

## One, Two, Buckle My Shoe 1940

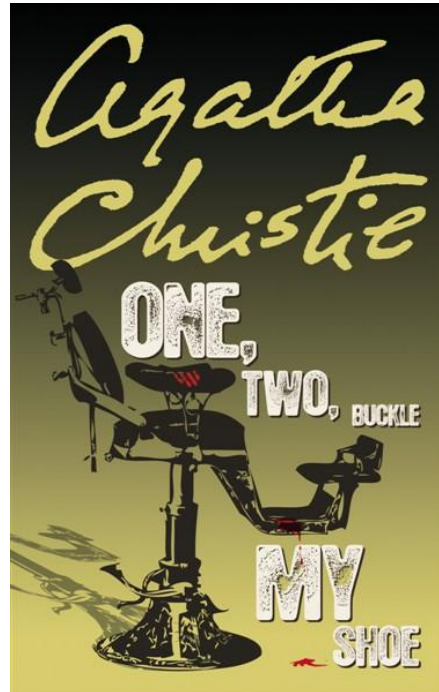
[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but not for other novels]

At the end of the sixth chapter Poirot suddenly sees the solution.

‘It was like a kaleidoscope – shoe buckles, 10-inch stockings, a damaged face, the low tastes in literature of Alfred the page-boy, the activities of Mr Amberiotis, and the part played by the late Mr Morley, all rose up and whirled and settled themselves down into a coherent pattern. For the first time, Hercule Poirot was looking at the case *the right way up.*’

There could not be a better description of the moment when an astute reader might put the various clues together and solve a well-constructed whodunnit such as *Death on the Nile*. But can a reader of *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* reasonably follow Poirot’s intuitive reasoning and, with a sudden certainty, realise the true solution? In many of Christie’s finest whodunnits there is a single central idea around which the plot is constructed. By contrast Christie seems to have thrown a whole plethora of ideas into the plot of *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, her imagination too fertile to be constrained by the limitations of the whodunnit form. The result is an entertaining murder mystery with a complex central story and a few diversions but there is insufficient guidance for a reader to tumble to the solution or, if she does, to know that she has got there. It is not that there are no clues but the clues do not crystallise into a ‘coherent pattern’ except in the mind of Hercule Poirot. Some of Christie’s novels are complex because there are many subsidiary plots that create the red herrings. In *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* it is the central plot itself that is complex.

I do not know what was the seed that started Christie on the road to devising this plot. It might have been the counting rhyme that she uses for the book and chapter titles. In *And Then There Were None* the nursery rhyme plays an important structural role that helps Christie with the difficult problem of providing the narrative for her brilliant plot. In *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* the rhyme plays no such role and the American title, *The Patriotic Murders*, ditched it altogether. Christie’s attempts to justify the use of each line of the rhyme as chapter titles are unconvincing. My guess is that she liked the dramatic effect of the nursery rhyme in *And Then There Were None* and wanted to repeat that effect in a different novel. The rhyme may



then have given her an idea for the plot. Her thinking might have gone something like this. A buckle comes off a shoe and Poirot notices. Discrepant shoe sizes might then provide a clue that one woman is pretending to be someone else. One of the two women would have to die this is a murder story after all. And why not have one of the women murdering the other. Since one woman is pretending to be the other woman the scene is set for the corpse to be taken for the wrong woman. So the corpse will have to be unrecognisable. The face bashed in? But that is rather a cliché. So a double bluff.

Christie may then have realised that the mechanism for a double bluff could be linked to her second main idea. For some time she had been thinking about writing a novel involving a dentist. In 1939 she had asked her friends, Carlo and Mary Smith, for an introduction to their dentist in Welbeck Street, just round the corner from Harley Street – the centre for London's expensive and fashionable medical and dental practitioners. Christie paid the dentist, but not for treatment. She asked him questions about how he ran his dental practice, focusing on the types of injections he gave and the potentially poisonous substances he used. Christie saw that a dentist might be relevant not only as the scene of murder but as a mechanism for the double bluff, perhaps inspired by the Ruxton case (see *Trivia*). In 1940 corpses could be identified by their dental records rather like DNA matching might be used today. If the dental records of two patients were swapped then the wrong identification would be made. The dentist, if he had a good memory, could realise that the records had been tampered with thus providing a good reason why a dentist might be murdered.



Christie's third idea provided her with a method for misleading the reader and could have been her starting point in plotting the novel. Poirot says: 'But every public character has a *private* life also. That was my mistake, *I forgot the private life*'. Some of Christie's novels from the 1920s involve

international politics and the motives for murder depend on the characters' *public* lives. On the whole these are amongst her poorer whodunnits.

