Agatha Christie

the thirteen problems

marple

Agatha Christie

The Thirteen Problems

perfectbound

To Leonard and Katherine Woolley

Contents

Chapter 2

The Idol House of Astarte

'And now, Dr Pender, what are you going to tell us?'

The old clergyman smiled gently.

'My life has been passed in quiet places,' he said. 'Very few eventful happenings have come my way. Yet once, when I was a young man, I had one very strange and tragic experience.'

'Ah!' said Joyce Lemprière encouragingly.

'I have never forgotten it,' continued the clergyman. 'It made a profound impression on me at the time, and to this day by a slight effort of memory I can feel again the awe and horror of that terrible moment when I saw a man stricken to death by apparently no mortal agency.'

'You make me feel quite creepy, Pender,' complained Sir Henry.

'It made me feel creepy, as you call it,' replied

the other. 'Since then I have never laughed at the people who use the word atmosphere. There is such a thing. There are certain places imbued and saturated with good or evil influences which can make their power felt.'

'That house, The Larches, is a very unhappy one,' remarked Miss Marple. 'Old Mr Smithers lost all his money and had to leave it, then the Carslakes took it and Johnny Carslake fell downstairs and broke his leg and Mrs Carslake had to go away to the south of France for her health, and now the Burdens have got it and I hear that poor Mr Burden has got to have an operation almost immediately.'

'There is, I think, rather too much superstition about such matters,' said Mr Petherick. 'A lot of damage is done to property by foolish reports heedlessly circulated.'

'I have known one or two "ghosts" that have had a very robust personality,' remarked Sir Henry with a chuckle.

'I think,' said Raymond, 'we should allow Dr Pender to go on with his story.'

Joyce got up and switched off the two lamps, leaving the room lit only by the flickering firelight.

'Atmosphere,' she said. 'Now we can get along.'

Dr Pender smiled at her, and leaning back in his

chair and taking off his pince-nez, he began his story in a gentle reminiscent voice.

'I don't know whether any of you know Dartmoor at all. The place I am telling you about is situated on the borders of Dartmoor. It was a very charming property, though it had been on the market without finding a purchaser for several years. The situation was perhaps a little bleak in winter, but the views were magnificent and there were certain curious and original features about the property itself. It was bought by a man called Haydon – Sir Richard Haydon. I had known him in his college days, and though I had lost sight of him for some years, the old ties of friendship still held, and I accepted with pleasure his invitation to go down to Silent Grove, as his new purchase was called.

'The house party was not a very large one. There was Richard Haydon himself, and his cousin, Elliot Haydon. There was a Lady Mannering with a pale, rather inconspicuous daughter called Violet. There was a Captain Rogers and his wife, hard riding, weatherbeaten people, who lived only for horses and hunting. There was also a young Dr Symonds and there was Miss Diana Ashley. I knew something about the last named. Her picture was very often in the Society papers and she was one of the notorious beauties of the Season. Her appearance was indeed very striking. She was dark and tall, with a beautiful

skin of an even tint of pale cream, and her half closed dark eyes set slantways in her head gave her a curiously piquant oriental appearance. She had, too, a wonderful speaking voice, deep-toned and bell-like.

'I saw at once that my friend Richard Haydon was very much attracted by her, and I guessed that the whole party was merely arranged as a setting for her. Of her own feelings I was not so sure. She was capricious in her favours. One day talking to Richard and excluding everyone else from her notice, and another day she would favour his cousin, Elliot, and appear hardly to notice that such a person as Richard existed, and then again she would bestow the most bewitching smiles upon the quiet and retiring Dr Symonds.

'On the morning after my arrival our host showed us all over the place. The house itself was unremarkable, a good solid house built of Devonshire granite. Built to withstand time and exposure. It was unromantic but very comfortable. From the windows of it one looked out over the panorama of the Moor, vast rolling hills crowned with weather-beaten Tors.

