

Death on The Nile

1937

[This review contains plot-spoilers for this book but no other]



Carving from the Temples Of Abu Simbel: where the attempted murder of Linnet Ridgeway occurs

Not since *Murder on the Orient Express* have there been quite so many characters in a Christie novel. In fact, on first reading, there seemed too many people to grasp. There are also an exuberant number of sub-plots, reminiscent of *The Secret of Chimneys*. However, unlike *Chimneys*, the sub-plots are woven into the main narrative, with the single unifying theme of everyone out to exploit Linnet Ridgeway: the lucky 'golden girl'. Linnet is unlucky enough to have everything. It is the cause of her death.

The main action of the book is set on a pleasure cruiser, *The Karnak*, going down the Nile, rather like a Wagon Lit of the *Orient Express*. One of the hallmarks of this book is deception. No one, with the exception of Poirot, Dr Bessner, Miss Bowers and Mrs Allerton is who they seem to be. This unsettles the reader. Everyone has a secret: the motto 'suspect everyone' is especially apt in this thriller.

Mr Pennington, the suave and granite jawed lawyer, is Linnet Ridgeway's trustee, but has secretly swindled her money away, and travels with a gun. Linnet thinks of Pennington as her devoted 'Uncle Andrew'.

The flamboyant Salome Otterbourne is a cantankerous alcoholic. Her 'sulky' daughter, Rosalie, is busy trying to care for her very difficult mother, ashamed of what her mother has become. The reader slowly realises Rosalie is a loving, caring daughter, being destroyed by her mother's behaviour.

The cream of New York Society, the rich Miss Marie Van Schuyler, is a secret kleptomaniac of expensive jewellery: hence the nurse to watch over her.

The kind and well-bred Tim Allerton is a society jewel thief, driven by economic reasons, excitement and his ruthless cousin, Joanna's, taste for expensive living.

The meek Cornelia Robson who is bullied unmercifully by Miss Van Schuyler shows her true courage, strength of character and kindness through her actions looking after Doyle after he is shot, and standing up to Mr Ferguson.

Mr Ferguson, the typical communist 1930s 'angry young man', hides his true identity – he is an English Lord. This is given away by the fact that although he has torn and dirty shirts and trousers, he still wears very good quality undergarments!

Signor Richetti is not the archaeologist he pretends to be: although this time, unlike in *Murder in Mesopotamia* where the bogus archaeologist knows surprisingly little, Signor Richetti is *too* knowledgeable and spouts nothing but archaeology!

Simon Doyle seems deeply in love with the perfect, beautiful Linnet, but this is untrue.

Jackie de Bellefort hates them both: again untrue.

Linnet's maid, Marie, is proposed to by a man. Marie's fiancé has a wife and three children.

One is dizzy with the deluge of deceit.

There are many clues in the book that are fair. Mrs Otterbourne swaying into Poirot on deck: a clue that she was drunk rather than her excuse of 'sea legs'. The Nile is calm, it is not the sea. Signor Richetti flew into a rage when Linnet read his telegram about 'potatoes, beetroots': clearly in code. Why would any one send a coded message to an archaeologist? The clues about Joanna Southwood and Tim Allerton being a pair of society jewel thieves are subtler, but still there. The first time you meet Linnet Ridgeway, she is with her 'friend', the utterly ruthless Joanna Southwood. One wonders why Linnet bothers to invite Joanna- a weakness in Linnet's character. The rich and famous being flattered by 'parasites'. In contrast, later, Mrs Allerton, whom we know to be an intelligent person with integrity, clearly says that she does not like Joanna Southwood. Joanna asks to wear Linnet's pearls, which are worth £50,000: a fortune in the 1930s. Diamonds had gone missing at a country house when Joanna, and Tim, had stayed, although the cousins had not stayed there at the same time. The calm and charming Tim was uncharacteristically antagonistic to Monsieur Poirot sitting at their dining table with Mrs Allerton: why? He was clearly nervous of something being found out. Tim shows his mother all of his correspondence, except that of Joanna's: she assumes they are in love, which he truthfully denies. If he is not in love with Joanna, why would he keep this correspondence from his mother?

The swindling of Linnet Ridgeway by her American Trustees is out in the open, for the reader, at the start of the book. One short scene with the two American Trustees

plotting to get Linnet to sign documents whilst on her honeymoon, hoping she won't read them. The other scene, the trusty English Solicitor sending his nephew out to Egypt by aeroplane, an expensive novelty in 1937, to gain information about the fraud. Why should 'Uncle Andrew' happen to have lots of drawn up legal documents for Linnet to sign in his briefcase when he was supposed to be 'on holiday' in Egypt, never expecting to see her? Linnet never seems to suspect him for this, which is odd when she is supposed to be a careful business woman. Perhaps she cannot think the unthinkable, that her own trustee, a loved uncle figure, has betrayed her.

This book also breaks the Golden Rule of Murder Mysteries: if an attempted murder takes place, the would-be murder *always* strikes again. Here Andrew Pennington rolls a boulder into the Doyles' path at the temple of Abu Simbel, attempting to kill Linnet. When reading the book I assumed that Simon Doyle and Jackie must have arranged for someone else [? a local] to roll the boulder when Simon had brought Linnet to the agreed spot. It was Simon who had wanted to leave the temple and sit in the sun. Jackie appearing on the gangplank just as the bewildered party return seemed too obviously contrived for me, and gave her a complete alibi! It is not certain if Mr Pennington would have attempted to kill Linnet again if circumstances had not intervened.



