

The Secret of Chimneys

1925

[N.B. This review contains **PLOT SPOILERS** for this novel, but not for other novels]

This novel starts in the early 1920s in Bulawayo, exactly where Anne Beddingfeld ends up in the previous thriller: *The Man in the Brown Suit*. There is talk of cannibal tribes of the interior, just as there is in that earlier novel. The reader may think that we are in for another African adventure, a continuation perhaps of *The Man in the Brown Suit*. However, Christie is always inventive, and loves surprises! We follow Anthony Cade, who had been a tour guide in Africa, as he sails on the *Granarth Castle*, sister ship to the *Kilmorden Castle* (in the previous thriller), to bring us back to aristocratic England at *Chimneys*, the Tudor home of Lord Caterham.

This is another thriller/romance in the style of *The Secret Adversary*, and *The Man in the Brown Suit*, with Anthony Cade as the lean, tanned, untamed strong silent man of the world, who meets the beautiful young English aristocratic widow, Virginia Revel. They fall in love.

This is a transitional book, packed too full of everything: characters, plots, subplots and detectives. There is a bewildering array of fifteen main characters, plus three professional detectives, tripping each other up. Christie had already written two action-packed thriller-romances, and two previous whodunnits. For this fifth novel, she has combined the two genres, and shoved everything into one exuberant romp, bursting at the covers.

Virginia finds, in her own house, the dead body of a man, Giuseppe, who had been blackmailing her. She is staggeringly unphased by this:

There's a dead man in the next room. He's been murdered, and I don't know what to do about it.

The rather surprising response from the dashing Cade, who is a complete stranger to her, is not 'lets call the Police' but

Excellent...I've always wanted to do a bit of amateur detective work.

The young, fearless, couple in love are the successful amateur detectives. They kiss on the last page, as did Tommy and Tuppence in *The Secret Adversary*, and Anne Beddingfeld and Harry Eardsley in *The Man in the Brown Suit*. But *Chimneys* is also a whodunnit with the murder of a foreign Prince, in the Council Chamber.

Cade finds a scrap of paper reading "*Chimneys 11.45 Thursday*" on the dead blackmailer, Giuseppe. The paper, stuck in a hole in the lining of his pocket, had somehow been missed by his murderers. Note the similarity of this to the scrap of paper bearing the message "*17.1 22 Kilmorden Castle*" found in the pocket of the dead Mr. Carton at the beginning of *The Man in the Brown Suit*. And so Virginia and Anthony arrive at *Chimneys* as a shot rings out at exactly 11.45 pm. The whodunnit part of the novel begins.

Compton Castle, Somerset: the inspiration behind '*Chimneys*' (National Trust)



One of the joys, and confusions, of this book is that it is simply fizzing with an excessive multitude of plots. This is quite different from the classic Christie whodunnits, which are like a redwood tree, tall and straight but with just a few small side branches of sub-plots and misdirections to obscure the reader's view of the trunk until that thunderclap of the dénouement reveals all. In contrast, *The Secret of Chimneys* is like an unpruned apple tree with fruiting boughs of plots and sub-plots in excessive profusion, some never explained.

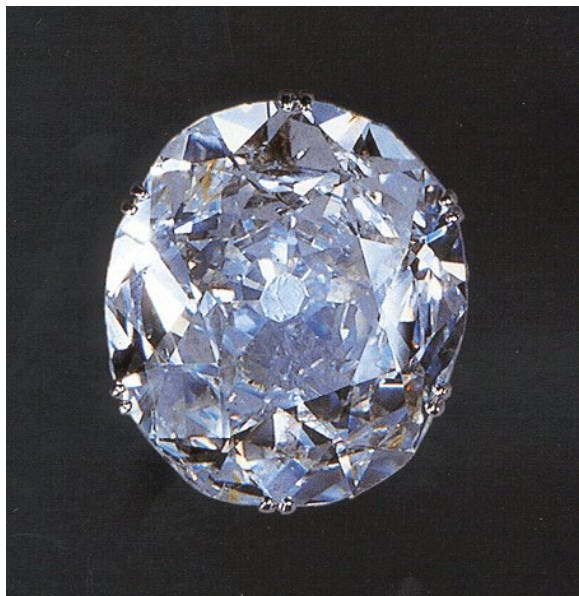
A list of the questions – by no means all - to be solved shows how many plots there are:

- [1] What was Anthony Cade's mysterious past: might he be 'King' Victor?
- [2] Who was Virginia Revel's lover?
- [3] Who murdered Giuseppe, and how did they pop him into a chair in Mrs. Revel's house without any of the battalion of servants noticing? This is never explained.
- [4] What secret, worth killing for, is hidden in Baron Stylptitch's Memoirs?
- [5] Why didn't the Baron's executors just send the manuscript by registered post to the publishers? This again is never explained.
- [6] Is the body shot in the Council Chamber really Prince Michael of Herzoslovakia? Who shot him?
- [7] Why did no one inside the house at *Chimneys* hear the shot that night? The body was not discovered until the morning by a hapless maid. Since the whole place was 'as still as the grave' until the shot rang out, and Anthony clearly heard it from the Park; this again is never explained.
- [8] Which character is 'King Victor'. He is known to be a master of disguises.
- [9] Where is the Koh-I-Noor diamond hidden?
- [10] Why did someone write letters using Virginia Revel's name?
- [11] Why did the light go on in Mademoiselle Brun's room just after the murder of Prince Michael?

One is dizzy just reading the list.