'On the slopes of the Tor nearest to us were various hut circles, relics of the bygone days of the late Stone Age. On another hill was a barrow which had recently been excavated, and in which certain bronze implements had been found. Haydon was by way of

being interested in antiquarian matters and he talked to us with a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. This particular spot, he explained, was particularly rich in relics of the past.

'Neolithic hut dwellers, Druids, Romans, and even traces of the early Phoenicians were to be found.

'"But this place is the most interesting of all," he said "You know its name – Silent Grove. Well, it is easy enough to see what it takes its name from."

'He pointed with his hand. That particular part of the country was bare enough – rocks, heather and bracken, but about a hundred yards from the house there was a densely planted grove of trees.

'"That is a relic of very early days," said Haydon, "The trees have died and been replanted, but on the whole it has been kept very much as it used to be – perhaps in the time of the Phoenician settlers. Come and look at it."

'We all followed him. As we entered the grove of trees a curious oppression came over me. I think it was the silence. No birds seemed to nest in these trees. There was a feeling about it of desolation and horror. I saw Haydon looking at me with a curious smile.

'"Any feeling about this place, Pender?" he asked me. "Antagonism now? Or uneasiness?"

'"I don't like it," I said quietly.

'"You are within your rights. This was a stronghold

of one of the ancient enemies of your faith. This is the Grove of Astarte."

'"Astarte?"

'"Astarte, or Ishtar, or Ashtoreth, or whatever you choose to call her. I prefer the Phoenician name of Astarte. There is, I believe, one known Grove of Astarte in this country – in the North on the Wall. I have no evidence, but I like to believe that we have a true and authentic Grove of Astarte here. Here, within this dense circle of trees, sacred rites were performed."

'"Sacred rites," murmured Diana Ashley. Her eyes had a dreamy faraway look. "What were they, I wonder?"

'"Not very reputable by all accounts," said Captain Rogers with a loud unmeaning laugh. "Rather hot stuff, I imagine."

'Haydon paid no attention to him.

'"In the centre of the Grove there should be a Temple," he said. "I can't run to Temples, but I have indulged in a little fancy of my own."

'We had at that moment stepped out into a little clearing in the centre of the trees. In the middle of it was something not unlike a summerhouse made of stone. Diana Ashley looked inquiringly at Haydon.

'"I call it The Idol House," he said. "It is the Idol House of Astarte."

'He led the way up to it. Inside, on a rude ebony pillar, there reposed a curious little image representing a woman with crescent horns, seated on a lion.

'"Astarte of the Phoenicians," said Haydon, "the Goddess of the Moon."

'"The Goddess of the Mooon," cried Diana. "Oh, do let us have a wild orgy tonight. Fancy dress. And we will come out here in the moonlight and celebrate the rites of Astarte."

'I made a sudden movement and Elliot Haydon, Richard's cousin, turned quickly to me.

'"You don't like all this, do you, Padre?" he said.

'"No," I said gravely. "I don't."

'He looked at me curiously. "But it is only tomfoolery. Dick can't know that this really is a sacred grove. It is just a fancy of his; he likes to play with the idea. And anyway, if it were –"

'"If it were?"

'"Well –" he laughed uncomfortably. "You don't believe in that sort of thing, do you? You, a parson."

'"I am not sure that as a parson I ought not to believe in it."

'"But that sort of thing is all finished and done with."

'"I am not so sure," I said musingly. "I only know this: I am not as a rule a sensitive man to atmosphere, but ever since I entered this grove of trees I have felt

a curious impression and sense of evil and menace all round me."

'He glanced uneasily over his shoulder.

'"Yes," he said, "it is – it is queer, somehow. I know what you mean but I suppose it is only our imagination makes us feel like that. What do you say, Symonds?"

'The doctor was silent a minute or two before he replied. Then he said quietly:

'"I don't like it. I can't tell you why. But somehow or other, I don't like it."

'At that moment Violet Mannering came across to me.

'"I hate this place," she cried. "I hate it. Do let's get out of it."

