

A Pocket Full of Rye

1953

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

Nursery rhymes have held a fascination for Christie ever since her 1939 masterpiece *And Then There Were None*. In that novel the rhyme provides a structure to the narrative, and gives it also an eerie malevolence, rather as circus clowns do in a James Bond film, or like a fairground scene in a thriller. In 1940 Christie published *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, and in 1943 the excellent *Five Little Pigs*. *Crooked House* was published in 1949 and *Hickory Dickory Dock* in 1955. The titles of all these books are taken from rhymes.

The first two lines of the rhyme that gives the title to this 1953 novel are:

Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye,
Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie.

The second verse goes:

The king was in his counting house, counting out his money,
The queen was in the parlour eating bread and honey,
The maid was in the garden hanging out the clothes,
When there came a little dicky bird and nipped off her nose.

The blurb on the back cover of my copy of *A Pocket Full of Rye* encourages the reader to buy the book with the following enticement:

Rex Fortescue was at the office, balancing the books.
His wife was having tea in the parlour.
The maid was doing her laundry ...
But where were the blackbirds?

Rex Fortescue, his wife, and the maid, Gladys Martin, who once worked for Miss Marple, are all killed. It is the murder of the maid that brings Miss Marple to Yewtree Lodge. Not so much the murder, perhaps, as the fact that the murderer put a clothes peg on the maid's nose after killing her - the nearest he could get to representing the dicky bird. "It was such a cruel, contemptuous gesture." Miss Marple says, "It gave me a kind of picture of the murderer. To do a thing like that! It's very wicked, you know, to affront human dignity. Particularly if you've already killed". Miss Marple seems to consider the affront to dignity as more morally culpable than the murder itself. But I suspect that what really brings her to stick her nose in where she has not been invited is her expectation that there is a puzzle that she will enjoy solving.

A little later Miss Marple summarises the pattern behind the three murders to Inspector Neele. Rex Fortescue (the king) who dies of taxine poisoning, that is from yew berries, whilst in his 'counting house' and is found to have rye grains in his pocket; his young wife, Adele, who drops dead whilst enjoying an afternoon tea in her library at home that includes scones and honey. Her cup of tea, it turns out, had contained cyanide. And Gladys, strangled,

hanging out the clothes, and a peg placed on her nose. There is certainly rhyme, Miss Marple insists, even if no reason, to these deaths. The chapter ends with Miss Marple at her most modest – the false modesty she so often assumes – saying to the Inspector: “But what I mean to say is have you gone into the question of blackbirds?” The Inspector, puzzled, asks about blackbirds and discovers that dead blackbirds had been placed on Rex Fortescue’s desk, and in a pie, the previous summer. He also discovers that many years ago Rex Fortescue had bought, as speculation, a mine in East Africa known as *The Blackbird Mine*, but it turned out to have nothing of value in it.

The problem with the novel is that the tail wags the dog: that is, the rhyme, rather than reason, drives the plot. It is as though Christie shoehorned the book to fit the nursery rhyme. If we look at the plot from the perspective of the murderer many of his actions make little sense.

The central plot idea is one that Christie uses to better effect in other novels: that it looks as though what the killer gains from the murders has trivial value, whilst in fact it has high value. In this novel the murderer is out to gain sole ownership of the Blackbird Mine, thought to be almost worthless. He, however, is alone, amongst the characters in the book, in knowing that the mine has recently been found to contain significant deposits of uranium. In order to ensure that he becomes the sole owner he kills his father and step-mother and persuades his brother to give up his share in the, apparently valueless, mine.

Christie realises that in setting the clues to the nursery rhyme – the rye in the pocket, the peg on the nose of the maid, the location of each of the murders – the killer is drawing attention to the Blackbird Mine. At first sight it would not seem to be in the killer’s interests to do so. Christie, always thorough and thoughtful, adds a further layer to the plot that also provides the book’s main red herring. Rex Fortescue, we learn, had a business partner when he bought the Blackbird Mine, a Mr MacKenzie. But Mr MacKenzie died and Rex Fortescue, it seems, left him to die. Mr MacKenzie’s widow is now very old and living in a care home, but she and her husband had two children, a boy and a girl. These children would now be adult. The police, and the reader, are led to wonder whether one of these children is now living at Yewtree Lodge and has murdered Rex Fortescue as revenge for what he did, or failed to do, to Mr MacKenzie. This subplot also provides a reason why the murderer, Lance, the son of Mr Fortescue, might want to bring attention to the Blackbird Mine: he is hoping that when the police investigate, they will learn of the MacKenzies and of their motive for killing Rex Fortescue and so they will become the main suspects.

