

They Do It with Mirrors

1952

[This contains plots spoilers for this novel and the play, King Lear]

This book, like its title, may be seen from many different angles. In the brilliant twist of Christies' kaleidoscope of pattern combinations, the two people beyond suspicion inside the locked study are the perpetrators. The mad are bad, and the bad are good, the rich are poor, and morality seems to have disappeared from the world since World War 2.

At one level it is a rather neat inverse of the 'locked room' murder mystery. Agatha Christie yet again inventing a new slant on the classic problem. Usually the person is murdered *inside a locked room*. In this story it is everyone outside the locked room become suspects. All the characters, except five, are gathered outside Lewis' locked study door, in the dark as an electric light fuse has gone. They hear a terrible argument within, between Lewis Serrocold and Edgar Lawson, a new and unstable young man Serrocold was trying to help. Shots are heard. Once light is restored, the study door is unlocked and the mad Edgar Lawson is sobbing his repentance to Serrocold. No one is harmed. All breathe a sigh of relief. It is the capable and efficient Miss Bellever, who finds the dead body of Carrie Louise's stepson, Christian Gulbrandsen, shot dead in *another room* of the house. Christian Gulbrandsen was a Trustee of the huge philanthropic fund.

This is a pure murder mystery puzzle, fairly clued, complete with a plan of the ground floor of 'Stonygates', in the front of the book. Which of the characters not huddled around the Study door committed the murder? Could the people together, but in the dark, swear all of their number stayed there listening to the commotion within? Was it possible they were all so absorbed and terrified, listening to the shouting in the study, that one of their number slipped away, without anyone else noticing, to commit the deed? This is a locked room murder mystery, where the people on the inside of the 'locked room' are safe from suspicion. Many witnesses can swear to hearing the two people fight inside the locked study, whilst the murder was committed in another part of the house. Everything in this book is inside out, or the reverse, as seen in a mirror image.

There are many clues that Edgar Lawson is not suffering from schizophrenia, but someone playing the part. Miss Marple feels Edgar's discussion with her had 'the familiarity of a stage scene', rather than a genuine conversation. Gina describes Edgar as 'madly theatrical'. Edgar Lawson has only come to Stonygates since that last meeting of the Gulbrandsen Trustees Board, the month before. New comers in Christie books are always suspicious!

Miss Marple informs Inspector Curry early on that the argument between Lewis Serrocold and Edgar Lawson was *contrived* in order to mask the murder of Christian Gulbrandsen:

"Well, everybody seems to think it very odd that Edgar Lawson should quite suddenly have a relapse"

The authorial misdirection is that the murderer somehow 'works up' Edgar into a mental fervour so he'll have an acute crisis, providing a diversion, to allow the murder of Christian Gulbrandsen to take place. Suspicion falls on each character in turn as the perpetrator. The two men in the 'locked study', Lewis Serrocold and Edgar Lawson, are excluded from being suspects, as there are many witnesses on the other side of the locked study door, to testify about their raised voices and shots within. Christie's misdirection is a theatrical conjuring trick.

Carrie Louise's stepson, the professional stage director, Alex Restarick, solves this murder by thinking of Stonygates as a stage set. Alex realises there are entrances and exits to a theatre stage invisible to the audience. Someone from the 'locked Study' could have easily gone out of the French Windows onto the Terrace *behind the house*, run round the outside to Gulbrandsen's room, shot him, and run back into the Study. If the remaining man in the study carried on shouting and crashing the furniture, it would convince listeners that the two men were there together. Alex had heard running footsteps in the fog, as he arrived at Stonygates just as the murder occurred. Alex had a discussion with Miss Marple, and was then murdered. A sure sign he knew too much. Miss Marple then remembered when Serrocold opened the locked study door, he was 'breathing hard as though he had been running.' At the time, the characters assumed he was panting from the effort of trying to calm 'mad' Edgar, the dangerous lunatic, who had taken two shots at him. Miss Marple understood why Alex Restarick was murdered. There can be no other solution; Lewis Serrocold and Edgar Lawson conspired together to kill Christian Gulbrandsen. The whole second half of the book with Serrocold 'protecting' Carrie Louise from being murdered by various spurious acts of poison, was an elaborate red herring, to distract the Police, and the reader, away from the real reason Gulbrandsen was killed.