'We moved away and the others followed us. Only Diana Ashley lingered. I turned my head over my shoulder and saw her standing in front of the Idol House gazing earnestly at the image within it.

'The day was an unusually hot and beautiful one and Diana Ashley's suggestion of a Fancy Dress party that evening was received with general favour. The usual laughing and whispering and frenzied secret sewing took place and when we all made our appearance for dinner there were the usual outcries of merriment. Rogers and his wife were Neolithic hut dwellers – explaining the sudden lack of hearth rugs. Richard

Haydon called himself a Phoenician sailor, and his cousin was a Brigand Chief, Dr Symonds was a chef, Lady Mannering was a hospital nurse, and her daughter was a Circassian slave. I myself was arrayed somewhat too warmly as a monk. Diana Ashley came down last and was somewhat of a disappointment to all of us, being wrapped in a shapeless black domino.

'"The Unknown," she declared airily. "That is what I am. Now for goodness' sake let's go in to dinner."

'After dinner we went outside. It was a lovely night, warm and soft, and the moon was rising.

'We wandered about and chatted and the time passed quickly enough. It must have been an hour later when we realized that Diana Ashley was not with us.

'"Surely she has not gone to bed," said Richard Haydon.

'Violet Mannering shook her head.

'"Oh, no," she said. "I saw her going off in that direction about a quarter of an hour ago." She pointed as she spoke towards the grove of trees that showed black and shadowy in the moonlight.

'"I wonder what she is up to," said Richard Haydon, "some devilment, I swear. Let's go and see."

'We all trooped off together, somewhat curious as to what Miss Ashley had been up to. Yet I, for one, felt a curious reluctance to enter that dark foreboding

belt of trees. Something stronger than myself seemed to be holding me back and urging me not to enter. I felt more definitely convinced than ever of the essential evilness of the spot. I think that some of the others experienced the same sensations that I did, though they would have been loath to admit it. The trees were so closely planted that the moonlight could not penetrate. There were a dozen soft sounds all round us, whisperings and sighings. The feeling was eerie in the extreme, and by common consent we all kept close together.

'Suddenly we came out into the open clearing in the middle of the grove and stood rooted to the spot in amazement, for there, on the threshold of the Idol House, stood a shimmering figure wrapped tightly round in diaphanous gauze and with two crescent horns rising from the dark masses of her hair.

'"My God!" said Richard Haydon, and the sweat sprang out on his brow.

'But Violet Mannering was sharper.

'"Why, it's Diana," she exclaimed. "What has she done to herself? Oh, she looks quite different somehow!"

'The figure in the doorway raised her hands. She took a step forward and chanted in a high sweet voice.

'"I am the Priestess of Astarte," she crooned. "Beware how you approach me, for I hold death in my hand."

‘“Don’t do it, dear,” protested Lady Mannering. “You give us the creeps, you really do.”

‘Haydon sprang forward towards her.

‘“My God, Diana!” he cried. “You are wonderful.”

‘My eyes were accustomed to the moonlight now and I could see more plainly. She did, indeed, as Violet had said, look quite different. Her face was more definitely oriental, and her eyes more of slits with something cruel in their gleam, and the strange smile on her lips was one that I had never seen there before.

‘“Beware,” she cried warningly. “Do not approach the Goddess. If anyone lays a hand on me it is death.”

‘“You are wonderful, Diana,” cried Haydon, “but do stop it. Somehow or other I – I don’t like it.”

‘He was moving towards her across the grass and she flung out a hand towards him.

‘“Stop,” she cried. “One step nearer and I will smite you with the magic of Astarte.”

‘Richard Haydon laughed and quickened his pace, when all at once a curious thing happened. He hesitated for a moment, then seemed to stumble and fall headlong.

‘He did not get up again, but lay where he had fallen prone on the ground.

'Suddenly Diana began to laugh hysterically. It was a strange horrible sound breaking the silence of the glade.

'With an oath Elliot sprang forward.

