she said. 'No, I was trying to put myself in the place of – er – a certain person.'

'Do you mean George Pritchard?' asked Colonel Bantley. 'I'll never believe it of George – though – mind you, even the nurse believes it. I went and saw her about a month afterwards, at the time of the exhumation. She didn't know how it was done – in fact, she wouldn't say anything at all – but it was clear enough that she believed George to be in some way responsible for his wife's death. She was convinced of it.'

'Well,' said Dr Lloyd, 'perhaps she wasn't so far wrong. And mind you, a nurse often *knows*. She can't say – she's got no proof – but she *knows*.'

Sir Henry leant forward.

'Come now, Miss Marple,' he said persuasively. 'You're lost in a daydream. Won't you tell us all about it?'

Miss Marple started and turned pink.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said. ‘I was just thinking about our District Nurse. A most difficult problem.’

‘More difficult than the problem of the blue geranium?’

‘It really depends on the primroses,’ said Miss Marple. ‘I mean, Mrs Bantry said they were yellow and pink. If it was a pink primrose that turned blue, of course, that fits in perfectly. But if it happened to be a yellow one –’

‘It was a pink one,’ said Mrs Bantry.

She stared. They all stared at Miss Marple.

‘Then that seems to settle it,’ said Miss Marple. She shook her head regretfully. ‘And the wasp season and everything. And of course the gas.’

‘It reminds you, I suppose, of countless village tragedies?’ said Sir Henry.

‘Not tragedies,’ said Miss Marple. ‘And certainly nothing criminal. But it does remind me a little of the trouble we are having with the District Nurse. After all, nurses are human beings, and what with having to be so correct in their behaviour and wearing those uncomfortable collars and being so thrown with the family – well, can you wonder that things sometimes happen?’

A glimmer of light broke upon Sir Henry.

‘You mean Nurse Carstairs?’

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‘Oh no. Not Nurse Carstairs. Nurse *Copling*. You see, she had been there before, and very much thrown with Mr Pritchard, who you say is an attractive man. I dare say she thought, poor thing – well, we needn’t go into that. I don’t suppose she knew about Miss Instow, and of course afterwards, when she found out, it turned her against him and she tried to do all the harm she could. Of course the letter really gave her away, didn’t it?’

‘What letter?’

‘Well, she wrote to the fortune-teller at Mrs Pritchard’s request, and the fortune-teller came, apparently in answer to the letter. But later it was discovered that there never had been such a person at that address. So that shows that Nurse Copling was in it. She only pretended to write – so what could be more likely than that *she* was the fortune-teller herself?’

‘I never saw the point about the letter,’ said Sir Henry. ‘That’s a most important point, of course.’

‘Rather a bold step to take,’ said Miss Marple, ‘because Mrs Pritchard might have recognized her in spite of the disguise – though of course if she had, the nurse could have pretended it was a joke.’

‘What did you mean,’ said Sir Henry, ‘when you said that if you were a certain person you would not have trusted to fright?’

‘One couldn’t be *sure* that way,’ said Miss Marple.

‘No, I think that the warnings and the blue flowers were, if I may use a military term,’ she laughed self-consciously – *‘just camouflage.’*

‘And the real thing?’

‘I know,’ said Miss Marple apologetically, ‘that I’ve got wasps on the brain. Poor things, destroyed in their thousands – and usually on such a beautiful summer’s day. But I remember thinking, when I saw the gardener shaking up the cyanide of potassium in a bottle with water, how like smelling-salts it looked. And if it were put in a smelling-salt bottle and substituted for the real one – well, the poor lady was in the habit of using her smelling-salts. Indeed you said they were found by her hand. Then, of course, while Mr Pritchard went to telephone to the doctor, the nurse would change it for the real bottle, and she’d just turn on the gas a little bit to mask any smell of almonds and in case anyone felt queer, and I always have heard that cyanide leaves no trace if you wait long enough. But, of course I may be wrong, and it may have been something entirely different in the bottle; but that doesn’t really matter, does it?’

Miss Marple paused, a little out of breath.

Jane Helier leant forward and said, ‘But the blue geranium, and the other flowers?’

‘Nurses always have litmus paper, don’t they?’ said Miss Marple, ‘for – well, for testing. Not a very

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pleasant subject. We won't dwell on it. I have done a little nursing myself.' She grew delicately pink. 'Blue turns red with acids, and red turns blue with alkalis. So easy to paste some red litmus over a red flower – near the bed, of course. And then, when the poor lady used her smelling-salts, the strong ammonia fumes would turn it blue. Really most ingenious. Of course, the geranium wasn't blue when they first broke into the room – nobody noticed it till afterwards. When nurse changed the bottles, she held the Sal Ammoniac against the wallpaper for a minute, I expect.'

'You might have been there, Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry.

'What worries me,' said Miss Marple, 'is poor Mr Pritchard and that nice girl, Miss Instow. Probably both suspecting each other and keeping apart – and life so very short.'

She shook her head.

'You needn't worry,' said Sir Henry. 'As a matter of fact I have something up my sleeve. A nurse has been arrested on a charge of murdering an elderly patient who had left her a legacy. It was done with cyanide of potassium substituted for smelling-salts. Nurse Copling trying the same trick again. Miss Instow and Mr Pritchard need have no doubts as to the truth.'

‘Now isn’t that nice?’ cried Miss Marple. ‘I don’t mean about the new murder, of course. That’s very sad, and shows how much wickedness there is in the world, and that if once you give way – which reminds me I *must* finish my little conversation with Dr Lloyd about the village nurse.’

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

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

THE THIRTEEN PROBLEMS by Agatha Christie

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