

## Lord Edgware Dies

1933

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, and for PERIL AT END HOUSE but not for other novels]

As Poirot says himself at the dénouement 'Just a little story quite simple – so simple I am ashamed not to have seen it at once.' The puzzle is: how can Jane Wilkinson be at a supper party in Chiswick with 12 other people for the evening, AND murdering her husband in his library in his town house *at the same time*, as witnessed by Lord Edgware's secretary and butler? So often in Christie, the solution is found by looking at the problem from a different angle. A lateral thought. The authorial misdirection is to send the reader down the path of Lord Edgware's house at Regent Gate, thinking Carlotta Adams impersonated Jane Wilkinson. The lady wore a black dress, a colour the real Jane Wilkinson never wears, and Carlotta Adams bought the new black hat that afternoon. Whilst Carlotta is talking to the butler, the unknown murderer slips into Lord Edgware's library and stabs him. The reader knows the real Jane Wilkinson, dazzling in a white gown and fur wrap, was at supper with Sir Montagu Corner, all evening, in Chiswick. It is only by swapping these ideas around by 180 degrees, that suddenly all the clues fit into place. Carlotta Adams pulls off the impersonation of her theatrical career by being Jane Wilkinson for an entire dinner party, rather than a 10 minute sketch. The real Jane Wilkinson, turns up at Lord Edgware's, announces clearly who she is to the new butler, goes into the library, stabs her husband and walks out. Wilkinson's reasoning is that everyone will think no one would be *that* stupid. Wilkinson also has 12 people to swear she is on the other side of London all evening. Christie often thinks of new plot twists. In this book the murderer does not dissemble at all, but blatantly walks through the front door, announcing who she is to the butler. This new plot idea of false/true identities of the murderer and or accomplice deserves the high Poirotscore. The whole plot is very simple, as Poirot eventually acknowledges, but the authorial misdirection masterful. Christie enjoys seeing through a mirror, darkly.

Two years before the start of this novel, the beautiful actress, Jane Wilkinson, left her sadistic husband, Lord Edgware. She has been a great success in Hollywood, but wants to divorce Lord Edgware so that she can marry the Duke of Merton, who is infatuated with her. Lord Edgware had refused to divorce his wife. Why she ever married Edgware in the first place, or indeed how they met, are never described. From what we know of Lord Edgware he was hardly a convivial socialite.

Right at the beginning of the novel, Lady Edgware seeks out Poirot to tell him that she must get rid of her husband: 'if we were only in Chicago I could get him bumped off quite easily'. Is Lady Edgware such a naive simpleton? What is very striking is Jane Wilkinson's complete obsession with herself: 'I do so hate being unhappy. It affects my acting, even.'

In the first chapter, despite Bryan Martin’s pleas to wait, Wilkinson sweeps Poirot off to her private suite at the Savoy, to discuss her marital problems, completely ignoring the two parties of people in the middle of their supper. She is the sort of femme fatale that ‘bewitches men’ and can wind them round her finger. Nothing stops her. She even persuades Poirot to act as an unlikely divorce broker between her and Lord Edgware, when this is not his normal line of work. Poirot firmly refuses the job - at first :‘I do not make the investigations for divorce. It is not pretty – ce métier là.’

‘Oh! but you can surely think of something, M. Poirot.’ She leaned forward. Her blue eyes opened wide again. ‘You’d like me to be happy, wouldn’t you?’

**The American Version, published as ‘13 for Dinner’.**

**Crowell Publishing Company, illustration by Weldon Trench / Public domain**



This is in sharp contrast to the treatment the equally ‘ruthless’ but ancient and dumpy Dowager Duchess of Merton receives, when she asks Poirot to ‘ensure that my son does not marry the actress, Jane Wilkinson.’ Poirot makes the excuse that he has already been engaged to act on Miss Wilkinson’s behalf, but that was only as a go-between with Lord Edgware, who has now been murdered. Clearly Poirot is as susceptible to beautiful young women as Hastings is. There is a most wonderful scene later in the book when Poirot attempts to talk to Miss Wilkinson whilst she is trying on new mourning outfits. Wilkinson is so focused on how she looks in a

satin coat, so self-absorbed, Poirot has to shout at her, something he very rarely does.

Women, of course, see through Jane Wilkinson immediately as a scheming, self-centred, cold-hearted egoist. Ex-lovers, like Bryan Martin, who have got over the infatuation and are bitter from their usage, understand her real character. Bryan says of her ‘no morals whatever...Amoral. Just sees one thing only in life- what Jane wants...? I believe she’d kill somebody quite cheerfully – and feel injured if they caught her.’

