

The Sittaford Mystery

1931

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

“That is difficult to say exactly” replies Mr Kirkwood, the solicitor, in answer to a question about the size of the murder victim’s estate. Christie comments that like all lawyers Mr Kirkwood enjoys making the reply to a simple question difficult. Christie’s job in this novel is to make a simple idea difficult, because at the core of the plot lies a very simple idea.

A game I like to play after finishing an Christie novel is to guess her starting point – what idea forms the nucleus around which the novel crystallises. Sometimes this idea is to do with the identity of the murderer or murderers, sometimes it is about the mechanism of the murder, and sometimes, as in *Sittaford*, it is related to the mechanism of the alibi.



One day, I venture to speculate, Christie had the thought that, in snow, a person can travel much more quickly on skis than by walking. And this fact could be used to establish a false alibi. The murder is committed not later than time T. At time T – x the murderer is known to be at a particular place. There is snow. It will take a great deal longer than time x to walk from that particular place to the scene of the murder. If walking is thought to be the only means of transport available then the murderer has a snow-tight alibi. But if by skis the journey time is less than time x, the murderer can secretly ski and kill without being suspected.

So how does Christie construct a whodunnit around that simple thought?

The most brilliant idea in *Sittaford* is not ski travel but a séance. Six people sit round a table in the dark. The table begins to rock. Contact is made with a spirit. The spirit has a message for Major Burnaby. The message is spelt out letter by letter: *Trevelyan is dead. Murder.* And indeed it turns out that Captain Joseph Trevelyan was murdered, six miles away, and close to the time that the séance was taking place. Good dramatic stuff of course, but also, in Christie’s hands, the central but subtle clue to the mystery. With these two ideas, skis and a séance, Christie now has the whole skeleton on which she can build her puzzle.

The reader can identify the murderer with a high degree of confidence directly from the séance but there are several steps in the reasoning. To start, the message cannot be from the spirit world – not in an Agatha Christie. Neither can a coherent, let alone a correct, message be formed without one of the six people around the table making it happen. The person who manipulated the table must have known the truth of the message: for had the message been intended as a joke it is too much of a

coincidence for it to have turned out to be true. Why would someone want to announce the murder? One reason might be to ensure that the body is found soon because this would enable a more accurate time of death to be established than if it were found later. But such a reason does not hold in this case. The best way of seeking the reason is to examine the effect, and the effect of the spirit's announcement is for Major Burnaby to travel six miles to Trevelyan's house where, two and a half hours later, he arrives to find Trevelyan dead, murdered around two hours before he arrived. One of the six people round the table must not only have known that Trevelyan was, or would be, murdered but must also have had a reason for announcing the fact. The only effect of the announcement was for Major Burnaby to have a reason to visit Trevelyan. If anyone other than Major Burnaby were the murderer there would have been no reason to announce Trevelyan's murder. Therefore, since the murder was announced, Burnaby must be the murderer.

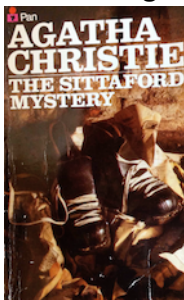


So how does Christie try to prevent readers from thinking through these steps and arriving at the correct identification of the murderer? She realises that some readers will fix on the fact that someone at the séance must have known that Trevelyan had been murdered or was about to be murdered, and so she tackles this head-on. In chapter 15, Emily Trefusis, who is the latest in Christie's young women detectives, says to her male side-kick: 'I don't believe for a moment in spirits or anything .. but supposing that one of those people who were playing [i.e. who were at the séance] knew that Captain Trevelyan was being murdered at that minute.' She goes on to suggest that one of those at the séance had an accomplice who committed the murder. Ten chapters later she returns to this issue. 'I have felt from the beginning that we couldn't ignore the queer business of the table-turning' she says, voicing exactly what many readers will have been thinking. She goes on to outline three explanations: first that it was supernatural; second that someone spelt out the message deliberately; and third that someone spelt out the message accidentally – an unconscious piece of self-revelation. She, like any reader of Christie, dismisses the supernatural. She discounts the second - and correct - explanation rapidly with the words: 'as one can't arrive at any conceivable reason, we can rule that out also'. She then elaborates on the idea of the unconscious and concludes that two people are involved: one person who was at the séance, and an accomplice who was committing the murder six miles away around the time of the séance. And having set the idea that two people are involved, Christie, with her characteristic sense of timing, immediately describes a scene in which one of the people at the séance, Ronnie Garfield, is having tea with the murdered man's sister – a person who had motive and opportunity to murder Trevelyan. Christie hopes that the reader will be wondering: could these two be in it together; and, which other pairs of people might

