

## Taken at the Flood

1948

There is an aura of misery and depression hanging over this text. Agatha Christie's son-in-law, Hubert, was confirmed dead in October 1944. It cannot be a coincidence that this is also the date of the German bomb in *Taken at the Flood* that kills two immensely rich members of the Cloade family. Christie was working through her grief by means of her creativity. There is no space for joy at all in this *Brave New World*. Maurice Richardson, in his review of this novel {*Observer: 21 Nov 1948*} noticed "The quintessential zest, the sense of well-being which goes to make up that Christie feeling, is missing".

This book has a very complex plot, quite apart from the bomb blast at the start of the book, with one suicide, one accidental killing then made to look like murder by one person, and a real murder made to look like suicide by somebody entirely different. There are no clues to the identity of the person that did accidentally kill 'Enoch Arden'. The murder of 'Rosaleen' is also rather poorly clued. There are clues that Rosaleen was an imposter, and that 'Rosaleen' and David were defrauding the remaining Cloade family. In yet another new Christie twist, David Hunter constructs an elaborate alibi for a murder he did *not* do, realising when he found the dead man, that he would be the chief suspect. Hunter inadvertently throws suspicion onto his innocent 'sister' Rosaleen.

After World War 1, the 28 yr old Agatha Christie was re-united with her dashing air force Pilot, Archie, whom she'd married during the War, but hardly seen as he was in fighting in France. The Christies were young, and had the irrepressible optimism of youth. They had their lives before them. Everything was new, exciting, and full of fresh opportunities with the liberation of women. Archie and Agatha Christie's alter egos, Tommy and Tuppence Beresford in *The Secret Adversary 1922*, had survived World War 1 and were coping with being back in 'Civi Street'. With a joy that is infectious, the *Young Adventures*, Tommy and Tuppence, face every difficulty with exuberance, despite the financial difficulties. In stark contrast, by 1946, Christie, now 56 yrs old, was weary and dispirited, having now survived two terrible world wars. In August 1944, Christie's son-in-law, Hubert, another dashing Air force pilot, was 'reported missing' in Action in France. Hubert's death left Christie's daughter, Rosalind, a War widow at 25 yrs of age, with their tiny baby, Matthew.

'Things are always difficult after a war', is David Hunter's stiff-upper lip understatement of the desperate state of Britain in 1946-47 from this book.

In *Taken at the Flood*, the central romantic figure, Lynn Marchmont returns home in the spring of 1946 after being demobbed from the Wrens. She had been to Egypt, North Africa and Sicily: like Christie's second husband, Max Mallowan. Lynn thinks 'It's the aftermath war has left. Ill will. Ill feeling. Its everywhere.'

The book is a brilliant social description of the thoughts and feelings of many different people, and how they were differently affected by the War. Lynn observed this 'ill will' everywhere, and exuded it herself. Her mother remarks to her: 'dreadful things in the papers. All these discharged soldiers – they attack girls'.

'I expect the girls ask for it' was Lynn's crisp, shockingly unsympathetic reply. Lynn's mother cannot understand why her millionaire brother married 'half-witted' Rosaleen: 'she's not a lady'.

'What does it matter nowadays?' says Lynn to her mother.

'It still matters in the country, dear...she isn't exactly one of us!'

Lynn 'doubted whether Gordon Cloade had chosen to marry a woman {40} years younger than himself for her intellectual companionship.'

The loose morality of women is also a topic in the village. Beatrice Lippincott, the landlady of The Stagg Inn was the subject of 'rumours...she's been away about a year and everyone said she'd gone away to have an illegitimate baby'. Illegitimate children in the 1940s were often given up for adoption.

Canon Leadbetter's 80 yr old widow, looked at Poirot with distaste :

'You're a foreigner.' ..you should all Go Back..That's what we fought the war for..so people could go back to their proper places and stay there.' She also echoed Lynn's unsympathetic and shocked morality about 14-18 yr old girls..'running round after ..Soldiers! Airmen! Niggers! Polish riff-raff! '

Nobody in this book says anything pleasant or cheerful. Everyone grumbles about taxation, and a decrease in services: whether it's the lack of service in an expensive Mayfair block of flats, Superintendent Spence on his laundry, Mrs Cloade queuing all morning for swiss roll , or the maids at the Stag ' run a mop under the furniture once in three weeks'.