The biggest clue comes from Sir Montagu Corner, who is clearly highly cultured: ‘he spoke of Japanese prints, of Chinese lacquer, of Persian carpets, of the French Impressionists, of modern music and of the theories of Einstein.’ Corner is the complete Renaissance man. He says of his evening with Jane Wilkinson ‘I was favourably impressed by her...She made several most intelligent remarks about Greek art’. Hastings smirks, misdirecting the reader

into thinking this just meant Jane saying 'Yes' and 'No' at the right moments, but Sir Montagu is a shrewd connoisseur; one feels he would be quite at liberty to say: well she's beautiful but no brains at all. The fact they had a conversation about Art is the major clue that the woman he had spent the evening with was not Jane Wilkinson but Carlotta Adams, whom the reader knows to be sensitive and intelligent.

Lord Edgware 'was a man of peculiar tastes', Poirot states without us really knowing what exactly these tastes were. Poirot continues: 'It is possible that facts about him had come to light which, while not entitling his wife to an English divorce, might yet be used by her as a lever coupled with the threat of publicity.' Lord Edgware would not want his name sullied by scandal. Lord Edgware himself admits to enjoying the macabre. His library contains the memoirs of Casanova, the Comte de Sade, and a book on mediaeval torture. Why does he have a young Adonis for a butler? Hasting describes the butler as 'one of the handsomest young men I have ever seen', but that he had a 'vaguely effeminate softness of the voice', that made the straight Hastings a bit squeamish. One has to remember that homosexuality was illegal in the UK, even between consenting adults (those aged 21 years and over) until 1967, over thirty years after this book was written. Later Japp says of the beautiful butler 'he's mixed up with a couple of disreputable nightclubs. Not the usual thing. Something a great deal more recherché and nasty.' For Christie to be even hinting at homosexual S+M in 1933 shows the breadth of her understanding, that nothing human was alien to her.



This Christie is all about authorial misdirection. Lord Edgware is such an unpleasant man that his wife, his nephew, and his daughter all have strong motives to want him dead. His death gives Jane Wilkinson the freedom to marry the Duke of Merton, who would not marry a divorcee. Edgware's nephew, Ronald Marsh suddenly becomes the 5<sup>th</sup> Baron Edgware and can finally pay his tailor. Miserable, timid Geraldine Marsh acquires independence from a tyrannical, sadistic father.

***Clara Bow, the actress with "It" {sex appeal} married actor Rex Bell in 1931, and quite unlike the fictitious Jane Wilkinson, lived happily on a ranch for the rest of her life***

There is a written clue, a letter from Carlotta Adams, which is reproduced in the novel. The letter to Carlotta's little sister is all about impersonating Jane Wilkinson as a bet. The page is torn so it reads 'he said I believe it would take in Lord Edgware himself.' Whereas Adams

wrote 'she said'. This evidence throws suspicion onto Ronald Marsh, or the film star Bryan Martin.

Ronald Marsh and his cousin, Geraldine Marsh, have alibis that Poirot proves to be false. Both of them returned to Lord Edgware's House around the time of his murder during the Covent Garden Opera Interval, ostensibly to get Geraldine's pearls for Ronald to pawn, to pay his immediate debts. Either of them could have paid Carlotta Adams to impersonate Jane Wilkinson at Lord Edgware's house to incriminate Miss Wilkinson. Jane Wilkinson had already publically said she'd like to kill her husband. We know early on that Carlotta Adams must have impersonated Jane Wilkinson, although the implication is she did the impersonation 'for a dare' or bet. A blonde wig and gloves are found amongst Carlotta's things in a case in her flat after her death, confirming that Carlotta impersonated Jane Wilkinson just before she died. The murderer had to kill Carlotta Adams, after Miss Adams successfully played her part, but before Lord Edgware's murder was discovered. Carlotta Adams had integrity; she would immediately realise she had played an unwitting part of the murder plot. All the authorial misdirection is into thinking that Carlotta Adams impersonated Jane Wilkinson at Lord Edgware's House in Regent Gate, and then a 'mystery person' slipped in unobserved to do the murder. The 'Lady Edgware' that arrives about 10 pm to see Lord Edgware is in black, a colour Jane Wilkinson never wears. This is an echo of Nick Buckley in Peril at End House, from Christie's previous novel. Carlotta Adams has also bought a new little hat from Jenny Driver that afternoon that casts a shadow on the left side of her face: the real Jane Wilkinson has a mole by her left eye.

Lord Edgware's 'toy boy' butler had only been in post for six months, so had never met Jane Wilkinson before. Miss Carroll, Lord Edgware's secretary, looked down into the hall from the first floor landing. Miss Carroll was sure it was Jane Wilkinson, but had to admit under questioning that she could not see Wilkinson's face.