be a possible murderer and accomplice? What she hopes the reader will not realise is just how feeble is Emily Trefusis' third and preferred explanation.

Christie defends herself against readers solving the murder in a number of ways. First, Major Burnaby does not appear to have had the opportunity. Christie is a master of rhetoric. Her logic is generally impeccable but she uses style to woo the reader away from the solution. Christie wants us to imagine that after the séance Major Burnaby trudges slowly through the snow to visit his friend Captain Trevelyan. Immediately after the séance Christie writes: 'Two and a half hours later, just before eight o'clock, Major Burnaby, hurricane lamp in hand, his head dropped forward so as not to meet the blinding drive of the snow, stumbled up the path to the door of 'Hazelmoor', the small house tenanted by Captain Trevelyan.' We see the hunched figure making his way slowly through the driving snow. We are unlikely to imagine that same Major Burnaby skiing rapidly and confidently over the snow two hours earlier to commit the murder.

Christie's second defence is to give the impression that Burnaby does not have the motive. Again and again she emphasises that Burnaby and Trevelyan were great



friends. She paints a vivid picture of Burnaby the good no-nonsense old soldier. She knows the power of first impressions and right on the first page Burnaby is described as "the staunch old warrior". She even employs rather awkward phrasing to emphasise that Burnaby and Trevelyan were friends. When Emily Trefusis says to Burnaby that Trevelyan would not have been an easy person to get to know, Christie writes: 'No, he wouldn't,' agreed the late Captain Trevelyan's friend'.

Christie's third defence is when Emily Trefusis suggests that Trevelyan was murdered before the séance began. The reader starts to think about who might have had opportunity at this earlier time and moves away from the idea that the murder was committed, as indeed it was, after the séance.

Christie's fourth defence is the classic one of providing sub-plots and red herrings. In *Sittaford* there is one fairly elaborate sub-plot involving Mrs Willett, her daughter, an escaped prisoner and one of Trevelyan's nephews. And then there are various relatives of Trevelyan's who stand to inherit from his death. Christie does no more than sketch the minimum of detail needed to encourage the reader to run down these various cul-de-sacs.

Although Christie hides mechanism and motive she also plays fair by the reader. There are several hints that could lead an astute reader to hit on the idea of skis. We are told that it is a steady downhill six miles from Sittaford, where the séance took place, to Exhampton, where the murder was committed. The snow is emphasised again and again. In chapter 1 – before the séance or the murder – Major Burnaby tells Violet Willett that he and Trevelyan used to go regularly to Switzerland for Winter sports. After the murder we learn that at Trevelyan's house there are two pairs of skis. One of these is the pair used by Burnaby, but, of course, it would be

quite possible for Trevelyan to own two pairs. And we are subtly told that, on the assumption that Major Burnaby had walked to Exhampton, he would have walked the last half of the trek in a snowstorm. 'It's a miracle he ever got through' is Mrs Curtis' view. In fact by the time of the snowstorm Burnaby was already in Exhampton and had already committed the murder.