The problem is that it still makes no sense for Lance to arrange for the rye to be put in the pocket of his murdered father, or for the clothes peg to be put on the nose of the maid. He could easily, when questioned by the police, have told them about the Blackbird Mine and his father’s behaviour towards Mr MacKenzie. A further problem is that the probability that his step-mother would have been eating bread and honey at the time when he had the opportunity to kill her is so low that it amounts to an impossibility. All in all, the links to the nursery rhyme are so contrived, and so unconvincing, as to undermine any dramatic value that they might possess.

If we lay aside the nursery rhyme what are we left with? The answer is, a decent plot but a somewhat arbitrary solution. Christie does a good job of diverting our attention away from the actual killer, Lance Fortescue. We first meet him after we know of the death, in London, of Rex Fortescue. Chapter 6 begins: 'At the moment that Rex Fortescue had been drinking his last cup of tea, Lance Fortescue and his wife had been sitting under the trees on the Champs Elysées watching the people walking past.' One of Christie's many skills at misdirection lies in her ability to sketch character. Lance Fortescue is a lovable rogue. The reader can be disarmed by his charm. And he appears to gain nothing from the deaths. So lacking means, motive and opportunity, and having a fundamentally pleasing character, he seems not to even make it onto the list of suspects.

In the notes I make of Christie's novels I have a heading under which I collect all the clues to the solution. These will often amount to over a dozen clues of one type or another. In this novel I noted only two points, neither very convincing, that might be considered clues to the actual solution. I noted ten misdirections – not a particularly large number for a Christie novel, but the ratio of clues to misdirections is one of the lowest of any of the novels I have analysed. Seasoned Christie readers might guess the correct solution, and might even feel fairly certain that they have done so, but they would be using their knowledge of Christie – the knowledge that the murderer is often the most interesting character, the character into whom Christie has put most work. Lance Fortescue *is* the best developed and the most interesting character. The rest, with the possible exception of Miss Dove (who turns out to be a petty criminal) and the detectives (Inspector Neele and Miss Marple herself), are very flat. And most of them could, on the evidence, be *the murderer*. Even Miss Marple's reasoning seems decidedly shaky. Pat, Lance's wife, has been married twice before, and on both occasions to bad characters. When Inspector Neele asks Miss Marple why she is sure that Lance is the murderer she answers: 'Because of Pat – a dear girl – and the kind that always marries a bad lot – that's really what drew my attention to [Lance] at the start.'

Despite this novel's being a mediocre Christie whodunnit it is still worth the reading. Christie has the comic writer's eye for the peculiarities of human beings, and a sensitivity to the social absurdities of England at the time that she is writing.

Miss Marple feels rather sorry for one of the characters, Mrs Percival Fortescue, a daughter-in-law of Rex Fortescue and who incidentally turns out to be one of the MacKenzie children. Miss Marple thinks she is exactly like poor Mrs Emmett, the bank manager's wife. Christie explains why: 'Mrs Emmett occupied a rather difficult position in St Mary Mead. She did not belong to the old guard of ladies in reduced circumstances who lived in neat houses around the church.' Being the bank manager's wife 'she could not, of course, associate with the wives of the trades people.' The 'of course' might at first be thought to reflect Christie's limited imagination, but the author's irony is made clear in the sentence that follows: 'Snobbery here raised its hideous head and marooned Mrs Emmett on a permanent island of loneliness.'

Even when describing the limited intelligence of Gladys Martin, the poor maid strangled whilst hanging out the clothes, and who is the innocent, gullible, and duped accomplice to the murder of Rex Fortescue, Christie, in the character of Miss Marple, makes a more general point:

It's very interesting .. the things these girls cut out of the papers and keep. It's always been the same ...Recipes for beauty, for attracting the man you love. And witchcraft and charms and marvellous happenings. Nowadays they are mostly lumped together under the heading of Science. Nobody believes in magicians any more, nobody believes that anyone can come along and wave a wand and turn you into a frog. But if you read in the paper that by injecting certain glands scientists can alter your vital tissues and you'll develop froglike characteristics, well, everybody would believe that.

The novel ends with Miss Marple back in St Mary Mead. She finds a letter from Gladys Martin written shortly before she was murdered asking Miss Marple for help. For a moment we see a softer side to Miss Marple. A tear rose in her eyes. But she quickly suppresses any sense of pity. She is more comfortable with anger, anger against the killer. But she does not allow the anger to last any longer than the pity. Perhaps both emotions, she feels, are useless. Or perhaps, in truth, she cares less about people than she does about the solving of puzzles. For both the pity and the anger are displaced by a surge of triumph, the triumph, we are told, is like that 'some specialist might feel who has successfully reconstructed an extinct animal from a fragment of jawbone and a couple of teeth.'

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