'"I can't stand this," he cried, "get up, Dick, get up, man."

'But still Richard Haydon lay where he had fallen. Elliot Haydon reached his side, knelt by him and turned him gently over. He bent over him, peering in his face.

'Then he rose sharply to his feet and stood swaying a little.

'"Doctor," he said. "Doctor, for God's sake come. I – I think he is dead."

'Symonds ran forward and Elliot rejoined us walking very slowly. He was looking down at his hands in a way I didn't understand.

'At that moment there was a wild scream from Diana.

'"I have killed him," she cried. "Oh, my God! I didn't mean to, but I have killed him."

'And she fainted dead away, falling in a crumpled heap on the grass.

'There was a cry from Mrs Rogers.

'"Oh, do let us get away from this dreadful place," she wailed, "anything might happen to us here. Oh, it's awful!"

'Elliot got hold of me by the shoulder.

'"It can't be, man," he murmured. "I tell you it can't *be*. A man cannot be killed like that. It is – it's against Nature."

'I tried to soothe him.

'"There is some explanation," I said. "Your cousin must have had some unsuspected weakness of the heart. The shock and excitement –"

'He interrupted me.

'"You don't understand," he said. He held up his hands for me to see and I noticed a red stain on them.

'"Dick didn't die of shock, he was stabbed – stabbed to the heart, and *there is no weapon*."

'I stared at him incredulously. At that moment Symonds rose from his examination of the body and came towards us. He was pale and shaking all over.

'"Are we all mad?" he said. "What is this place – that things like this can happen in it?"

'"Then it is true," I said.

'He nodded.

'"The wound is such as would be made by a long thin dagger, but – there is no dagger there."

'We all looked at each other.

'"But it must be there," cried Elliot Haydon. "It must have dropped out. It must be on the ground somewhere. Let us look."

'We peered about vainly on the ground. Violet Mannering said suddenly:

'"Diana had something in her hand. A kind of dagger. I saw it. I saw it glitter when she threatened him."

'Elliot Haydon shook his head.

'"He never even got within three yards of her," he objected.

'Lady Mannering was bending over the prostrate girl on the ground.

'"There is nothing in her hand now," she announced, "and I can't see anything on the ground. Are you sure you saw it, Violet? I didn't."

'Dr Symonds came over to the girl.

'"We must get her to the house," he said. "Rogers, will you help?"

'Between us we carried the unconscious girl back to the house. Then we returned and fetched the body of Sir Richard.'

Dr Pender broke off apologetically and looked round.

'One would know better nowadays,' he said, 'owing to the prevalence of detective fiction. Every street boy knows that a body must be left where it is found. But in these days we had not the same knowledge, and accordingly we carried the body of Richard Haydon back to his bedroom in the square granite house and the butler was despatched on a bicycle

in search of the police – a ride of some twelve miles.

'It was then that Elliot Haydon drew me aside.

'"Look here," he said. "I am going back to the grove. That weapon has got to be found."

'"If there was a weapon," I said doubtfully.

'He seized my arm and shook it fiercely. "You have got that superstitious stuff into your head. You think his death was supernatural; well, I am going back to the grove to find out."

'I was curiously averse to his doing so. I did my utmost to dissuade him, but without result. The mere idea of that thick circle of trees was abhorrent to me and I felt a strong premonition of further disaster. But Elliot was entirely pig-headed. He was, I think, scared himself, but would not admit it. He went off fully armed with determination to get to the bottom of the mystery.

'It was a very dreadful night, none of us could sleep, or attempt to do so. The police, when they arrived, were frankly incredulous of the whole thing. They evinced a strong desire to cross-examine Miss Ashley, but there they had to reckon with Dr Symonds, who opposed the idea vehemently. Miss Ashley had come out of her faint or trance and he had given her a long sleeping draught. She was on no account to be disturbed until the following day.