In trying to answer some of these questions Christie is fair to the reader. There are, for example, many clues about Anthony Cade's real identity. Cade says

One lie involves you in such a lot of lies - and continuous lying is so monotonous.



The real The Koh-I-Noor Diamond

One wonders: *what* is Cade lying about? One clue is that Prince Michael's valet, Boris Anchoukoff, attaches himself to Anthony Cade and vows to serve him as his new master 'until death'? Anthony talks of 'instinct' in this faithful follower of the Royal House of Herzoslovakia. He also says to Superintendent Battle of Scotland Yard when questioned about it:

perhaps he may have liked my face.

This is a truthful answer because Boris in fact recognises him. Anthony Cade

always answers questions truthfully at first. He then, however, in the next sentence misdirects Battle

Or he may think I murdered his master and wish to establish himself in a handy position for executing revenge.

We are told that members of the Royal Family of Herzoslovakia had a British education, and that Prince Nicholas had been at Oxford. On a separate occasion, Virginia finds out that Anthony Cade was at 'Eton and Oxford'. It is this information that leads her to trust him with the disposal of the murdered Giuseppe! Anthony Cade says he was brought up to a 'trade' but chose not to follow it:

It's tying oneself down to regular work. I've always avoided that so far.

He does not reveal what that job was. The final clue is

Cheer up, Battle. I'm really a king in disguise said so jauntily you are left wondering again if he is 'King' Victor, the famous jewel thief.

Christie is also fair about the clueing for Queen Varaga's true identity. Varaga had been Queen of Herzoslovakia. She had been the lover of the jewel thief 'King Victor', and wrote to him in code when she became Queen Varaga. Her body had, apparently, been found (before the novel opens)

horribly mutilated and hardly recognizable.

This was 61 years before DNA profiling was developed by Sir Alec Jeffreys. In whodunnits from this era, therefore, a mutilated corpse raises the suspicion that the dead body has been misidentified and that the person presumed dead may be alive under an assumed name. Christie, in several of her novels, plays with this idea sometimes subverting expectations. Queen Varaga, we are told, started life as a clever young actress

from the Folies Bergère. Christie devotees will realise that this means that she is capable of taking on any disguise and able to fool everyone

These are clues that Queen Varaga is alive and that she is likely to be one of the characters at *Chimneys*. Several clues fall into place once the reader considers the possibility that Queen Varaga is Mademoiselle Brun. For example, we are told that Virginia Revell 'knew [Mademoiselle Brun's] face quite well', and elsewhere we learn that Virginia had spent several years in Herzoslovakia at the British Embassy. One explanation for why the dead Giuseppe is found in Virginia's London house is that he was planted there in order to prevent her from visiting *Chimneys*. There was no reason for Prince Michael to object to her visit, but if Queen Varaga were at *Chimneys* in disguise then she would have reason to want to avoid being recognised by Virginia. As there were no female guests, and as it is unlikely, although not perhaps impossible, that Varaga would be in disguise as a man, she is likely to be a female member of staff. The female member of staff who has only recently come to *Chimneys* is Mademoiselle Brun, the Governess to the Brent daughters. Furthermore, when Baron Lolopretjzyl and Mrs. Revell are together, both people who knew Queen Varaga, the Governess has a migraine and remains in her room. The light in Mademoiselle Brun's room goes on after the shooting of Prince Michael. Anthony Cade and, perhaps, the reader guess that Queen Varaga is alive, disguised as governess Brun, and the murderer of Prince Michael.

We know Queen Varaga was a French Actress, so she could easily pass as a French governess. Cade rushes off to Brittany to check out the governess's references with the Comtesse de Breteuil. He is too naïve to think that the bona fide Governess Brun was kidnapped en route to Chimneys and the actress substituted, to get her in position at Chimneys for the recovery of the lost diamond.

The clues that Mr. Fish is not who he seems to be are fair but there is no way the reader can guess who he really is. He is up and dressed at night, he listens at doors and sits in the middle of hedges! His apparent reason for coming to Chimneys is that he is a collector of rare books but Lord Caterham remarks

Fish is very interested but he never volunteers any statements of his own. The reader is fooled into believing Fish is 'fishy' - possibly 'King' Victor himself - especially when he follows Anthony Cade to Dover. But it turns out that he is no criminal, but one of the detectives.

The real sleight of hand comes with the character of Lemoine of the Sûreté. He starts off being a 'suspicious foreigner' caught snooping around the boat house with the lame excuse of getting lost walking to the Pub. Later Superintendent Battle introduces him as being from the Paris Sûreté, so the reader accepts these small idiosyncrasies as not abnormal in a professional detective. He is above suspicion. It turns out, however, that he is the jewel thief known as King Victor, working with his accomplice, Queen Varaga. The only decent clue to his identity comes when Cade suggests that the missing diamond is in the Library. 'Lemoine' responds rapidly by handing a note to the Butler for immediate delivery to someone in the house; by

preventing everyone from rushing to the Library; and by accusing Anthony Cade of the jewel theft.

In *The Man with the Brown suit* there is a real colonel, Colonel Race, and a criminal mastermind known as "The Colonel". In *The Secret of Chimneys*, there is the criminal mastermind "King Victor", and a real monarch, Prince Michael of Herzoslovakia.

In future novels, Christie will refine her plots and sub-plots and reduce the number of characters and detectives, giving a smoother read.

Less is sometimes more.

However, she clearly developed a fondness for the brilliantly funny characters of Lord Caterham and Lady Eileen Brent, and for the setting of *Chimneys* itself. They will return in four year's time in *The Seven Dials Mystery*.

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