

## The Seven Dials Mystery

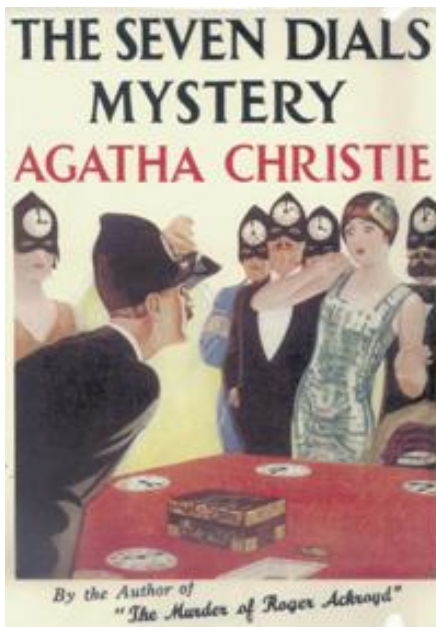
1929

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but for no other novels]

This is an interesting variation on Christie's series of thrillers about 'Young Adventurers' in love. The first was about Tommy and Tuppence in *The Secret Adversary* published in 1922. Christie then wrote *The Man in the Brown Suit* in 1924, and *The Secret of Chimneys* in 1925, each with a young pair of different but rather similar lovers as amateur sleuths. *The Big Four*, 1927, is the only adventure thriller without any young lovers, perhaps because Christie was writing it during a dark period in her personal life when Archie Christie was divorcing her. In *The Seven Dials* there are *four* young friends, rather than the usual single pair of lovers, who are trying to solve the murder of Loraine Wade's stepbrother, Gerry Wade, and his best friend Ronny Devereux. Two of the four end up engaged to each other, as did the three previous pairs of Young Adventurers.

Agatha Christie, it seems, cannot quite bear to let go of the image of Archie and her as the 'Young Adventurers' although by the time she wrote this book she had miserably acquiesced to the divorce. Perhaps this is why two of the four Young Adventurers, the ones most like Archie and his new love, Miss Neele, come to a very bad end indeed. This book, in psychological terms, may be seen as a cathartic goodbye to Agatha Christie's first marriage.

In no other Christie novel are there so many characters who have appeared in a previous novel. *Seven Dials* takes place exactly four years, both in fictional and in real time, after *The Secret of Chimneys*.



*The Seven Dials* is an espionage thriller like *The Big Four*, and *The Secret Adversary*. The plot involves attempts to steal the Eberhard steel formula from the British to sell to the Bolsheviks. The 'Seven Dials' is a secret society, with seven international members. Bundle (Lady Eileen Brent) rather brilliantly squeezes into a cupboard to eavesdrop on the Society's meeting early on, rather more successfully than Tommy did, behind a curtain in a similarly slummy bit of Soho, in *The Secret Adversary*. The reader is lulled into thinking that the Seven Dials is an inflated *Big Four* - an international group of power hungry terrorists aiming for World domination. From her spy hole Bundle can see a mole on the shoulder of a masked woman, referred to only as "One o'clock", and so recognises her as the beautiful Hungarian Countess Radzky, when they meet again at Wyvern Abbey.

It is fairly clued, but there are too many events that are never explained: what was Sir Oswald Coote doing out in the gardens in full evening dress at 2 am? You could equally well come up with Sir Oswald Coote as the evil Mastermind, as 'one of the

richest men in England'. He is in a similar mould to the criminal masterminds in *The Secret Adversary*, and *The Man in the Brown Suit*.

Christie starts misdirecting the reader in the first sentence when she describes one of the main characters as 'that amiable youth Jimmy Thesiger'. He is one of the set of Bright Young Things with silly nicknames like 'Pongo', 'Bundle' and 'Socks'. All giggles and innocent japes with old school friends, down for a jolly weekend at Chimneys, annoying Lady Coote and the Butler with their thoughtless lateness for meals. Ronny Devereux calls Gerry Wade 'an ass'. Jimmy Thesiger wonders if he is 'such an ass as we all think'. When Mr. Wade is found dead, the mood suddenly changes from Brideshead to Chimneys revisited.