There are many clues to the two attempts of 'poisoning' Carrie Louise being sham. Lewis Serrocold told the Police the poison story and provided all the evidence of the poison in Carrie Louise's tonic. Inspector Curry remarks 'You think of everything, Mr Serrocold.' Indeed, he had. Serrocold also asked Miss Marple to be 'a watch dog' over Carrie Louise. Miss Marple then stopped Carrie Louise from eating the poisoned box of chocolates, sent though the post, with Alex Restarick's card inside. In a Christie if someone survives a murder attempt, they are usually the murderer, and have created this event to make him or her appear a victim. Christie develops this new variation. Serrocold created this attempted poisoning of his wife, to add weight to his false statement that Gulbrandsen thought someone was trying to kill Carrie Louise.

The final dénouement is rather rapidly and unusually described in one paragraph in a letter written by Gina. Edgar Lawson panicked under questioning, and rather improbably jumped in a rotten boat by the lake's edge to escape the Police. The boat sank and Edgar Lawson drowned. Serrocold, his true father, jumped in to save him, and also drowned. The Police very unconvincingly try to save them both. This was still the era where murder was a Capital Offence. In many Christie books murderers are allowed to die before they can be brought to justice, as a kindness to them and their families. It avoided the public humiliation of a trial. Poirot, in particular, allows this to happen, as a kindness. Miss Marple tends to be tougher, but perhaps she couldn't swim either.

The second way to read this book is as a discourse on attitudes to mental illness and criminality, in the early 1950s. Christie has many different characters express widely different views. The very rich widow, Carrie-Louise, who is passionate about 'good causes', married Lewis Serrocold. Lewis Serrocold is 'absolutely rabid on the subject of the redemption of young criminals.' Lewis is 'more like a dynamo than a human being'. There are 'fashions in philanthropy'. In Gulbrandsen's time, Gulbrandsen was Carrie-Louise's first husband, 'it was education', but this has been taken over by the state. Now it is the new theory that people are not bad, but mad, and therapy can reform them. Lewis has a 'passionate enthusiasm about constructive training for juvenile delinquents'.

Lewis Serrocold, by profession, was an accountant. Miss Marple felt he 'was a man who would always put causes before people'. One feels the authorial mistrust for 'One of those men of enormous will power who like living on a banana and a piece of toast and put all their energies into a Cause'. Miss Bellever comments: 'It's against human nature never to relax or rest. He only sleeps four hours a night.'

Lewis Serrocold, with Carrie-Louise's money, turns her enormous house and grounds, Stonygates, into a private institution for rehabilitating juvenile delinquents. Miss Bellever is Carrie-Louise's long standing 'Nurse, dragon, watchdog, secretary, housekeeper and very faithful friend.' Miss Bellever is forthrightly unsympathetic to Serrocold's ethos:

'My brothers and I were brought up the hard way, Miss Marple, and we weren't encouraged to whine. Soft, that's what the world is nowadays.'

Inspector Curry also privately expresses his views:

'Makes me a bit sick, sometimes. Daresay I'm wrong and old-fashioned. But there are plenty of good, decent lads about, lads who could do with a start in life. But there, honesty has to be its own reward – millionaires don't leave trust funds to help the worthwhile.'

Miss Marple is of a similar opinion 'young people with a good heredity, and brought up wisely in a good home – and with grit and pluck and ability to get on in life – well, they are really, when one comes down to it – the sort of people a country needs.' Miss Marple wondered at the 'blindness of enthusiastic social reformers.'

On the opposing side, the mad, not bad school of thought, are Lewis Serrocold and his Team, headed by the humorously named psychiatrist, Dr Maverick. Maverick and Serrocold believe criminal behaviour is 'a medical problem – that's what we've got to get the legal authorities to understand. Psychiatry came into its own in the war. The one positive good that did come out of it –' When Miss Marple tentatively asks Dr Maverick if Edgar Lawson might be maladjusted, 'Dr Maverick laughed cheerfully 'We're all mad, dear lady. That's the secret of existence. We're all a little mad.'

The reader is given the different characters reactions to the same occurrence, which contributes the pervading feeling of unease and unpleasantness present at Stonygates throughout the book.

When

'Edgar went out, shutting the door with a slam behind him.

Miss Bellever snorted:

'Atrocious manners.'

'He's so sensitive,' said Carrie Louise vaguely.

Mildred said sharply:

'Everyone can help behaving rudely.'

Wally Hudd spoke..

'That guy's crackers. That's all there is to it. Crackers!'