Lynn has experienced the excitement of War and foreign travel, and finds her mother, Aunts and Uncles in sleepy Warmsley Vale stultifying boring on her return. Her dull, bovine, farming fiancé, Rowley Cloade, cannot understand her any more. The War has changed her into a 'modern girl' from the country girl he had known and felt comfortable with. Modern girls 'thought for themselves, were free in language, and admired enterprise and audacity in men.' Rowley himself says it was 'hell' having to stay behind: the survivor's guilt of knowing his best friend and co-farmer was killed in Norway. Rowley complains: 'everything seems to boil down to money these days...wages up, workers unwilling, everybody dissatisfied'. 'It used to be the man who went to wars, the woman who stayed at home.' Rowley has not found the new Labour Government at all helpful to his plight: 'not knowing what this damned Government is going to do next – hampered at every turn – snowed under with forms, up to midnight trying to fill them in. Its too much for one man.'

Frances and Jeremy Clodes' only child, at nineteen, was killed in action. There is a dumb misery about the waste of human life:

'there is nothing to be said'.

These Clodes misunderstand each other in the non-communication of their overwhelming grief for their son. Jeremy Cloade believes his wife married him out of duty, and never realised she loved him. As Christie described: 'married to someone for over twenty years and not have known what was going on in their minds'.

The Civilian casualties from the Blitz are at the Centre of the book: the millionaire Gordon Cloade, his new young wife, Rosaleen and their servants are all killed in a bomb strike in Campden Hill, on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1944. Only Rosaleen's brother, David Hunter and an Irish servant girl, Eileen Corrigan, survive. Eileen never really recovers psychologically from the blast. David, as a tough ex-Commando, hardened by war-experience, sees the opportunity to defraud the Cloade family out of the fortune. He persuades 'half-witted' Eileen, who loves him, to *be* Rosaleen. None of the rest of the Cloade family had ever met her. This is also rather improbable since Mr Hunter had only just met his sister's maid about two weeks before, but David does think and act quickly on a number of occasions.

David Hunter, like Lynn Marchmont, had a real value during the War. Hunter was



also adrift

in peacetime:

'Men who were reckless and slightly dangerous. Men who were worth their weight in gold in a push – and drove their C.Os to distraction out of the firing line!'

David gives 'the laugh of a man going into action on a hazardous and dangerous enterprise. There was enjoyment in it and defiance.'

He relishes this new game of wits, against the Cloades, to foil every attempt they make, constantly 'hinting, asking, begging' for monetary handouts from 'Rosaleen'. David says to his 'sister' when they are alone:

'I like seeing their smug faces eaten up with envy and malice. Don't grudge me my fun'.

David is the type of man to 'like excitement ..they don't give a damn for society – and finally they've no regard for human life.'

In analysing this book a valid alternative solution was that David Hunter and his sister had killed Gordon Cloade in the 'bombing' in Campden Hill. They would need to kill Cloade before he had time, in London, to remake his will, if they wanted to

have all the money, rather than share the fortune with the rest of the Cloades. Given David's commando experience, he would know about explosives. It seemed suspicious that the basement was destroyed killing everyone except his sister, and the first floor was 'untouched' where he was. An explosion, made to look like the Blitz.....This solution was never considered by Poirot in the book, but interestingly it is the exact story of the TV Poirot, so clearly Guy Andrews had the same idea, although he did change more of the story.

No one comes out well in this book. Mrs. Marchmont selfishly complains about the cost of having to pay out 'War Damage Insurance' for Blitz victims. She never empathises with the hundreds of thousands of people who have lost everything. Mrs. Marchmont happily cadges £500 from Rosaleen when David is away, for her own house's normal repairs; no bombs ever fell in snug, smug Warmesley Vale. Marchmont complains about the cost of living: 'the small but adequate fixed income which had kept them going comfortably before the war was now almost halved by taxation. Rates, expenses, wages had all gone up.' Yet Marchmont starts thinking about getting a *second* gardener at an extra £3/week, once she receives a handout from Rosaleen.

The 'Old War Horses' like Major Porter, African Army Rifles, have their life 'paired to the bone' selling their precious possessions, in order to eek out their Army Pensions. Indeed Major Porter is the only one left with moral integrity in the book. He perjures himself at the Coroner's Inquest, as money was such a temptation, but realises he cannot swear to a falsehood under oath, and shot himself.

Almost all morality has been destroyed by this terrible war.

The Landlady, Beatrice Lippinstock, listens at intercommunicating doors to eavesdrop on her customers' private affairs.

David Hunter has enjoyed defrauding the Cloade family out of their millions, and saw it as a game.

Eileen Corrigan, despite being a devout Catholic, is in an immoral relationship with David Hunter and posed as her dead mistress, to defraud the Cloades.