The sleuthing begins in earnest when Bundle believes she has run over Ronny Devereux, whose dying words are 'Seven Dials..Tell...Jimmy Thesiger'. A doctor discovers he was shot, rather than carelessly run over by Lady Brent. This is the major clue, but it is misinterpreted by Bundle.

There are many further decent clues to the main perpetrators of the murders. To solve this whodunnit the reader has to ask themselves the following questions. Why should that 'pleasant and engaging youth' Jimmy Thesiger leave his lookout post at 2 a.m.? How does Jimmy escape with a minor shot wound in his *right* arm, when two previous people have been skilfully killed by these murderers? 'Jimmy's arm was in a sling, but he bore little trace of the night's affray'. Why did Battle's men never apprehend the burglar as he ran away from Wyvern Abbey, after fighting and shooting Jimmy? Why was the Mauser .25 pistol thrown away apparently from the Library window? Why is there only a tooth-marked *left* hand glove in the Library grate? Why were there only Sir Oswald's footprints on the lawn, and no evidence of an escaping burglar at all?

Putting all the evidence together, Battle concludes 'it was an inside job'. George Lomax immediately suspects his servants, but Lomax is a Cabinet Minister, and in Bundle's estimation 'an ass'. The reader at this point may have totted up the evidence against Thesiger, but will be puzzled as to motive.

There are clues that may make the reader suspicious of Loraine Wade: Gerry Wade and Ronny Devereux both confide in her, and then die; and what prompted Miss Wade to be on the Terrace at Wyvern Abbey at exactly 2 a.m. when the Eberhard Formula magically drops at her feet? Could Thesiger and Wade be acting together to steal the Eberhard Formula?

Christie likes to trail a red herring across our path, just when we think we've solved the puzzle, to keep us guessing and turning the pages. Bundle rightly suspects the Countess Radzky is a phony when she listens to her graphic description of Hungarian starvation and misery 'like a gramophone record'. The Countess also oddly says 'I'd just adore a high-toned garden'. If she were as rich as she is supposed to be, she would surely have a fabulous garden. Christie's point is that the extremely rich are oblivious to the trappings of wealth. The Countess Radzky is also inexplicably in the

Library when the burglary takes place. Could the Countess be an espionage agent in disguise? After all, we already know she is 'One o'clock'.

The reader might realise that Bill and Countess Radzky are working together. Bill seems excessively solicitous about her welfare after she has fainted: 'Don't try to talk...Don't say anything until you are quite all right. Take your time'? Bundle feels jealous that Bill is taken in by the beautiful Hungarian face, and the see-through négligée. There is a further clue that the Countess and Bill, and also Battle, share a secret when both gentlemen back up the Countess's appallingly unlikely story that she was looking for a book in the library, by torchlight, at 2 a.m.

'Very natural', said Bill.

'Very often done', said Battle.

This, of course, piques Bundle's insatiable curiosity. Battle tries to warn Bundle off from pursuing Radzky:

I know all about the Countess. And I want her let alone.

Christie pulls off a brilliant final dénouement. The trap, set by Bill to catch the murderer of his two friends, looks at first as though it has gone horribly wrong. But Bill is not the ass you think he is, although he is badly shaken by the attack on Bundle and fears she is dead. 'Suspect everyone' is always Christie's motto. The revealing of the mastermind behind the Seven Dials really is a surprise: Christie really does turn the table on the reader.

A major strength of this book is its humour. It is an amusing read, with Lord Caterham having all the best lines.

'You shouldn't shoot people', said Lord Caterham in a tone of mild remonstrance to his daughter. 'You shouldn't really. I daresay some of them richly deserve it'.

Lord Caterham is a wonderful caricature of the English aristocrat. It is worth viewing the 1981 Granada production of *The Seven Dials* for the magnificent performance of Sir John Gielgud in this role:

'Father,' said Bundle ... 'You're going to lose me'.

'Nonsense,' said Lord Caterham. 'Don't tell me that you're suffering from galloping consumption or a weak heart or anything like that, because I simply don't believe it'.