Carrie Louise's granddaughter, Gina gives a fresh and objective view of Stonygates to Miss Marple:

'Everything's madly earnest, and you tumble over psychiatrists everywhere underfoot. Enjoying themselves madly. Rather like Scoutmasters, only worse. The young criminals are rather pets, some of them...It's the thugs I like best,' said Gina. 'I don't fancy the queers so much.... Dr Maverick thinks they're *all* queer – it's repressed desires and disordered home life and their mothers getting off with soldiers and all that. I don't really see it myself because some people have awful home lives and yet have managed to turn out quite all right.'

Gina says of Edgar 'I think he's just a rotter.'

When Edgar Lawson shoots two rounds of a revolver off in the library:

Carrie Louise mildly remarks 'But people don't really need a cause for feeling what they do feel. They're just made that way.'

Her daughter, Mildred's assessment is less understanding:

'He's a dangerous lunatic. He's been shooting off a revolver and raving.' Whereas Dr Maverick explains it as 'a gesture of defiance and resentment against a universe that has denied him the simple necessities of a child's life – security and affection.'

When Inspector Curry is questioning Dr Maverick about Edgar Lawson after the shooting:

'Is this young man, in your opinion, definitely a mental case?'

'We are all mental cases, Inspector Curry.' {Replies Dr Maverick}

Tomfool answer, thought the Inspector. Dr Maverick continues:

'He could easily have shot him dead. Instead, he missed him. Why did he miss him? Because he *wanted* to miss him.'

It is an authorial joke upon the male medical profession that gullible doctors are so easily hoodwinked by criminals. Edgar Lawson 'was actually a normal young man playing the part of a schizophrenic. He was always theatrical.'

All the main female characters: Carrie-Louise, Gina and Miss Marple remark at various parts of the text that Lawson does not feel genuine, and indeed turns out to be playing a part. Untrained, intelligent women saw through Lawson's charade in a way that the male professional psychiatrists did not. Another example of Miss Marple's observing the 'blindness of enthusiastic social reformers'.

The third way to read this novel is as a parody of *King Lear*. Christie adored Shakespeare. It cannot be a co-incidence that she chose the name 'Edgar' for Lewis Serracold's son, who was feigning madness. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Gloucester's son, Edgar, spends most of the play pretending to be psychotic as poor Tom. *King Lear* is about the king foolishly dividing his kingdom amongst his three daughters. Lear then disinherited Cordelia, the most deserving, because of her failure to be a sycophant. Lear and his children are destroyed by jealousy and greed. In *They Do it with Mirrors* Carrie-Louise has had three husbands, one good and two rotters. Carrie-Louise's kingdom of money was destroyed by Serracold, who kills a lot of people in the process. It is a tragedy in true Shakespearean terms.

Miss Marple, in her charitable obituary of Lewis Serracold says he was 'a passionate believer in what could be accomplished – with money. He didn't want it for himself - ..not in the greedy vulgar sense- he wanted the power to do great good with it –' The Bishop of Cromer, brought in at the end of the book as the *deus ex machina* figure is much tougher:

'He wanted,' said the Bishop 'to be God.' His voice was suddenly stern. 'He forgot that man is only the humble instrument of God's will.'

Carrie Louise simply sums her husband up:

'People who can be very good can be very bad, too.'

The fourth way to read this book is as an interesting document of the turmoil in thoughts and behaviour of English society after the Second World War. 'Old barriers and class shibboleths are gone.'

Elderly rich women, in their mid-60s, no longer accepted growing old gracefully as Jane Marple has done. Miss Marple's exact contemporary, they were both teenage girls 'in the Pensionnat in Florence', Mrs Ruth Van Rydock is 'exquisitely corseted', with grey hair 'hydrangea blue', and 'fine nylon stockings' on her still shapely legs.

'Everything that money could do had been done for her – reinforced by diet, massage and constant exercise'.

This is the new generation of woman who won't give in to old age. Ruth Van Rydock rather bitchily says:

'Do you think most people would guess, Jane, that you and I are practically the same age?'

Miss Marple wears rather 'dowdy black'; Ruth is in a beautiful designer gown by Lanvanelli. Mrs Van Rydock has also been married and divorced three times, and Ruth's sister Carrie Louise has also been married three times. This is an enormous difference from the early 1920s, when divorce was unacceptable to the higher social classes. Christie herself refused Archie's initial request for divorce in August 1926.

