

Death In The Clouds

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



Aerial view of Croydon Aerodrome in the 1920s

All the characters are in an aeroplane flying from Le Bourget [Paris] at noon to Croydon aerodrome, London, on a warm September day, long before Heathrow or Gatwick airports came into being. In those days aeroplanes were very small: this one contained 11 passengers in the rear compartment and 10 in the front, plus two stewards, a much higher staff ratio than nowadays. The front compartment was second class, as it contained Lady Horbury's maid, and does not come into the story. All the focus is on the rear compartment with the 11 smart passengers. This is a locked room mystery, with the novel twist that there are thirteen people in a small compartment, but *no one* saw or heard the murder take place.

There are a number of interesting details about the flight from the historical perspective. There are holes in the windows, through which a blowpipe might have been thrown out of the plane. The cabins were not pressurised and aeroplanes did not fly at high altitudes. The stewards laid the places for lunch, like waiters, with cutlery, salt cellars and pepper pots, and coffee cups and spoons. Both stewards are male, their uniform a white coat. The stewards also brought round menus for people to choose what to eat, and individual bills towards the end of the flight for each customer. Lady Horbury could demand of the steward 'Send my maid to me, she's in the other compartment': try that out on easyJet and see what happens. Poirot, Dr Bryant, a steward and Mr Clancy were all standing as the plane descended to land at Croydon Aerodrome; they 'staggered a little'. Passengers were allowed to smoke during the flight but not once the plane landed – not until they were in the aerodrome building.



Croydon Aerodrome terminal

Madame Giselle was killed by boomslang snake poison that was on the tip of a thorn impaled in her jugular vein. The Amazonian Blowpipe, thought to have shot the thorn was concealed down the side of Poirot's seat. The coroner's jury find Poirot guilty of the murder, on the grounds that he is a suspicious foreigner. The coroner overrules the jury, but Poirot feels his good name needs to be cleared and investigates with Japp on the London side, and Fournier in Paris.

Christie carefully sets out the framework, so all the passengers have motive, except Poirot. Madame Giselle was a moneylender. She used secrets as her 'security' for financial loans to society people. Madame Giselle knew about Lady Horbury's heroin addiction, and her affairs. Madame Giselle probably knew about Dr Bryant's affair with a married woman. James Ryder was facing financial ruin. Madame Giselle's will, leaves a fortune to her daughter, Anne Morisot. Anne was brought up in a Quebec orphanage. Anne Morisot is that favourite Christie trope, an unknown young person, to keep the reader guessing. Jane Grey, or Lady Horbury could be Giselle's daughter. Jane Grey admits she was brought up in an orphanage. Any of the men, Clancy, Gale or Jean Dupont, could be secretly married to Anne, and want the money.

The police are very slow tracking down Giselle's daughter and tracing her movements and those of anyone connected with her. An odd quirk in the book is that the reader knows Lady Horbury's French maid went to the back of the plane to get her mistress' nail file during the flight. No one mentions this at the inquest, nor calls the maid to testify. It is as though the authorities do not consider the servant class as people: this theme comes into many Christies, for example *The Secret at Chimneys* [1925], and also found in Conan Doyle's writing.

It is stated that Madame Giselle had a superb information network. A possible valid solution I considered, that is *not* mentioned by any character in this book, was that Madame Giselle could

have asked someone to take her place on the plane, knowing she had many enemies. This would allow Madame Giselle to 'disappear' with her fortune.

There are other significant plot weaknesses. There is only the maid's word that Giselle asked her to burn all her confidential papers, should Giselle die. Giselle and her maid were close, it would be easy for Giselle and her maid to swap identities. The old retainer, Georges, had poor eyesight. The police did not search Giselle's flat properly, and Madame Giselle's old lawyer identified the body. Lawyers can be corrupted by bribes. The police assume that if she was travelling as Madame Giselle on the plane that was her true identity. All Christie readers know not to take a body on trust. The stewards had the best opportunity to kill Giselle as they were going up and down the plane all the time, but Scotland Yard seemed to exclude them as suspects for no apparent reason. Someone bribed the official at the ticket office to put Madame Giselle on that particular plane. A steward could easily have a concealed motive and had the best opportunity. Christie uses this idea soon in another novel, perhaps she gave herself that idea by writing *Death in the Clouds*.

