

Sad Cypress

1940

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

This is an interesting inverse format of the usual detective fiction. You can see the Christie imagination seeking something new, and setting herself the task of writing another impossible book! How could Poirot save an obviously guilty double murderer, Elinor Carlisle, when Scotland Yard are certain about the case for the prosecution? In Christies, Poirot and Hastings usually going about London or on holiday, when something occurs to provoke their interest. The detectives are mostly in the stories from the beginning, and the reader is with them, every step of the investigation, as the murders unfold, culminating in a final dénouement. It is therefore rather a shock to read the very first sentence 'Elinor Katharine Carlisle. You stand charged upon this indictment with murder of Mary Gerrard'. Poirot does not come into the book until almost half way through. Dr Lord is desperate to save the woman he loves, Elinor Carlisle, from the hangman's noose. In the UK there was still the death penalty for murder in the 1940s.

After the initial court scene there is a long flashback so the reader understands why Elinor is in the dock for Mary Gerrard's murder. Elinor is the classic, passionate young Christie heroine 'eyes were a deep vivid blue, the hair black' {like Nick Buckley in *Peril at End House*. Ann Beddingfeld has liquid green eyes and long black hair in *The Man in a Brown Suit*}. There is much discussion about love and passion. 'It was so very obvious that Roddy, although he loved her, didn't feel about her the way she felt about him.' 'Men didn't like devotion and adoration. Certainly Roddy didn't'. Roddy says: 'Some women are. -so damned possessive – so – so dog-like and devoted – their emotions slopping all over the place! I'd hate that! With you I never know. You're a fascinating creature, Elinor.' One wonders if this was harking back to Agatha Christie's own failed marriage to Archie Christie? Especially when the 'Roddy' character becomes infatuated with Mary Gerrard, despite being engaged to Elinor. Archie left Agatha Christie, a few years after their marriage, for a younger woman. Certainly Mrs. Christie portrays passionate love as a very uncomfortable emotion. Elinor asks her Aunt 'do you think love is ever a happy thing?' Mrs. Welman replies: 'To care passionately for another human creature brings always more sorrow than joy; but all the same, Elinor, one would not be without that experience. Anyone who has never really loved has never really lived.' This may be true authorial self-expression; especially since Elinor bitterly jokes in the same conversation 'Aunt Agatha's Advice column', after her Aunt Laura gives her advice. Is it a Freudian slip for her to choose *Agatha* as the name for her agony aunt, or a fully conscious slightly joking tease for the reader?

Scotland Yard have no doubts about Elinor Carlisle's guilt. Inspector Marsden tells Poirot 'It's a pleasant feeling when you are sure! This time I can go ahead with a clear conscience.' Poirot, in the initial discussion with Dr Lord, raises the point that Elinor might be really guilty: he will uncover the facts, but Dr Lord might not like the results. As the case stands Elinor is the only person with opportunity and the double

motives: jealousy and financial gain. With Mary Gerrard dead, Roddy might return to Elinor, as they had been previously engaged. The exhumation of Mrs. Welman proves she, too, died of morphine poisoning. This again points to Elinor. It was clear Mrs. Welman, after her second stroke, wanted to make some provision for Mary Gerrard. Welman's will left her enormous fortune to Elinor. An anonymous letter to Elinor hinted that Mrs. Welman might change her will to make Mary the sole beneficiary. Elinor promises Mrs. Welman, on her deathbed, to call the solicitor first thing in the morning, but Mrs. Welman died that night. It was not clear exactly what Mrs. Welman's intentions for the new will would have been, but certainly less for Elinor and more for Mary. This is a variant of the paid-companion's behaviour in *Dumb Witness* [1936], when the rich Miss Arundell, on her deathbed, asks her paid-companion to destroy her new will.

The book is obtusely clued. The reader is intentionally kept in the dark, along with Dr Lord and the members of the Jury for 90% of the book. Throughout the book the reader knows that Elinor must be innocent, otherwise Poirot would not be there, but there is no chink of light through the cast iron case for the prosecution. The authorial misdirections all centre on Nurse Hopkins, the cheerful district nurse who attends Mrs. Welman. Nurse Hopkins was concerned about the disappearance of a tube of morphine, and mentions it to Nurse O'Brien, but does not officially report it at the time. Poirot says 'What could she [Nurse Hopkins] gain by Mrs. Welman's death?' 'Why call attention to the missing morphine if she were guilty? It would probably bring her censure for carelessness as it is, and if she poisoned Mrs. Welman it was surely idiotic to draw attention to the morphine?' Poirot also says of Nurse Hopkins confessing the loss of the missing morphine: 'There was no need for her to do so'. Today in the UK any medical professional 'losing' a large quantity of morphine would face a severe disciplinary hearing, and certainly *not* reporting the loss would mean being struck off the medical or nursing register if discovered, and a criminal prosecution. There are now 'Dangerous Drug registers' held at GPs surgeries where the amounts of opiates are recorded, when they are imported into the surgery and to whom they are given. The registers are independently audited, to prevent opiates 'going astray', by making sure the amounts balance.

