

Dumb Witness

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



Miss Emily Arundell is an extremely rich, elderly spinster, with only three blood relatives: two nieces and a nephew. Charles Arundell, the nephew, is a wastrel, a forger, and a thief. Charles was “sent down from Oxford because of a little misunderstanding about a cheque...merely a question of adding a naught”. Theresa Arundell, a niece, spent money on the disgraceful ‘High Life’ with alcohol, drugs, immoral relations with men, and brushes with the Police. Bella Tanios, the final relation, married a ‘foreigner- and not only a foreigner- but a Greek’. Miss Arundell strongly disapproves of all her blood relations. Her nephew and nieces do not like her either, and all wish she would die and leave them her money.

Miss Arundell is a tough Victorian, whose father was a Colonel in the Indian Army during the Mutiny. ‘She was autocratic and often overbearing, but she was also intensely warm-hearted’. She had Victorian values. Emily Arundell is well over 70 at the start of the novel, so would have been born in the 1860s.

'There was no foolish optimism about the Victorians. They could believe the worst with utmost ease.' 'In Miss Arundell's day, women took second place. Men were the most important members of Society'.

Emily Arundell still believed that blood is thicker than water: she has left all her money to her nephew and nieces in her will, despite disapproval of them. They stood to inherit £100,000 each. This was a vast fortune in the 1930s: equivalent to roughly £7 Million now, according to the Bank Of England Historical inflation calculator. Each nephew or niece is, of course, in desperate need of money. Each is refused financial help, despite the authorial assertion that Miss Arundell was 'kind-hearted'. She has helped them out in the past and they have all gone to rack and ruin. She has made the firm resolve not to help them again during her lifetime. A fatal mistake.

The George Hotel, Wallingford, Oxfordshire {Wallingford is Market Basing see Trivia}



Charles threatened to kill Miss Arundell. The following night, Miss Arundell fell headlong down the stairs. Surprisingly, she was not seriously injured. After her relatives left, she summoned the solicitor to write a new will, leaving her entire estate to Wilhelmina Lawson,

her paid companion, as an act of self-preservation. Unfortunately, within a fortnight Miss Arundell dies of Jaundice.

The Police are *never* involved at all. Her own family doctor issued a death certificate, since Miss Arundell had experienced a previous, serious attack of jaundice eighteen months earlier, nearly dying at that time. Shortly before her death, Miss Arundell had engaged Poirot to look into her fall down the stairs, calling for the “utmost discretion”, and he honoured her wishes. If this was murder, as Poirot thought, the family and her paid companion are the only possible suspects. Only Charles knew she’d changed her will. Miss Arundell clearly thought Charles had been responsible for her fall, and so only showed him the new will to ensure he would have no motive for any further attempts on her life. Theresa and Bella still had the false motive for poisoning Miss Arundell, after the failed fall, expecting their inheritance. Miss Lawson, the poor paid companion, might easily have poisoned Miss Arundell; Lawson knew the new will had been changed in her favour.



The Mallowans' House: Winterbrook House, Wallingford

[This house is described as Littlegreen House, Market Basing in *Dumb Witness*]

Charles is the only one without a motive, but he was clever enough to frame the slightly foolish, trusting Miss Lawson for the murder, if the jaundice was not ascribed to natural causes. After Lawson was hanged, the estate would go to Miss Arundell's relatives. Charles stood to regain his third share. However, this was all my own conjecture. Miss Arundell's GP just thought she had died of natural causes, and so an official murder enquiry never took place.

Unlike most Christies, there is only one real clue. Miss Lawson's eyewitness account of Theresa Arundell kneeling on the staircase in her dark dressing gown with the silver initials brooch, TA. Miss Lawson sees this by reflection in her bedroom mirror. The implication was Theresa was hitting the nail into the skirting board in order to attach the thread across the top of the stairs to cause Miss Arundell's 'accident'. This is a magnificent clue because it reveals and deceives at the same time. The reader is presented with the red herring that Theresa Arundell murdered her Aunt by poison after the trip wire failed to kill her. Theresa has the intelligence and daring to think up the scheme. She is also desperate to marry Dr Donaldson, and all doctors have a knowledge of poisons, when her plot of a trip wire fails. The reader can use fair information in the book to get to the correct right answer. Several times a comparison between the cousins is made: Theresa Arundell looks wonderful, and adores well-cut, expensive clothes. Her cousin, Bella, is described as 'plain', and copies Theresa's fashions but 'at an inferior price and cut'. Bella Tanios is married to a doctor, so again possible knowledge of poisons like phosphorus are available to the Tanios household too.