The police never questioned Lady Horbury's maid, who was the only person, other than Mr Clancy and the stewards to walk past Giselle during the flight. Christie seems to rule out Mr Clancy as a harmless thriller writer, who knows about blow darts and poisons but would never actually do the deed. Because everyone had possible motives, this novel cannot be solved using that approach. It can only be solved by looking at opportunity. Someone had to have manipulated Giselle to travel on that particular flight. This looks most suspicious for Giselle's maid who did the booking, but we don't know who else she might have told, or who might have overheard.

Poirot, again and again, brings our attention to the wasp flying around the cabin, and to the empty Bryant and May match box found in Norman Gale's Pocket. The idea is that the wasp is a distraction or, perhaps, that people will think, had the great Hercule Poirot not been on the plane, that a wasp sting killed Madame Giselle. This latter thought, however, seems unlikely since had Madame Giselle died of anaphylaxis from a wasp sting she would have had time to ask for help and her whole face and airway would have swollen up and gone puffy: very different from her actual, silent, death. A wasp could easily have been in the front compartment and only come into the back compartment at coffee time, or have been in one of the food containers and have been accidentally released during luncheon. However, it is clear that Poirot thinks that the wasp was intentionally released, and the thorn's yellow and black silk tassel also point to a pseudo wasp. Why does Norman Gale have an empty match box in his pocket at all? Why didn't he get rid of it in the WC if it is the main clue that he is the killer, as the wasp container? Why should he have an empty matchbox when he has a cigarette lighter? Why should Norman Gale carry dental cotton wool, mirrors, and a white coat in his attaché case when he was on holiday? As doctors when we go to the South of France, we pack our swimsuits and sun block not our stethoscopes. All the clues point to Norman Gale, but you have no idea as to motive at all, and no hope of guessing it accurately, or how he did it.

Norman Gale could be Simon Barraclough in disguise, as an actor. Barraclough's motive was to get his lover, Lady Horbury, out of a debts and a nasty scandal. I had considered that Lady Horbury's maid was Anne Morisot and thought it just possible the two had murdered Madame Giselle together, especially as Barraclough was seen by Poirot leaving the same hotel in Paris that Anne Morisot had just vacated. Mr Barraclough could 'act' as a steward, changing in the WC. I discounted this theory as far too risky! With only eleven fussy first class passengers demanding service all the

time, one was bound to ask a steward for something as he walked past. Also the two real stewards were expecting 'large tips' from these rich customers, and would immediately spot an imposter pretending to be a steward. The real stewards were making out their bills at this point of the flight, but in such a tiny plane the idea of a disguised passenger, posing as one of the stewards is far too weak a plan. Christie reiterates Sherlock Holmes' theory that people do not notice servants or staff. This is partly borne out in the fact that no one mentions that Lady Horbury's maid goes to the back of the plane to get her valise. The incorrect solution of Anne Morisot killing her own mother, since she happened to be Lady Horbury's maid, is much neater.

A further verbal confusion was the 'Bryant and May' matchbox in Gale's pocket, and another passenger being Dr Bryant. Why would Christie choose this brand of matches, if not for a specific reason? In previous books there was confusion with 'King Victor', a jewel thief, and the King of Herzoslovakia in *The Secret of Chimneys*, and 'The Colonel', a criminal mastermind, and Colonel Race, secret service, in *Man in the Brown Suit*. It's as though Christie's mind works on opposite pairs that sound the same, reflections in mirrors, the yin and the yang of life.

By creating Anne Morisot's 'suicide' in remorse for killing her mother, the true murderer throws the police an easy resolution to the case, and the reader an exciting final unexpected twist. Had Poirot not been involved, the real murderer would have gone undetected, and ultimately financially profited by the crime. However, I agree with Japp's assessment of the initial murder on the aeroplane 'It was madness, absolute madness, to commit a crime that way. Only about a chance in a hundred that it would come off without being spotted.'

[SH]