Mary Gerrard is not Mr. Gerrard's genetic daughter. This explains why Mr. Gerrard resented her. The implication was that Mary was Mrs. Eliza Gerrard's daughter by another father. There are no clues to Mary being Mrs. Welman's daughter. As a young widow, Mrs. Welman had fallen in love with Sir Lewis Rycroft, who was killed towards the end of World War I. Mrs. Welman must have been about 38- 42 when she got pregnant. Agatha Christie was about 38 yrs old when she met Max Mallowan. The Mallowans never had children.

Mary Gerrard was born in 1918, and finds out after both her parents' death that Eliza Riley, Mrs. Welman's maidservant, married Gerrard in 1919, when Mary was one year old. She assumes that Eliza's lover had been killed in World War I, like so many other young men. In fact, Eliza *did* have an illegitimate child, you never know who the father was, but the baby died. Mrs. Welman supported her maid throughout: a very unusually humane act. Most unmarried pregnant servants would

have been cast out of a 'respectable establishment' onto the mercy of the workhouse at the turn of the 20th Century. Both Eliza Riley and Mrs. Welman shared the same secret shame. It was the bond between them. Eliza Riley agreed to adopt Mrs. Welman's little girl.

To someone reading this book in the 21st Century it seems improbable that if Mary was Mrs. Welman's only child, and Mrs. Welman had gone to the trouble of 'educating her above her sphere', that Mrs. Welman had not legally adopted her, nor made any provision for her whatsoever. I think we cannot understand the enormous stain of bastardy and scandal that might have enveloped Mrs. Welman, a pillar of the local community, as well as Mary Gerrard, at this time in England before World War II. Clearly Mary Gerrard, even though she was 21 yrs old, has never seen her birth certificate or worked out that her 'parents' were not married until she became a toddler. Mary finds her parents' marriage certificate, *after* her father's death. There is no mention of Mary's birth certificate, which should have been in the same tin box. Perhaps Roddy's rather startlingly blunt appraisal of the woman he'd fallen in love with as 'Sweet – gentle – not very clever' was an accurate assessment of Mary's intellect.

There is no way the reader can guess that Eliza Riley's sister, who the reader was told lived in New Zealand, is in the book as a character under another name. Nurse Hopkins is suspicious, in that she 'lost' a large quantity of morphine, and does not officially report this loss. She pushes Mary Gerrard into immediately making a will. We are fooled into thinking the friendly, busybody local District Nurse has no benefit from the will, when Mary dies, whereas Nurse Hopkins as Mary Riley is Mary Gerrard's sole beneficiary.

There is only one concrete clue in the book: Nurse Hopkins tells Elinor the rose from the Lodge trellis has pricked her. Poirot notes the rose is a Zephyrine Drouhin. Zephyrine Drouhin is a thornless rose. Elinor has known and played around this rose all her life and does not notice this lie, even when we are told that as children she and Roddy fought a 'War of the Roses'. Nurse Hopkins' lie is the key to unlock the crime for Poirot. Agatha Christie was a keen gardener. I suspect it was the grain of sand in Christie's mind that allowed this pearl of a book to form around it.



Zephyrine Drouhin Arch Trellis

Why lie about a prick from a rose? Poirot wonders why the 'sensible, shrewd, kindly and competent' District Nurse Hopkins should lie about such a trivial thing. The answer is she was injecting herself with apomorphine, the antidote to morphine: the



only way she could have poisoned the tea with morphine, drunk with Mary Gerrard, and survived. The Nurse makes herself sick. I would argue that I could tell the difference between a rose thorn prick and an injection mark left by a syringe, but Elinor, with no medical training might not.

I had thought that Nurse Hopkins might be a secret morphine user, which is why the whole hypodermic tube of morphine tablets had gone 'missing' in her care, and why she had a hypodermic syringe needle mark on her arm.

The clue of the scrap of label from the hypodermic tablet tube 'morphin.' is impossible to solve, without a detailed historical knowledge of pharmacology labels of the 1930s. The expert witness at the trial points out the small m, whereas if it had been Morphine there would have been a large M, so it must be the middle of the word, and the 'apo' was torn off. These days there are ampoules of morphine and the correct chemical name is printed on the glass of the ampoule. There is still a capital M, but very few readers would be expected to know this. As a doctor I have given morphine injections and must have read hundreds of morphine ampoules in my clinical practice, but I still did not know this.

There are many reasons why Mary Gerrard would never inherit Mrs. Welman's enormous estate in the first place, as her illegitimate daughter. So the book has a very poor plot for the murders of Mary Gerrard and Mrs. Welman by Mary's aunt, Mary Riley, who has taken the name of Hopkins, to hide from the Police.

1] During her lifetime, Mrs. Welman *never acknowledged* Mary Gerrard as her daughter, if indeed she was. We have no proof of this birth, only hearsay. Since Mary Riley [Nurse Hopkins] makes herself Mary Gerrard's heir [by encouraging her to write a will without Mary Gerrard or the reader realizing that Nurse Hopkins is Mary's aunt], the only amount Mary Riley could inherit was the £2000 that Elinor gave Mary Gerrard after Mrs. Welman's death. After Mary Gerrard's death this money would go to her aunt, Mary Riley, in New Zealand. The case of Mary Gerrard inheriting Mrs. Welman's entire fortune of about £200,000, many millions in current value, would never have come to a court of law, because of lack of evidentiary proof.