When the pompous George Lomax effectively asks Lord Caterham for his daughter's (Lady Eileen Brent, better known as Bundle) hand in marriage, Christie rather brilliantly echoes the marriage proposal of Mr. Collins to Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*. This is George Lomax setting out his complacent thoughts to Lord Caterham:

I have given this matter my deep and earnest consideration. Marriage, especially at my age, is not to be undertaken without full – er – consideration. Equality of birth, similarity of tastes, general suitability, and the same religious creed – all things are necessary and the pros and cons have to be weighed and considered. I can, I think, offer my wife a position in society that is not to be despised. Eileen will grace that position admirably

After this long speech, and some clarification Lord Caterham, knowing and loving his daughter as well as Mr. Bennett knew Lizzy, wisely says:

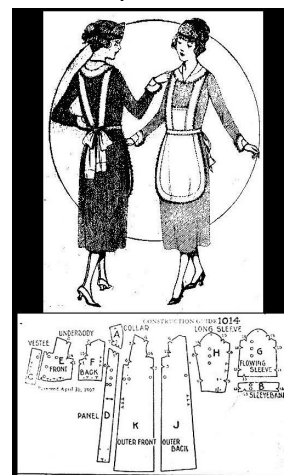
I really shouldn't if I were you. Just go home and think it over like a good fellow. Count to twenty. All that sort of thing. Always a pity to propose and make a fool of yourself.

There are also the sly observations of class. Bundle has to borrow her maid's 'nondescript garments' in order to slip into the Seven Dials club unnoticed. As a Lord's daughter in a well cut tweed suit, Lady Eileen Brent would have stood out in the Soho area of the 1920s. A century later, young people from any walk of life wear the same uniform: torn at the knee jeans and tee shirts. Multimillionaires and office workers look virtually the same as they all stroll down the pavement, gazing at their mobile phones rather than anyone else. There may be subtle differences between designer jeans and Primark, but those immediate visual clues of haut couture versus home sewn garments, worn and mended, have vanished.

A Gabrielle Chanel evening dress  
1925 (Met Museum collection)



1920s servant's dress  
pattern



Bundle orders the 'mystified and scared' Alfred about outrageously. Alfred, who had been a second footman at Chimneys, is still 'troubled and sheepish' and does Bundle's bidding even though he is now the doorman at The Seven Dials club and no longer in Lord Caterham's employ. In the 1920s the lower classes obeyed their betters: especially if the person doing the ordering was as bossy as Lady Brent.

Bundle's dictatorial handling of servants, born and bred a Lady, is contrasted with the nouveau riche, whom aristocrats and their servants unite in treating with contempt. Lady Coote's very uncomfortable, and completely ineffectual run-ins with the staff at Chimneys. The 'menacing tone' and 'very hard' stare of the gardener, McDonald, make Lady Coote's resolve crumble when she tries to get grapes from the greenhouse, or the bowling green tidied up. When Bundle is back in charge at Chimneys, she doesn't allow McDonald any autonomy:

The bowling green. It's shockingly overgrown. Put someone on it, will you?.....Let's have some.. grapes..I know it's the wrong time to cut them because it always is, but I want them all the same. See?

Lady Brent simply barks out orders and does not allow any comeback or discussion. Christie highlights Lady Coote's insecurity, and indeed utter misery, and contrasts her new life as a rich woman with her nostalgia for 'the old days' when she was the happy Mrs. Coote with only one servant, who was a friend and companion, in a small house by her husband's shop.

Although Superintendent Battle is mostly monosyllabic you feel there is an amused twinkle lurking in the depths. 'He swore - mostly,' continued the Countess [describing Jimmy Thesiger]. 'Clearly a gentleman.' said Superintendent Battle.

Christie was very fond of dogs, and uses canine metaphors as compliments for kind human characters: Battle 'lumbered off..like a well-trained retriever.' You know the author has a soft spot for Bill Eversleigh, when he 'bustled in ... in the same such way does a favoured Newfoundland'.

Towards the end of the novel Bundle confesses to her father that she is about to get married, having not discussed this with him at all beforehand. Bundle is a radically modern young woman. Lord Caterham responds by talking about his memoirs! Then he begins to move away, but turns back. 'By the way, Bundle, who are you marrying?' She informs her uninterested parent, who is a fanatical golfer, that she is marrying Mr. Eversleigh. 'Excellent,' Lord Caterham replies. 'He and I can play together in the foursomes in the Autumn Meeting.'

[SH]