'It was not until about seven o'clock in the morning that anyone thought about Elliot Haydon, and then Symonds suddenly asked where he was. I explained what Elliot had done and Symonds's grave face grew a shade graver. "I wish he hadn't. It is – it is foolhardy," he said.

'"You don't think any harm can have happened to him?"

'"I hope not. I think, Padre, that you and I had better go and see."

'I knew he was right, but it took all the courage in my command to nerve myself for the task. We set out together and entered once more that ill-fated grove of trees. We called him twice and got no reply. In a minute or two we came into the clearing, which looked pale and ghostly in the early morning light. Symonds clutched my arm and I uttered a muttered exclamation. Last night when we had seen it in the moonlight there had been the body of a man lying face downwards on the grass. Now in the early morning light the same sight met our eyes. Elliot Haydon was lying on the exact spot where his cousin had been.

'"My God!" said Symonds. "*It has got him too!*"

'We ran together over the grass. Elliot Haydon was unconscious but breathing feebly and this time there was no doubt of what had caused the tragedy. A long thin bronze weapon remained in the wound.

‘“Got him through the shoulder, not through the heart. That is lucky,” commented the doctor. “On my soul, I don’t know what to think. At any rate he is not dead and he will be able to tell us what happened.”

‘But that was just what Elliot Haydon was not able to do. His description was vague in the extreme. He had hunted about vainly for the dagger and at last giving up the search had taken up a stand near the Idol House. It was then that he became increasingly certain that someone was watching him from the belt of trees. He fought against this impression but was not able to shake it off. He described a cold strange wind that began to blow. It seemed to come not from the trees but from the interior of the Idol House. He turned round, peering inside it. He saw the small figure of the Goddess and he felt he was under an optical delusion. The figure seemed to grow larger and larger. Then he suddenly received something that felt like a blow between his temples which sent him reeling back, and as he fell he was conscious of a sharp burning pain in his left shoulder.

‘The dagger was identified this time as being the identical one which had been dug up in the barrow on the hill, and which had been bought by Richard Haydon. Where he had kept it, in the house or in the Idol House in the grove, none seemed to know.

‘The police were of the opinion, and always will be,

that he was deliberately stabbed by Miss Ashley, but in view of our combined evidence that she was never within three yards of him, they could not hope to support the charge against her. So the thing has been and remains a mystery.'

There was a silence.

'There doesn't seem anything to say,' said Joyce Lemprière at length. 'It is all so horrible – and uncanny. Have you no explanation for yourself, Dr Pender?'

The old man nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'I have an explanation – a kind of explanation, that is. Rather a curious one – but to my mind it still leaves certain factors unaccounted for.'

'I have been to séances,' said Joyce, 'and you may say what you like, very queer things can happen. I suppose one can explain it by some kind of hypnotism. The girl really turned herself into a Priestess of Astarte, and I suppose somehow or other she must have stabbed him. Perhaps she threw the dagger that Miss Mannering saw in her hand.'

'Or it might have been a javelin,' suggested Raymond West. 'After all, moonlight is not very strong. She might have had a kind of spear in her hand and stabbed him at a distance, and then I suppose mass hypnotism comes into account. I mean, you were all prepared to see him stricken down by supernatural means and so you saw it like that.'

'I have seen many wonderful things done with weapons and knives at music halls,' said Sir Henry. 'I suppose it is possible that a man could have been concealed in the belt of trees, and that he might from there have thrown a knife or a dagger with sufficient accuracy – agreeing, of course, that he was a professional. I admit that that seems rather far-fetched, but it seems the only really feasible theory. You remember that the other man was distinctly under the impression that there was someone in the grove of trees watching him. As to Miss Mannering saying that Miss Ashley had a dagger in her hand and the others saying she hadn't, that doesn't surprise me. If you had had my experience you would know that five persons' account of the same thing will differ so widely as to be almost incredible.'

Mr Petherick coughed.