There is an interesting nugget of Miss Marple's back-story: she is described as an 'English girl from a Cathedral Close', so her father must have been a clergyman with a cathedral position. Jane Marple's adolescent ambition was 'going to nurse lepers'. One never finds out if she did or did not go. This novel is set in 1952, and Miss Marple's teenage friendship with Ruth and Carrie Louise extends back 'nearly half a century ago': so Miss Marple must be in her 60s, born around 1890, when Miss Agatha Miller was born.

Everything in the novel about the beautiful old house of Stonygates, not directly related to Lewis Serrocold's rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, is in a state of decay. The Serrocolds are oblivious to beauty or comfort.

'The drive was badly kept and the grounds seemed neglected. No gardeners during the war, and since we haven't bothered.'

Miss Marple finds tea at Stonygates disappointing: 'white utility cups mixed with the remnants of what had been Rockingham and Spode tea services. There was a load of bread, two pots of jam, and some cheap and unwholesome-looking cakes.' Supper is no better, 'indifferently cooked and indifferently served'. Just as well it was Miss Marple as detective, one feels Poirot would have walked out in disgust, and decided to stay at some local hotel.

There was a complete mixture of dress code according to age, the older people still observing the pre-war custom to dress for dinner, the young not bothering, and the middle aged caught between the two.

'A variety of costumes were worn. Miss Bellever wore a high black dress; Mildred Strete wore evening dress, and a woollen cardigan over it. Carrie Louise had on a short dress of grey wool – Gina resplendent in a kind of peasant get up. Wally had not changed, nor had Stephen Restarick, Edgar Lawson had on a neat dark blue suit. Lewis Serracold wore the conventional dinner jacket.'

The dress codes for mourning are also described:

Mildred Strete 'wearing black with some onyx beads.'

She raised her eyes and looked at the two brothers. 'Not even a black tie!'

'I don't suppose,' said Miss Marple apologetically, 'that they knew beforehand that a murder was going to happen.'

Young, wild and beautiful, Gina in 'scarlet shirt and dark green slacks' slightly shocks even calm Inspector Curry:

'I see you're not wearing mourning, Mrs. Hudd?'

'I haven't got any,' said Gina, 'I hate black. I think it's hideous, and only receptionists and housekeepers and people like that ought to wear it.'

The air of moral laxity pervades the book in the shape of Gina, Carrie Louise's granddaughter. Gina outrageously flirted with both her two step-uncles, but is married to an American she met and *married after only one week*, during the war. Alex Restarick says to Gina, she is

'Ruthless, determined to have your own way, quite without pity or kindness or the rudiments of compassion. You are very, very feminine, Gina Dear.'

Alex also comforts Gina with the maxim and proposes to her

'Every woman should make one mistake matrimonially'. It's an odd, unsentimental proposal of matrimony.

Gina's aunt, Mildred Strete is smugly horrified to see Gina kissing Alex Restarick, and does not mince her words: 'You're a bad lot...utterly depraved'.

There is no love lost between the aunt and her niece. Mildred Strete observes 'Gina would say anything. The Italians are never truthful. And she's Roman Catholic, of course.'

Her other step-Uncle, Stephen Restarick, is also passionately in love with her, but has an objective assessment of Gina:

'Italians have that unconscious vein of cruelty. They've no compassion for anyone who's old or ugly, or peculiar in any way.'

Gina has an odd way of justifying her behaviour, but it may come rather close to Christie's own life experience, given Archie Christie ran off to a younger woman after the Christies had their daughter:

"Women have a much worse time of it in the world than men do. They're more vulnerable. They have children, and they mind – terribly- about their children. As soon as they lose their looks, the men they love don't love them any more. They are betrayed and deserted and pushed aside...It's a cruel world! Sooner or later it will be cruel to me!"

To leaven the unpleasantness, there is Christie's humour. Some of the characters' names are chosen to be funny, almost as in a child's card game: Dr Maverick, the odd-ball psychiatrist and Mildred Strete the widow of Cannon Strete [Canon Street is an underground station in London]. Stonygates is chosen to be the name of the uncomfortable mansion, and Lewis Serrocold, the man without human feelings of hunger or tiredness - 'more like a dynamo than a human being'. However, there is a pervading feeling in this book that philanthropy and indeed society as a whole in England, has lost its strong moral compass, to the detriment of all.

The book ends by the young couple, Gina and Walter Hudd, having reaffirmed their love, deciding to cut all ties with England. They will make an entirely new life for themselves in America, where their future will be bright.

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