2] Mary Gerrard's birth certificate was never found in the box of papers with her supposed parents' marriage certificate. We never know how Mary's birth was registered. The people that might have been witnesses to the law case of inheritance, Eliza Gerrard, Mr. Gerrard, Mrs. Welman and Sir Lewis Rycroft are all dead.

3] We have no evidence of Mrs. Welman's confinement except a note, written years later, from her dying maid [Eliza Gerrard]. Mrs. Gerrard's assertion that Mary was Mrs. Welman's daughter may have been false to cover up Eliza's pregnancy. We are told that both Mrs. Welman and her maid, Mrs. Gerrard, had illegitimate babies, like Madame Giselle and her maid in *Death In The Clouds*. In both these novels the maids' babies do not survive childhood: this probably accurately reflected the higher

infant mortality of babies born to working-class single mothers in the 1930s-40s before the National Health Service.

4] In English law in the 1940s, bastards need to be *acknowledged by their parents* in order to inherit. Mary Gerrard might have inherited Sir Lewis's estate, if he had named her his heir, but he did not ever know about her. Until Mary Gerrard's birth certificate was found, Mary Gerrard's beneficiaries could not inherit Mrs. Welman's estate, and only then if Mrs. Welman was on the certificate. This seems highly unlikely in view of her consistently never acknowledging Mary as her own child for the rest of her life. In the pre-NHS days, rich ladies could travel to another part of England, where they were unknown. They could book into a private lying-in clinic under an assumed name, and then give the baby up for adoption or fostering, with no questions asked.

5] In Mary Gerrard's will she just writes 'Mary Riley, sister of Eliza Riley' *no* address, *no* married name, in New Zealand. How was any lawyer to find the beneficiary? New Zealand is quite an extensive place. The fact that the will is in possession of Nurse Hopkins, who *is* Mary Riley, makes Riley's successful prosecution for murder a certainty.

6] We heard from Poirot that New Zealand was 'too hot' for Mary Riley, which is why she left, under suspicion of two murders, to take an assumed name and come back to England. One wonders about Passport control at the time. Also the records of the Royal College of Nursing, which should have realised that the real Nurse Hopkins had died abroad. However, it makes it difficult for Mary Riley to return to New Zealand to await a lawyer to claim her inheritance.

7] If Mary Riley came forward to claim the inheritance herself in New Zealand or England, she would immediately be under the full suspicion for the murders of her niece and Mrs. Welman, since she was on the spot at the time of their deaths as Nurse Hopkins, with a tube of morphine, and had made herself sole beneficiary of Mary Gerrard's will: motive, method and opportunity. Mary Riley/Nurse Hopkins was also wanted for the murders of her husband and her patient back in New Zealand.

There are other niggles with the plot it seems rather churlish to point out. Nurse Hopkins puts a massive amount of morphine in the tea, and cheerfully brings three cups, fully expecting Elinor and Mary to drink it with her. How on earth does she think she could explain the other two dying of morphine, when she survives? Two healthy young girls killed at one fell swoop would immediately make Nurse Hopkins the prime suspect. I cannot imagine the 'shrewd' Nurse doing such a thing. She would have waited until she and Mary were alone, killed Mary, and then said something like 'she was very low in spirits after clearing out her father's things from the Lodge', to make it look like suicide, and avoid any hint of suspicion falling on herself.

It is unusual to have so many plot holes, and I feel rather mean pointing them out. *Sad Cyprus* is still a very good read.

The most interesting issues in the book are the ethical discussions on euthanasia, and the guilt of *wishing someone dead* rather than committing the act. One could see this whole book as a cathartic act of expiating Agatha Christie herself from the final feelings of guilt and misery from her marital breakup with Archie Christie a decade before. Archie Christie [Roddy] falls in love with a beautiful young girl, Nancy Neele [Mary Gerrard], so betraying the trust of the woman he is tied to, Agatha Christie [Elinor]. Elinor was engaged to Roddy, before he broke it off. Agatha and Archie Christie had been married twelve years when Archie demanded a divorce. Elinor [Agatha Christie] passionately wishes Mary [Nancy Neele] dead. When Elinor finds Mary dead, after she was thinking about it all day and *imagining* the sandwiches were poisoned, she believes she *is* guilty.

Poirot makes the distinction between wishing someone dead, and actually committing murder. Poirot exonerates her actions, and finds her 'not guilty', as do the 12 good men and true. Agatha Christie can finally draw a therapeutic line under the whole painful business.

I do not think Christie *wants* the reader to be able to guess the solution. We are kept in breathless suspense until the end, as surprised as the members of the Jury, until the real murderer is revealed. Poirot does indeed 'take out of the empty hat rabbit after rabbit' in the witness box, the identity of the true murderer, just as he ironically predicted Dr Lord would want him to do at their first interview.

[SH]