'But in all these theories we seem to be overlooking one essential fact,' he remarked. 'What became of the weapon? Miss Ashley could hardly get rid of a javelin standing as she was in the middle of an open space; and if a hidden murderer had thrown a dagger, then the dagger would still have been in the wound when the man was turned over. We must, I think, discard all far-fetched theories and confine ourselves to sober fact.'

'And where does sober fact lead us?'

'Well, one thing seems quite clear. No one was near the man when he was stricken down, so the only person who *could* have stabbed him was he himself. Suicide, in fact.'

'But why on earth should he wish to commit suicide?' asked Raymond West incredulously.

The lawyer coughed again. 'Ah, that is a question of theory once more,' he said. 'At the moment I am not concerned with theories. It seems to me, excluding the supernatural in which I do not for one moment believe, that that was the only way things could have happened. He stabbed himself, and as he fell his arms flew out, wrenching the dagger from the wound and flinging it far into the zone of the trees. That is, I think, although somewhat unlikely, a possible happening.'

'I don't like to say, I am sure,' said Miss Marple. 'It all perplexes me very much indeed. But curious things do happen. At Lady Sharpley's garden party last year the man who was arranging the clock golf tripped over one of the numbers – quite unconscious he was – and didn't come round for about five minutes.'

'Yes, dear Aunt,' said Raymond gently, 'but he wasn't stabbed, was he?'

'Of course not, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'That is what I am telling you. Of course there is only one way that poor Sir Richard could have been stabbed, but I do wish I knew what caused him to stumble in

the first place. Of course, it might have been a tree root. He would be looking at the girl, of course, and when it is moonlight one does trip over things.'

'You say that there is only one way that Sir Richard could have been stabbed, Miss Marple,' said the clergyman, looking at her curiously.

'It is very sad and I don't like to think of it. He was a right-handed man, was he not? I mean to stab himself in the left shoulder he must have been. I was always so sorry for poor Jack Baynes in the War. He shot himself in the foot, you remember, after very severe fighting at Arras. He told me about it when I went to see him in hospital, and very ashamed of it he was. I don't expect this poor man, Elliot Haydon, profited much by his wicked crime.'

'Elliot Haydon,' cried Raymond. 'You think he did it?'

'I don't see how anyone else could have done it,' said Miss Marple, opening her eyes in gentle surprise. 'I mean if, as Mr Petherick so wisely says, one looks at the facts and disregards all that atmosphere of heathen goddesses which I don't think is very nice. He went up to him first and turned him over, and of course to do that he would have to have had his back to them all, and being dressed as a brigand chief he would be sure to have a weapon of some kind in his belt. I remember dancing with a man dressed as a brigand

chief when I was a young girl. He had five kinds of knives and daggers, and I can't tell you how awkward and uncomfortable it was for his partner.'

All eyes were turned towards Dr Pender.

'I knew the truth,' said he, 'five years after that tragedy occurred. It came in the shape of a letter written to me by Elliot Haydon. He said in it that he fancied that I had always suspected him. He said it was a sudden temptation. He too loved Diana Ashley, but he was only a poor struggling barrister. With Richard out of the way and inheriting his title and estates, he saw a wonderful prospect opening up before him. The dagger had jerked out of his belt as he knelt down by his cousin, and almost before he had time to think he drove it in and returned it to his belt again. He stabbed himself later in order to divert suspicion. He wrote to me on the eve of starting on an expedition to the South Pole in case, as he said, he should never come back. I do not think that he meant to come back, and I know that, as Miss Marple has said, his crime profited him nothing. "For five years," he wrote, "I have lived in Hell. I hope, at least, that I may expiate my crime by dying honourably."'

There was a pause.

'And he did die honourably,' said Sir Henry. 'You have changed the names in your story, Dr Pender, but I think I recognize the man you mean.'

'As I said,' went on the old clergyman, 'I do not think that explanation quite covers the facts. I still think there was an evil influence in that grove, an influence that directed Elliot Haydon's action. Even to this day I can never think without a shudder of The Idol House of Astarte.'

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

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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

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Play Collections

The Mousetrap and Selected Plays
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