What was the reason for the 'hoax call' for Lady Edgware in Chiswick? Once you think the unthinkable, and wonder if Carlotta Adams could pull off impersonating Lady Edgware at a dinner party evening with 12 people she'd never met before, the phone call makes sense. The real Lady Edgware was checking with Carlotta that Sir Montagu Corner had not challenged her as an imposter, before she put the rest of the murder plan into action. We are told the candle light lamps were dim in Chiswick. It may be true that Hollywood starlets in the flesh look very different from when they are on screen, but what gives the game away to the reader, is the content of Carlotta's conversation. Sir Montagu was impressed that Lady Edgware knew about Greek art. Donald Ross realises he could not have met Jane Wilkinson in Chiswick, when he hears the real Jane Wilkinson at the Claridge's luncheon party, later on. The true Ms Wilkinson was ignorant about Greek Myths, and misunderstood a discussion about the Judgement of Paris, thinking people were talking about the city of Paris. Stupidly Ross hints this to Hastings at the end of the lunch, in the full public hearing of the party, and so signs his own death warrant.

The 'light bulb' moment is realising the women swap clothes: Carlotta Adams goes off to the supper party at Chiswick in a blonde wig, but Wilkinson's own white fur wrap and evening dress, Jane Wilkinson takes a taxi to Regent Gate wearing Carlotta's black dress and hat. One has to skate over the fact that the two women were highly unlikely to be of exactly the same build.

As Poirot says, it is a brilliantly simple idea. Get someone to impersonate you at a dinner party so you have 12 unimpeachable people giving you an alibi. The idea of 12 reputable people giving their verdict, chimes with ideas of a jury, and occurs in another, later, Christie novel. Wilkinson was so brazen committing the murder, with no effort to dissemble, that people think it must have been someone in disguise to throw suspicion onto her. As Jane Wilkinson says herself 'I've always noticed if you speak the truth in a silly way nobody believes you.' How shrewd.

There are a few red herrings in this book. There is the sub plot with Geraldine and Ronald Marsh and the pearls. Ronald Marsh is arrested for the murder of his Uncle, but with no real evidence, except he was in the house just after the murder, and his alibi was proven false. We shall also slide over the highly improbable timings of leaving the Royal Opera House, finding a taxi, going to retrieve the pearls from Regent Gate, then returning to Covent Garden all within thirty minutes. Although the London traffic in the 1930s would not have been as gridlocked as it is now, nor the ushers at the Royal Opera House so rigorous, it is hard to get out onto the pavement at Covent Garden in half an hour, let alone rush around central London, and get back again. Also, at the Royal Opera House, the staff do not allow you in, if you are late for the curtain, at least not now.

The Bryan Martin character is unusual: I was not sure for most of the book whether he was in the plot with Jane Wilkinson, or trying to incriminate her. The preposterous story of the young man with a gold tooth tracking Martin across America, which he spins to Poirot deserved the telling off he got, but I really couldn't see the point of Christie putting it in at all. It felt like something out of a Sherlock Holmes novel. There is never an explanation of why Martin tells this bag of bilge. The false dénouement by Poirot in front of Japp is Martin's punishment for telling him lies, but it did seem rather petulant of Poirot to do this.

Poirot is as egotistical as Jane Wilkinson. In the interview with the Dowager Duchess of Merton he says

'I comprehend the mother's heart. No one comprehends it better than I, Hercule Poirot'

This does seem odd in a man with no near relations, or even true close friends. However, to be fair to the great man, he does give good advice 'Be patient and calm, and disguise your feelings. There is yet a chance that the matter may break itself. Opposition will merely increase your son's obstinacy.'

The gold veronal pillbox planted in Carlotta's handbag was a much better red herring, and led the story to Paris, the city, not the Trojan hero, but this might have been a subconscious or conscious link in Christie's mind. It led to speculation amongst the detectives, thinking that Carlotta Adams was not the straight forward, hardworking reliable older sister the world thought she was. It also shows just how scheming and smart Lady Edgware was. There is also the sketchy beautiful effeminate butler who does a runner, and one wants to know much more about him too, and his exact relationship with Lord Edgware. Or, perhaps, it is better not to know.

The ruthless, attractive, immoral Nick Buckley, of *Peril at End House*, Christie's previous main character, metamorphoses into the even more beautiful and amoral Jane Wilkinson in *Lord Edgware Dies*. They both have large, innocent blue eyes, that they use to great effect on Poirot. Christie was clearly interested, in writing these two successive novels, to explore the deep, unpleasant psychological waters of egocentric characters. Nick Buckley, in *Peril At End House* was a very gifted liar. Lady Edgware is even more depraved: she tells the truth, but specifically in a way so that no one believes her. Neither woman shows any remorse for



*Portrait of Mrs. St. George by William Orpen.*

*I imagine this is how Carlotta Adams disguises herself as Mrs Van Dusen*

In *Lord Edgware Dies* there is no dénouement. One never has the arrest of Lady Edgware, nor the Duke of Merton's reaction to it. Many loose ends are never tied up. One never knows if Geraldine Marsh marries her cousin, or the Duke of Merton, or neither. One never finds out what happened to

Lord Edgware's beautiful butler. One can only speculate as to the quiet, smug satisfaction felt by the Dowager Duchess of Merton, having saved her son from marrying that dreadful Jane Wilkinson. One hopes the Duchess forgives Poirot for refusing to take her commission, but one suspects not.

[SH]