Theresa appears after her aunt falls down the stairs, 'wrapped in dark silk'. Bella has a 'navy-blue kimono': so *both* are in dark silk. The cousins might be mistaken for each other in the poor lighting of a dark corridor at night. If Theresa Arundell has a brooch with her initials on it [TA], on reflection the reader could work out that Bella will have copied her [AT]. The brooches will be mirror images of each other. It was Bella, not Theresa, hammering a nail into the skirting board. And indeed, the 'mindless' Minnie hasn't thought that if she could read TA in the mirror, it must be AT. It is shocking how long it takes the brilliant Poirot to work it out.

Poirot has to fall back 'upon the psychology of the crime and the personality of the murderer! Both crimes had roughly the same outline'. Poirot explored criminal profiling in his immediately previous case: see *Cards on The Table* [1936], and continues with *Appointment with Death* [1938]. Poirot asserts that the thread across the stairs, blamed on the trip hazard of the dog's ball, to cause a fall, was 'essentially a woman's idea'. Poirot uses this statement to exclude both medical men, Dr Tanios and Dr Donaldson, both of whom would have the knowledge required about phosphorus poisoning, and that it could mimic 'yellow jaundice'. This knowledge alone seems to point to a medical input to the successful murder, although, of course, it is never proved that this was a case of phosphorus poisoning, as there is no exhumation or autopsy. How would one get hold of phosphorus to poison someone? It is never explained.

Poirot also excludes Charles on the grounds that he is too cowardly: 'your crimes are crimes of weakness. To steal, to forge...To kill one needs the type of mind that can be obsessed by an idea.' There is absolutely no 'evidence base' for this breathtakingly confident statement. As Charles himself trips on the stairs from Bob's ball, on the first night, he could easily have

had the idea. One could hypothesise equally well that a trip-wire is a cowardly way to kill someone, and rather stupid too as it is so non-specific: just the sort of rash thing Charles could do. People of the household knew Miss Arundell often got up in the night, and wandered around, but other people could too, and been unfortunately harmed by this attempt. It's rather like Charles's selfishness not to think through the consequences. Again Christie's attempt to set a crime solved by psychological profiling is unconvincing.

It was completely arbitrary whether Theresa or Bella, did actually do the deed. From the motive and opportunity points of view, it could have been either woman. Theresa admitted to taking the arsenic weed killer, with the *intention* of poisoning her aunt, but then felt she 'did not like to kill another living being'. Her cousin, Bella, the poor, devoted mother, had the motive of her children in urgent need of funds in order to be given a British Education. The broach clue clinched it. It is also assumed that the unsuccessful murderer would try again. This possibly excluded Charles who knew the will has been altered, to disinherit him.

Wilhelmina Lawson could be tempted to murder, now she knew a colossal fortune awaited her. Indeed she did act criminally by refusing to give Miss Arundell the new will to destroy. This confession by the paid-companion is wrung from her by Poirot after Miss Arundell's death: 'I felt just as though I'd embezzled the money.' Which she *had*. Lawson's justification was 'her own relations didn't really care' for Miss Arundell. Christie is usually rigorously moral. There are some surprising lapses in this novel. Miss Lawson defrauds the family, by refusing to destroy the new will, although her employer commanded her to do so on her deathbed. Although, after confrontation, Lawson divides the vast fortune into quarters, offering shares to Miss Arundell's family, Lawson still retains a comfortable moiety, to live

on the rest of her life. Her serious crime went *completely* unpunished. Indeed she lives happily ever after.

