

Peril at End House

1932

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

Peril at End House starts at the coast in Christie's beloved South West England. Not in Devon where she grew up (in Torquay), but in Cornwall. St Loo is a fictitious seaside resort where Poirot and Hastings go for a week's holiday in the sun. It 'reminds one forcibly of the Riviera...every bit as fascinating as...the south of France'. The characters link the two places by their reminiscences of the previous winter when Poirot solved 'a complicated and baffling' mystery murder 'committed on the Blue Train' (see *The Mystery of the Blue Train*).

The real fishing village of Looe in Cornwall



Right at the start of the book, Poirot acts in a very uncharacteristic fashion: he pretends to fall in front of Nick Buckley in order to strike up an acquaintance, since a bullet hit the wall behind his head just as Nick was running up the path. Nick immediately tells Poirot and Hastings of 'three escapes from sudden death in as many days'. Miss Buckley also leaves her hat, with a bullet hole through the brim, for Poirot to notice. Why would an upper class woman immediately tell complete strangers, one a foreigner too, without any formal introduction, about her near death experiences? Nick is not supposed to know he is Hercule Poirot at this point, and indeed later says she has never heard of him. Why would she leave her good quality hat behind for Poirot to examine, when she is in desperate need of money? Why was the St Loo Weekly Herald and Directory open, at the page which announced Poirot's arrival at St Loo, in Nick's drawing room of End House? Nick said she had been looking at the Tides Timetable, which were not on that page. Why does Nick Buckley tell so many lies? The reader who pauses to think on these

questions might well tumble quickly to the solution. Many readers, however, may, like Poirot, be seduced by Nick Buckley's charms.

Poirot has often sharply criticised Hastings for trusting a beautiful girl with an 'elfin charm and a small, vivid pansy shaped face with enormous blue eyes', but, in this novel, Poirot is completely taken in by the beautiful Miss Buckley. Hastings is amused: 'Poirot, I believe you have fallen in love.' Poirot accepts as true the three previous 'near death escapes': the brakes on Nick's car failing, the heavy picture above her bed falling in the night, and a boulder dislodged from the cliff top, missing her as she went to bathe. The fourth attempt was the terrace bullet that pierced Nick's hat, witnessed by Poirot and Hastings. Presumably Nick had already shot her hat and then thrown the bullet close to Poirot's head – which suggests she had carried out a significant amount of premeditated planning.

Christie describes the bullet as a 'little pebble' hitting the wall. The noise from a gunshot, or of a bullet ricocheting off stone, would surely be more startling. Even Hastings points this out to Poirot, who explains away the lack of a gunshot sound by the ear ignoring sounds like speed boats in the bay. Hastings had fought in the war, so knows the sound of gunshot, which he did not hear.



Prior to the bullet incident, there are no corroborating witnesses for Miss Buckley's previous near death escapes. Poirot and Hastings check with Mott's garage and are told that Nick's car had indeed been tampered with. This is evidence, but of what? It is not as though Hastings wasn't warned early on. Nick's best friend Frederica Rice, on first making Hastings' acquaintance says of Nick: 'She's the most heaven-sent little liar that ever existed, you know. Amazing – it's quite a gift'.

Like many other of Christie's heroines 'Nick' is her 'nickname', like Tuppence, Bundle, and Egg. Her real name is 'Magdala...it's a kind of family one . There have been lots of Magdalas in the Buckley family.' Magdala Buckley was brought up by her

grandfather, who was so wicked he was called 'Old Nick'. She proudly boasts she 'inherited his spirit', hence 'Young Nick'. We also learn that she has lost her Mauser pistol, and the bullet Poirot picks up is from a Mauser.

There are a number of clues to the set up of the murder of Nick's cousin Maggie, and to the elaborate plan to make it look like an attempted murder of Nick. This is top-class Christie. None of the clues by itself is sufficient but if a reader sees the truth then all the clues fit. It is like a jigsaw where you only see the picture once the jagged pieces fit together.

First, Nick says waspishly to Poirot of her cousin Maggie 'I was hoping to get out of having her this year'. This implies Nick had not invited Maggie. Yet, in the letter Maggie writes to her mother, she says 'I cannot see why she should have telegraphed for me in the way she did. Tuesday would have done just as well.' So Nick lied again to Poirot: she had already invited Maggie for her usual summer visit. Second Nick demanded an urgent change in the arrangements, so that Maggie would arrive just in time for the fireworks party. Third, it seems that Nick kept the impending visit secret from her housekeeper - for otherwise the housekeeper would have mentioned this to Poirot. Fourth, and most importantly, Nick ordered a new black dress specifically for the fireworks party despite being desperately short of cash, and despite 'never wearing black'. Indeed Frederica Rice comments on this startling sartorial choice. Nick knew her cousin would wear the old black evening dress she always wore. Maggie Buckley was a poor cleric's daughter. The reader is misdirected into thinking Nick's new black dress is in mourning for Michael Seton, as Nick tells everyone, after his death, that they were engaged. But the clues are there that when Nick ordered the new dress, and indeed when she was already wearing it, Seton was not known to be dead, only 'missing'. His death was not announced until 9pm on the evening of the fireworks party, after supper, when she has been already wearing the dress all evening.