Christie was writing *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* around the time of the outbreak of the Second World War. She mentions Hitler and Mussolini, 'The Reds' and 'our Blackshirted friends'. It is no wonder that a central

character, Alistair Blunt, is an important *public* figure – a banker who plays a significant role in ensuring Britain's financial strength as war looms. Blunt appears to be the intended victim in several murder attempts because of his significant public role. Christie misleads the reader, as Blunt misled Poirot, by making it appear that the motive for the murders is political when in fact it is all too personal.



Christie put these various ideas together and came up with reasons why the private life of a public figure should provide a motive for the killing of an apparently harmless woman and why another woman should be impersonating her. Bigamy, blackmail and the bold impersonation of a dentist provided her with the (jaw) bones of her plot.

The problem with the novel is that the mechanism is too complicated and the motive too obscure. Let us start with the motive. Alistair Blunt is already married when he bigamously marries a woman whose wealth, abilities and connections will help further his career. His first – perhaps one should say, only – wife knows and apparently approves of his second marriage. Blunt and this first wife continue to meet in secret – she takes on several identities – and all is well until Blunt is recognised, on the pavement outside his dentist, by Miss Sainsbury Seale. Miss Sainsbury Seale says: 'Oh, Mr Blunt, you don't remember *me*, I'm *sure*! ...I was a *great* friend of your wife's.' The wife to which she is referring is Blunt's first wife whom she knew when they were all in India. This incident would have posed no threat to Blunt had Miss Sainsbury Seale not talked about it to an acquaintance of hers, Mr Amberiotis, who is a blackmailer and a rogue. He realises Blunt's secret and tries blackmail, which provides the motive for all the murders: those of Mr Amberiotis and Miss Sainsbury Seale, and of Mr Morley the dentist.

The problem from the reader's point of view is that the one clue that Mr Blunt has been previously married is too obscure. That clue is the account of the incident when Miss Sainsbury Seale comes up to Blunt outside the dentist. Even readers who suppose that Miss Sainsbury Seale has not made a mistake would have no reason to think that she is referring to anyone other than Blunt's second wife. Perhaps Christie thought that if readers realised that Blunt had committed bigamy the solution would be too

obvious, but by providing only such an arcane clue she makes the motive too obscure.

The motive is also problematic in another way. It is almost inconceivable that there would not have been several people who knew about Blunt's first marriage. Indeed many of the British in his social circle in India would have returned, like Blunt, to Britain and would have been aware of his further career and probably kept in touch with him. A man in Blunt's position could never have kept his first marriage secret.

Equally problematic is the mechanism for the murders of Mr Morley and Mr Amberiotis. These involved such dexterity of movement, such comings and goings along staircases, corridors and rooms, as to be more fitting for a French farce than a whodunnit. Mr Blunt, a patient, kills Mr Morley, moves the corpse into a side-room and swaps dental records, all with the help of his assistant, who is his first wife posing as Miss Sainsbury Seale - and then poses as Mr Morley, pretends to treat Mr Amberiotis and, without Mr Amberiotis' realising, injects him with an overdose of adrenaline and novocaine that has no effect on Mr Amberiotis until the next day, when he suddenly drops dead. Even with my medical training and experience I would find it hard to know how to give a dental injection, so I can't imagine that a banker would so efficiently and effectively give such an overdose.

Equally unlikely is that an overdose of novocaine and adrenaline would have no effect until the next day and then cause death. It would certainly not be a reliable way of committing murder.



The problem of mechanism, however, is less what goes on once all the relevant *dramatis personae* are at the dentist, as how they are brought together at the dentist in the first place. Mr Morley is the dentist of Blunt's first wife (who is using the name, Mrs Chapman) and of Miss Sainsbury Seale, a coincidence that is crucial to the plot as it enables the dental records of Miss Sainsbury Seale and Mrs Chapman to be swapped. Mr Morley is also Mr Blunt's dentist. A few months before the novel opens Mr Blunt visited Mr Morley. It was then that he was accosted by Miss Sainsbury Seale who was also presumably visiting Mr Morley. No coincidence there as the meeting is brought about by their having the same dentist. To complete

his treatment Mr Blunt needs to go back for a second visit. We never find out when he made the appointment for this second visit. Mr Amberiotis who is visiting London - has toothache. It seems one coincidence too many that he should make an appointment with Mr Morley but it could just be explained (although Christie never does explain it) by supposing that the real Mrs Sainsbury Seale who met with Mr Amberiotis (hence the blackmail) recommended Mr Morley to him. Now comes the difficult part. How does Mr Blunt know about this appointment, let alone when it is? Even if somehow he does know there are more problems. It would be quite extraordinary if Mr Amberiotis' appointment happened to be immediately after the appointment that Mr Blunt had already made for completion of his course of treatment. So Mr Blunt would have had to re-make his appointment at short notice to be immediately before that of Mr Amberiotis, as is required for his murder plan. Even if Blunt's high social status gave him the power to do this, we, and Poirot, should have learned that his appointment had been recently re-scheduled in this way: Mr Morley's assistant Gladys Nevill would have known of this and seen it as relevant to the police enquiry. Indeed she tells Poirot that she had to fit in one extra patient at short notice, but she is referring to Blunt's first wife who is posing as Miss Sainsbury Seale. In short, it just seems too incredible (and unexplained) that Mr Amberiotis should make an appointment with Mr Morley, that Blunt should know about it, and that Blunt could arrange the sequence of appointments - his and his first wife's - to fit perfectly with Mr Amberiotis' appointment.