Poirot admits he has not the evidence to convict anyone of murder. Without an exhumation, there was no proof that Miss Arundell was poisoned in the first place. Poirot confronts the murderer with his thoughts, his 'evidence', and hopes they will do the decent thing and commit suicide. This is different from saving a murderer and their innocent family from the scandal and humiliation of a court proceeding, and a hanging [as in *Peril at End House*, and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*]. In England, murder had the Death Penalty at this time. However, in *Dumb Witness*, Poirot takes it upon himself to be judge *and* jury. Poirot is completely confident about bullying someone to death, without a qualm. Poirot's victim was a young woman, a devoted mother with two children. Poirot's justification, just as in some other Christie's to come, was to stop a murderer murdering again:

'Was it not the best way? She thought so. There were, you see, the children to consider...It had to be. Believe me it was necessary. There would have been more deaths. First yours – then possibly, under certain circumstances, Miss Lawson's.' This again is completely without evidence: Bella Tanios would have been able to send her boys to public school, university and anything else with such a large amount of money. That is all she wanted.

Christie kept trying to find a convincing way to make psychological profiling of murderers and their victims to work in this string of books in the 1930s, but it does not help the reader of *Dumb Witness* get any nearer to solving the murder. From the psychological point of view any or all of the suspects could have done it: the 'solution' was arbitrary. There is only one flimsy eyewitness clue. The impressive aspect of great writers is they keep working through an idea. One can see the progression through these novels sequentially. Christie, through

her characterisation of Poirot's analysis, was a trailblazer even thinking of psychological profiling 40 years before it really gained credence in police circles. Psychology was useful, indeed essential, but like Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, one wants facts too. This is the reason for the low Poirot score: just one good clue and a lot of very subjective Poirot pontification presented as though it was hard psychological evidence, where there is none.

Bob, the wired-haired terrier gives the murderer the idea for the first attempt. The 'accidental' fall down stairs blamed on Bob's ball. But Miss Arundell remembered putting Bob's ball away in a drawer, that evening, and had no memory of stepping on a ball. Also we know Bob actually was out all night and didn't come home till 5am: so he has an impeccable alibi. Bob speaks volumes to Miss Arundell that someone tried to murder her, but it is a negative clue: a nod, or a silent woof, to Sherlock Holmes's dog that didn't bark in the night.

Bob is also used to portray the characters in this novel. Bob adores Captain Hastings, and indeed they go off happily together at the end of the book. Bob is contemptuous of Miss Lawson. This gives the reader a hint that Lawson really is not smart enough to have thought of murdering her employer; dogs are never deceived. Bob also shows Charles' character: Charles' kindness in playing ball with him, and Charles' deceitful nature: stumbling across his aunt's pay roll and helping himself to her money. This theft does not go unnoticed by his aunt: hence her writing to Poirot. This sets 'the ball rolling' for the murderer to be discovered, and some part of justice dispensed.

Is it a moral tale? Is it right that two selfish useless bright young things still profit by their aunt's murder? Dr Tanios and his children also profit by the murder committed by Bella Tanios, and are able to have the futures Bella envisioned, thanks to her crime. Is it right that Minnie Lawson benefits enormously, when she has already confessed that she withheld the

new will, knowing Miss Arundell would have destroyed it? There is a literary nod to Jane Eyre. When Jane Eyre inherits a fortune from her uncle, she nobly shares it with her male cousin, and his two sisters. However, Jane was good, intelligent and generous. Minnie Lawson's suggestion that they all split the inheritance after she admitted to failing to destroy the new will, is staggering. Surely the nephews and nieces could convict Lawson, and get it all? Miss Lawson's contrition is hardly repentance for a crime she still profited by enormously. One feels Christie wanted a quick conclusion, and a happy ending in the final chapter.

Whereas the psychological profiling of the human criminals isn't convincing, the dog psychology is excellent and well observed. Hastings and Bob have the last word. Hastings states that Poirot does not understand dog psychology, whereas he [Hastings] does. 'Woof', said Bob in energetic assent. They scamper off into the sunset together.



Christie pictured with the dedicatee of *Dumb Witness*, Peter.

[SH]