Frances Cloade does not scruple at fraud and blackmail of David Hunter.

Her husband, Jeremy, a respectable country town solicitor has embezzled financial trusts and is now faced ruin and professional disgrace.

Jeremy's brother, Lionel, the Country town GP was a morphia addict.

Rowley Cloade accidentally kills a man in a fight and makes it look like murder to frame David Hunter. Rowley 'wants to see Hunter hanged'. This is another version of the plot in 'Towards Zero', published four years earlier. Rowley bribes Major Porter to perjure himself in a coroner's inquest.

Lynn encouraged Rowley never to own up to either crime, and they successfully conceal all from the Police.

More shockingly Poirot seemed to plan to keep quiet about this too: making a 'moral judgement' about Rowley, since he never intended to kill 'Enoch Arden'.



A Londoner beside his destroyed house 1944

There are a number of clues in the book that 'Rosaleen' was an imposter. Gordon Cloade's relatives cannot understand why he married this 'half wit'. Gordon's sister wonders how on earth he was 'blinded.. to her stupidity and lack of breeding?' This is within the context of Gordon previously withstanding many other 'gold digging' secretaries in the past. The answer is that the terrified 'Rosaleen' the Clodes meet was actually not the dazzling Rosaleen, Gordon did fall for, but her Irish maid, Eileen, who was the only other survivor of the bomb blast. This explains 'Rosaleen's' happy morning spent with Rowley looking at cows on his farm: her real past life 'milking a Kerry Cow'. It also explains why in a moment of stress David calls her 'alanna'. Rosaleen's first husband, Mr Underhay, was Roman Catholic and the implication was she was not. Yet this 'Rosaleen' is found by Poirot weeping in the Roman Catholic Church. David Hunter sent his 'sister' away so that she did not meet 'Enoch Arden' {the man pretending to be Underhay}. The reader assumes David did this to avoid Rosaleen seeing her first husband, so nullifying the marriage to Gordon Cloade. The clever second possibility to which the reader is blinded, was that David does not want Underhay to meet 'Rosaleen', since Underhay was the only person who could identify Rosaleen. Underhay would leave David and Eileen exposed in their fraudulent deception.

Rosaleen herself alerts the reader to something being seriously amiss, when talking to David Hunter alone:

'We're wrong – all this has been wrong – very wicked.' 'Taking what doesn't belong to us. God is punishing us for our wickedness'. 'I'm cut off from the mercy of God.'

Rosaleen said to Poirot, when he finds her weeping in Church: 'the lies I've told', but refused to give more of an explanation and rushed out. There is also the objective fact that she 'looked much younger than 26 yrs' {the age Rosaleen should have been, were she alive}. The real age of Eileen is never revealed, but Frances Cloade is employing a 15 year old maid, so Eileen might still only be a teenager, which would explain her very young appearance, and behaviour.

There is a clue that there had been an arrangement between Rowley and Major Porter to misidentify 'Enoch Arden's' body as Underhay. Major Porter offers Poirot a cigarette when they first meet in his flat, but turned to Rowley saying: 'You don't, I know'. This was the first time they are supposed to have met.

There is also a clue that 'Enoch Arden' must be a member of Frances Cloade's family. Rowley first met Enoch Arden as he is walked into the village and asks Rowley for directions and advice about which Pub to stay in. Rowley thought 'the face was not unfamiliar' to him, but was unable to place it. Later Rowley wanted to talk to Jeremy Cloade, and was kept waiting in Jeremy's study. Rowley stared at a picture of Frances's father Lord Trenton, and then rushed out of the house without seeing Mr. Cloade. Rowley had suddenly realised 'Enoch Arden' must be a relative of Lord Trenton's. Frances Cloade had set up the black sheep of her family to do a spot of blackmail on David Hunter.

There are no clues about who killed 'Enoch Arden'. It could have been anyone. Christie was so involved in the very complex alibi of David Hunter, the real fight between Rowley and 'Enoch Arden' was completely lost.

David Hunter's alibi for the murder of Enoch Arden, hinges on a phone call he made to Lynn from London at 11.04pm, so proving he caught the 9.20 pm train back to London. He uses Lynn for this. There is also confirmatory evidence that a Toll Call was put through from the Mayfair flat to Lynn at that time. To make the alibi even stronger, the virtuous old Mrs Leadbetter, as she goes up to bed just after 10 pm, sees a 'hussy' with heavy makeup and an orange scarf come out of Enoch Arden's room, after hearing the man inside throwing the hussy out. All these are misdirections, to make the Police and the reader think Arden was still alive and sexually active just before 10 pm that night, whereas he's already died in a fight with Rowley, earlier that evening.