These clues can be put together once the murder occurs. It is because Nick wears a black dress, as does Maggie. Nick 'kindly' suggested that Maggie should borrow her bright red shawl, and because it seems that there have already been several attempts on Nick's life, that everyone would think Maggie has been shot by mistake in the dark for Nick. Nick was relying on Poirot's authority to explain all this to the investigating police.

In addition to the clever clueing, Christie uses the central plot as a brilliant piece of whodunnit misdirection. The reader is focused on who would want to kill Nick Buckley, not on who has a motive for killing Maggie Buckley. The reader and the greatest detective in the world are taken in. Christie had used the central plot idea - that the apparent victim is in fact the murderer - in a very small way in a previous novel. *Peril at End House* is the first of her novels in which she explores this idea to its full potential and that is part of the reason for considering this novel to be one of Christie's great whodunnits. She uses this plot again, with small variations, to great effect in two later, very good, novels.

Had Nick stopped after killing Maggie she might well have fooled Poirot and got away with murder. After Maggie's death there continue to be apparent attempts on Nick's life, which still fail. Perhaps Christie wrote these into the story in order to arouse the readers' suspicions and help readers to the solution, or perhaps for the opposite reason: that unless there continued to be attempts to kill Nick, readers would more easily tumble to the true solution.

Readers who do consider the correct solution might stumble over the problem of motive: why would Nick want poor, harmless, sweet, kind and pure Maggie Buckley dead?

Christie however is fair to the reader: the clues are fairly placed.

Poirot and Hastings discuss the reasons for the possible murder of Nick Buckley and this discussion provides a template for solving any whodunnit:

Motives:

[i] Gain: Who stood to gain from Miss Buckley's death?

[ii] The *crime passionnel*: the jealous lover.

[iii] Jealousy: not of the sexual type but envy of possession- of supremacy..

[iv] Fear: somebody's secret in their power, of which she herself may be unaware.

Using this template for why Nick would want to murder Maggie, the only thing we know about both girls is that they had each met the glamorous aviator Michael Seton. Again Christie misdirects us when Freddie Rice says that she knew 'he was a conquest of Nick's'. But the letters found in Nick's drawer written by the pilot say 'I flew over Scarborough. Blessed, blessed, blessed Scarborough.' Scarborough is where Seton met Maggie: he'd known Nick at Le Touquet. We also find from the letters that Maggie's name, like Nick's, is also Magdala, and that Seton has made a will leaving everything to 'Magdala Buckley', should he die on the round the world trip.

We know that Seton's multimillionaire uncle died a few weeks before the novel opens, presumably leaving everything to Michael Seton. If Michael Seton was also dead then Magdala Buckley will become one of the richest women in England. But which Magdala Buckley? Nick appears to know that Maggie and Michael were secretly engaged but that no one else, apart from her, knows this. So Nick claims that she and Michael were secretly engaged thus explaining why Michael would

make a will leaving all to her. The reader is given the 'blessed Scarborough' clue providing a motive for why Nick would murder Maggie.

Readers who have seriously considered Nick as the murderer will see the 'attempted' chocolate cocaine poisoning when



Nick is in the nursing home as the final proof. The clumsy tampering of the chocolates: a smart girl like Nick would have spotted it. She was also told not to eat anything from 'outside': so why eat them? The cocaine sub-plot with the wrist watches, and Commander Challenger supplying drugs to Frederica and Nick. So you know Nick would have had her cocaine supply with her. The nice touch of adding Hercule Poirot's card to the box, and telephoning Freddie to deliver a box of Fuller's chocolates, and ordering another box by post, to muddle them up, to add a 'smoke screen' just shows how very smart Nick is.

By the end of the book you realise just how ruthless Nick can be. Nick frames Frederica for murder, by putting the Mauser in Freddie's coat pocket. Nick has no moral compunction in potentially getting her best friend hanged for the crime she herself committed.

This brings me to speculate on whether Nick killed her own brother three years before the events narrated in the novel in order to become the proud owner of End House. 'Gerald was killed in a motor accident just three years ago and the place came to me' Nick says. This is all we know from the text. We also know that their grandfather brought both of them up, and Nick's word (which is worthless) that her brother and grandfather didn't get on. Yet, Old Nick leaves the estate to Gerald not to Nick. We know Nick successfully tampered with her own car brakes, to cause an accident. I suspect she killed her brother to gain End House too. Perhaps Poirot has just thought of this possibility, as he builds another house of cards.

[SH]