'Fruit machine cluing' to add up to a certainty.

The solving of the real murders relies on the reader seeing through Christie's misdirection. In a classic piece of writing Hercule Poirot draws up a meticulous list of 'persons on board with a motive for killing Linnet Doyle, and those who are free of suspicion'. The *only* people *not* on either list are Jackie de Bellefort, and Simon Doyle. They have absolute alibis: Jackie because people were with her all the time during the 'argument' with Simon Doyle, the 'shooting' of Simon, and making sure she didn't self-harm after she had shot him. Simon had witnesses that saw him shot in the leg, hence incapacitated.

There are seven separate clues that added together make you realise that Jackie did not actually shoot Simon, but only pretended to, despite the eye witnesses:

[1] Jackie is a crack shot. If Jackie had really wanted to kill Simon, as she threatened in their argument, she would have done so at such short range. Indeed she does dispatch Simon in a mercy killing at the end of the book, swiftly and efficiently.

[2] In crime books characters shoot themselves in the leg or arm to seem like victims whilst making sure they are not seriously injured.

[3] Why would she carefully kick the pistol under a settee?

[4] Why would Simon Doyle specifically ask Fanthorp to go and search for it, after they had carried him to Dr Bessner's cabin? Odd to think about an irrelevant detail, like a missing pistol, when your leg has just been shattered by a bullet.

[5] Where is Miss Van Schuyler's missing velvet stole and why was it taken *before* any shooting occurred, unless by premeditation? There is no need to steal the stole for Linnet Doyle's murder. There had to be another, unknown shot, that had to be muffled by this velvet silencer.

[6] Why is there red ink in a nail varnish bottle in Linnet's bathroom?

[7] Why was a cheap handkerchief stained with red ink found with the pistol and the velvet stole?

Initially, we are made to think the velvet stole was an improvised silencer to make the noise of shooting Linnet in the head, quieter. Yet, we are told the scorch marks of the shot are visible on her skin, so nothing between her head and the bullet. Why would anyone pretend to shoot her when she was shot? The only other shooting is that of Simon by Jackie. If you suddenly think that was play acting in front of gullible Cornelia Robson, suddenly all the pieces fall into place. The 'pretend shooting' of Simon by Jackie gives them *both* cast iron alibis. Simon puts ink on a handkerchief and screams. The onlookers, whom Jackie previously intentionally detained until the shooting in order to act as witnesses, are too shocked and busy looking after an hysterical Jackie to examine Simon. The duped witnesses feel it wiser to wake up the professional Dr Bessner, to attend a seriously wounded man. This buys Simon the few minutes to run round, shoot Linnet in her cabin, run back and really shoot himself, using the stole as a silencer for his own leg. The reader is mulling over the risky nature of this possible plot, when two more clues are revealed, that absolutely nail the solution.

[8] Linnet's maid is questioned by Race and Poirot somewhat inexplicably in the presence of the bedbound Simon Doyle. She gives a Delphic answer to the question 'you heard or saw nothing?' She replies 'Naturally if I had been unable to sleep, if I had mounted the stairs, then perhaps I might have seen the assassin'.....She threw out her hands appealingly to Simon. ... 'My good girl,' said Simon harshly, '...I'll look after you'. This is the only time Simon Doyle becomes harsh in the book. Why? He has suddenly realised he *was* seen and is being blackmailed. He has also given the maid the reassurance she requires to know she will be paid. Since Simon knows he is now being blackmailed she signed her own death warrant.

There are also fair clues that Linnet's murder was premeditated. Poirot has been given a sleeping potion: he is abnormally sleepy. Someone has planned something to get him to snore through the night. Could this have been the jewel thieves?

[9] The extraordinarily uncharacteristic behaviour of Jacqueline de Bellefort insisting that Cornelia Robson talks to her and stays with her after the shooting, in order to use her as a witness. Throughout the rest of the book Jackie speaks to no one, and only sullenly answers Poirot on direct interrogation. Jackie kept Robson there for a reason. Why would Jackie require a witness to an argument with Simon?

[10] Why would Simon Doyle stay in the first place rather than swiftly excuse himself, when it was obvious a nasty scene was about to happen with Jackie? The only answer was they had planned it together, and required witnesses.

[11] Finally, when Salome Otterbourne also ill fatedly, and full of grand self-importance announces to Poirot and Hastings, again in front of Simon Doyle, that she saw who killed Linnet's maid, Simon starts shouting loudly? Why would he do this when he has not raised his voice before? The answer is so Jacqueline de Bellefort could hear him through the wall. Jackie acts quickly with her lethal aim and shoots Mrs Otterbourne in the head just as Salome is about to reveal the name of the murderer.....

Some crime detective novels have one or two decent clues: many have none. What makes Christie the 'Queen of Crime' is this book has 11 separate clues that build towards the correct answer. I think of this like a slot machine. A row of cherries that all line up, and a pile of gold showers down upon you. As these 11 cherries begin to build, the correct answer is improbable but *nothing* else fits. As Sherlock Holmes says 'when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.'

There may be too many red herrings and sub-plots for some readers. Greed and deception are the unattractive but unifying themes. Two separate jewel thieves, blackmail, bigamy, alcoholism, a dishonest American lawyer [there's a shock!] who attempts murder to hide his swindling. An incognito terrorist, and a voluble angry communist who turns out to be an English Lord.

There is a sadness that lingers over the waters of the Nile. The feeling that people will never change. Life is just as brutish and short as it was 3000 years ago when the Temples were built.



The S.S. Nefertari, a river-steamer on the Nile

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