The clever twist was David manufactured this alibi because he went to pay Enoch Arden the blackmail money at 9.20 pm and found Mr. Arden already dead. David Hunter realised he would be the chief suspect, he had to think very quickly. David slipped out of Arden's room, ran to his sister's house, borrowed her make-up and clothes, and then made sure he was seen as a 'hussy' downstairs in the pub. He waited in Arden's room until the ancient Mrs Leadbetter came up to bed, to be the male voice inside Arden's room, and the 'hussy' on the stairs, to scandalise this old woman into remembering the incident. David as the 'hussy' then puts through a telephone call, from the village public telephone box, to Rosaleen in Mayfair asking her to ring Lynn and then hang up. David then phoned Lynn from the village phone box, pretending he had arrived back in London. All rather complex for a murder he did *not* do. However he was correct in his supposition that he was chief suspect, since he is subsequently arrested for Arden's murder, but then set free because of his alibi.

The clues about a trunk call from London are fair, if complicated, especially as modern readers don't appreciate the method of long distance calls through

telephone exchanges in the 1940s. Indeed phone boxes too, are almost superseded by mobile phones these days.

The clue that Dr Lionel Cloade was a heroin addict was that he has 'pin-point' pupils. Dr Cloade was worried by Enoch Arden's supposed death with the round end of the fire tongs, and confided his concerns to Poirot. From examining the dead man's injuries, he'd expected 'not something so smooth and round - ..more a cutting edge - a brick' .....This was a real clue that Arden's death may have been accidental: Arden may have hit his head on the edge of the fender, having been knocked to the ground in a fight. Then his death made to look like murder, by hitting his head with the fire tongs post mortem. Why would Arden's death be accidental?

Where did Rowley rush off to, after he'd seen the picture of Lord Trenton? The answer is, he went back to the Stag and had a 'flaming row' with Arden, but there are no clues to this in the book. The ever nosy landlady, Beatrice Lippincott, should have heard angry voices and a very heavy thump of a tall well-built man hitting the floor. Service, as we are frequently told in the book, was not like it used to be pre-war. The Stag was all 'silence and emptiness' with very low staffing levels, as Poirot discovered as he let himself into the dead man's room unmolested.

The death of Major Porter for Rowley, is in some way similar to Enoch Arden for David Hunter. Rowley walked in on the dead Major, with a suicide note explaining the Major's lie, when he misidentified the body of Arden as Underhay. Rowley destroyed this note, but he and his Aunt Frances Cloade feel responsible for the Major's death, as well as Charles Trenton's, who they were paying to be "Enoch Arden". Rowley says 'I've killed two people' as he starts to strangle Lynn. This is the final twist in the plot, leading the reader to think Rowley's character was fundamentally flawed. David Hunter accuses all the Cloades of murdering his sister, 'Rosaleen Cloade'.

What is oddly shocking in this book, is that Rowley in the end appears to get no punishment whatever, and indeed is rewarded with his slice of the Cloade fortune, and the return of his girl, Lynn. Whereas David Hunter was going to be hanged for killing Eileen. Truly morality has been lost during this War.

Eileen was wracked with guilt, pretending to be Rosaleen, and jealous about David's infatuation with Lynn. Eileen's confession would destroy them both. David was the one person without a motive for killing 'his sister', if she was his sister. Eileen's written confession, found by Poirot confirmed David's suspicion that this pretence could not go on. David also wanted to marry Lynn. It may well have gone through David Hunter's mind, although not in the book, that with 'Rosaleen' dead, Lynn will inherit her slice of Cloade fortune, so he'll be marrying money: having his cake and eating it!

There is an uncomfortable ending, with Lynn suddenly realising Rowley was the man she really loved, *as he is strangling her*. Poirot does save her life. One of the few times Poirot ever prevents murder. Afterwards Lynn explains to Rowley: 'when you

caught hold of me by the throat and said if I wasn't for you, no one should have me – I knew then I was your woman'. Some like it rough!

Lynn also plays down Rowley's role in the death of Major Porter:

'You suggested dishonesty to him, he accepted it and then repented and took a quick way out. He was just a weak character.' Lynn also thought 'Poirot is rather a dear' in the context of 'hushing up' his knowledge that Rowley had accidentally killed Arden in a fight, and also bribed the Major to perjure himself. The book ends with forgiveness for true lovers, and the hope of a better world to come, but a very bitter taste of an amoral society in the reader's mind.



Coventry Cathedral. {Imperial War Museum}

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