The one coincidence, however, that is perfectly acceptable is that Mr Morley is also Poirot's dentist, and that Poirot is also having treatment on the fateful morning. The coincidences over the years of Poirot's being at the right place at the right time for murder could only be rationally explained if Poirot were a brilliant mass murderer himself. The genre, however, allows for irrationality and extraordinary coincidence in this one aspect.

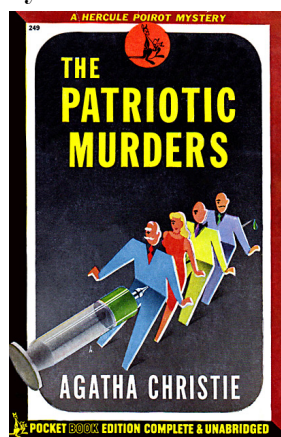
In short, in *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, motive is too obscure, and mechanism too fantastical. This is not a Christie to try and solve, but it is a good read and some of the puzzles of the plot, such as who is the corpse in the metal chest, are intriguing and soluble.

Christie is, generally, scrupulous in being fair to readers. Her brilliant analytical mind is sensitive to any illogicality. In *Ackroyd*, for example, although she cunningly misdirects the reader she never misleads unfairly. In *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, however, Christie writes: "At the Glengowrie Court Hotel .... Miss Sainsbury Seale was sitting talking to Mrs Bolitho". And later: "Miss Sainsbury Seale was in the dimly lit lounge of the Glengowrie Court Hotel having tea". On both these occasions it is *not* Miss Sainsbury Seale but Blunt's first wife posing as Miss Sainsbury Seale. Had we learned the name from the woman herself, for example had Christie written something like: 'Mrs Bolitho looked up to see a woman approaching.

“My name’s Sainsbury Seale” the woman said, extending a hand in greeting’, there would be no problem. But in her authorial voice Christie tells us that the woman is Miss Sainsbury Seale when she is not. In the first example the ensuing conversation is about going to the dentist. Thus the author is effectively telling the reader that it is Miss Sainsbury Seale who visits Mr Morley that day even though a crucial aspect of the solution is that it is someone impersonating her. A trivial point perhaps but it seems out of keeping with Christie’s usual care over these details.

Questions around the morality of killing and the rights and wrongs of ensuring that killers are brought to justice have been raised in interesting ways in several of Christie’s novels. Very occasionally Poirot thinks that it is right for a murderer to get away with murder on the grounds that the victim deserved to die and the law cannot touch him. In most situations, however, Poirot neither condones murder nor does he allow murderers to avoid the law. In *And Then There Were None*, a novel without Poirot, Christie presents the reader with a number of different ways in which people can be responsible for the death of another, raising interesting questions of degrees of culpability. In *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* Christie presents us with another interesting scenario perhaps influenced by the proximity of war and the threat of mass killings. Alistair Blunt argues that although he has murdered three people Poirot should let him off. His argument is: ‘That I believe, with all my heart and soul, that I am necessary to the continued peace and well-being of this country .....Don’t you realize, Poirot, that the safety and happiness of the whole nation depends on me?’. Poirot does not agree with this utilitarian argument. He refers to the three victims and to Frank Carter whom Blunt was trying to frame for the murders: ‘For me’ Poirot says, ‘the lives of those four people are just as important as your life .... I am not concerned with nations, Monsieur. I am concerned with the lives of private individuals who have the right not to have their lives taken from them.’

With the looming war, perhaps, very much on her mind Christie ends the book with Poirot speaking to a young couple in love: ‘The world is yours. The New Heaven and the New Earth. In your world, my children, let there be freedom and let there be pity ... That is all I ask.’



**Photos**

Welbeck Street – in the heart of London’s private medical and dental practices. <http://www.hdwe.co.uk/office/41-welbeck-street>

Oswald Moseley in 1936 inspecting the ‘Blackshirts’ – members of the British Union of Fascists  
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/28/secret-files-mi5-plot-nazi-britain-world-war-ii>

A scene from *Novocaine* in which Steve Martin plays a dentist. Although the film involves novocaine and murder it is not related to Agatha Christie’s novel.  
<http://www.dvdactive.com/reviews/dvd/novocaine.html>

[TH]