Motive is the other, lesser, stumbling block in coming to the correct solution. Burnaby appears to be a great friend of Trevelyan's. Shortly after Trevelyan's death Burnaby is given £5000 – a large sum in 1931 – for winning a football competition in a National newspaper. This should perhaps make the reader suspicious. Twice we are told that Trevelyan goes in for this type of competition but submits his answers giving the names and addresses of his friends. His reason is that he believes that his own rather grand address will count against him when the newspaper gives out prizes. It was in fact Trevelyan who had submitted, under Burnaby's name and address, the football competition entry that won the £5000. Burnaby's motive in killing Trevelyan is so that he can keep the prize money.

All in all the book is fairly clued and it passes the cryptic crossword test: that readers who hit on the right solution for the right reasons will be almost certain that they have done so. But there are weaknesses in the plot and clues. Perhaps foremost is motive. Since Trevelyan, unwisely, submitted his solution in the name of Burnaby it seems likely that Burnaby could have successfully kept the money without murdering Trevelyan. He might thereby have lost Trevelyan's friendship, but he did that in rather more dramatic fashion by murdering him. He might have lost the respect of some of his other friends but this hardly seems a motive for murder and all the risks he had to take. Another weakness is the business of the missing boots. Evans, the man who works as Trevelyan's manservant, notices that, after the murder, a pair of Trevelyan's boots is missing. Emily finds these boots hidden up Trevelyan's chimney and this leads her to the solution of the mystery. Christie makes a great deal of these missing boots. If only we could understand why they were hidden, she seems to be telling us, we would solve the puzzle. But in fact the reason they were hidden is rather weak: apparently Burnaby thought that if the police found Trevelyan's ski boots they might then think of the possibility that the murderer had travelled using skis. But that thought would, more likely, be prompted by finding the two pairs of skis themselves that were not hidden. The boots don't help the reader at all in solving the puzzle. They only help Emily because she fits the boots to one of the pairs of skis in Trevelyan's house but not to the other pair, which enables her to realise that one of the pairs of skis belonged to someone other than Trevelyan. The reader however does not know this. More problematic is why does Evans, who notices the missing boots, not also notice what would be far more obvious: that there are two pairs of skis when there should be only one pair.

Romance is rarely absent from these early Christie novels and in *Sittaford* she once again has a feisty young woman as the main detective, this time with hazel, rather than with grey, eyes. But Christie, now forty years old, seems to be wearying of the type. Emily Trefusis is the least attractive of



her young female sleuths despite being 'well dressed in a demure and provocative style'. 'I can't think why women worry so about servants. If they cut up nasty, just push them out' she says at one point. Other people are there only to serve her ends. She proposes 'a kind of partnership' with a young male journalist, Charles Enderby - the Tommy to her Tuppence. But it is all very manipulative. Christie tells us that 'What she really wanted was to engage Mr Enderby as a kind of private sleuth of her own. To go where she told him ...and in general to be a kind of bond slave. ... The whole point was that she was to be the boss, but the matter needed managing tactfully'. Charles starts to fall for her, and she leads him on suggesting that once the mystery is solved she will be available for romance. All the time, however, she intends to marry her fiancé, Jim Pearson. I don't think that Christie liked Emily very much. Jim Pearson is not very promising as a life companion. As Mrs Curtis remarks of Emily and her choice of man: 'The living image of my Great Aunt Sarah's Belinda, she is. Threw herself away she did on that miserable George Plunket down at the Three Cows.' The future for Emily is distinctly unpromising.

Photo acknowledgements

Dartmoor in the snow: <http://www.alexnnail.com/blog/dartmoor/staple-tor/attachment/staple-snow-grass-2/>

Séance: <http://psychictibor.wordpress.com/2012/11/25/modern-seances/>

Zoe Telford: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0854364/>

Zoe Telford played Emily Trefusis in the 2006 TV version of *The Sittaford Mystery* which takes enormous liberties with the characters and plot. In order to include it in the Marple series Miss Marple, who is not in the novel, is the detective (not Emily Trefusis). Geraldine McEwan plays Miss Marple, Timothy Dalton (of James Bond fame) is the victim, and Carey Mulligan is Violet Willett.

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