

Dead Man's Folly

1956

[Plot spoilers to this novel and Shakespeare's Hamlet]

Christie was at her cunning best again, after the disappointing *Destination Unknown* [1954]. Christie achieves an original twist within her classic country house whodunnit genre. The reader is given *the whole plot before* it has happened. Only, of course, because none of it has yet occurred, it passes one by. It is more *Columbo* than Christie. One reads the opening of this novel thinking how ludicrously over-exuberant Ariadne Oliver's imagination is. It is only after the dénouement that the reader and Poirot realise that Oliver was spot on, right at the beginning. Mrs. Oliver had called Poirot down to Devon to *prevent* a murder, in which task he abjectly fails. Poirot finally acknowledged it: 'You are a sensitive person, Madame. You are affected by your atmosphere, by the personalities of the people you meet. And these are translated into your work...You have always known more about this crime than you have realised yourself.'

Ariadne Oliver had been asked to set a treasure hunt for the local summer fete at Nasse House. Since Mrs. Oliver is a famous crime fiction writer, it had to be a *murder hunt*. The winner works through the clues across the estate to find the *pretend* dead body. Christie, in the guise of Mrs. Oliver, creates a literary dumb-play, just like the troupe of players act in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when they perform *The Murder of Gonzago* at the Danish Court. The actors mime out the story, with Hamlet as narrator, so that Hamlet's uncle, the king, will understand the plot. *The Murder of Gonzago* is 'something like the murder of my father'. Hamlet's idea is to observe the king's expression to get objective proof of his guilt: the 'mousetrap'. Unlike King Claudius who understands exactly why Hamlet has chosen to stage *Gonzago*, the bewildered Poirot thought 'the whole plot and action of the Murder Hunt seemed to him to be wrapped in impenetrable fog.' If only Poirot had bothered to listen to Mrs. Oliver seriously, or even read the synopsis of her plot, he might have actually saved the lives of Marlene and Merdell. If you re-read the early, pre-murder introductory chapters of *Dead Man's Folly* after you know the final solution, suddenly the bewildering, whacky Ariadne Oliver murder hunt characters of the atomic scientist in the pay of the Communists, the wicked local Squire 'Colonel Blunt poisoned his first wife for her money', and a foreign girl hitchhiker, come into sharp focus.

In the discussion of clues for the Hunt, there is the remark 'So much depends on how you look at a thing.' Ariadne Oliver felt she was being manipulated. She had a very

uneasy premonition that a real murder was about to take place, which was why she contacted the great Hercule Poirot.

An unusual clue for Christie lies in the title of this book. Sir George Stubbs, the new owner of Nasse House, who is alive and well, so why is the novel called *Dead Man's Folly*, built the folly a year ago? There are intentional and subconscious word plays on The Folliahs, the ancient Devonian family who had owned Nasse House since Tudor times, and a folly, the small temple built in the garden. It is the Folliahs' folly. Old Mrs. Folliah was a widow: her husband has died, and both their sons were killed in World War 2. James, her younger son, was reported 'missing in action' with the commandos in Italy. Three lots of death duties had required Mrs. Folliah to sell Nasse House; yet, at the beginning of the novel she was still living at The Lodge of the Nasse Estate. She is in charge of the garden. Mrs. Folliah welcomes her county friends to the fete as though she was still the lady of the manor. This is a big clue.

Before either of the murders has taken place, Poirot also missed two important clues. Poirot chats to the 92-year-old ferryman, Merdell, who was Head Gardiner on the Nasse estate for 30 years. Poirot:

'It is sad that the day of the Folliahs is over.'

'Don't ee never believe that, sir.. there would always be Folliahs at Nasse. Rare and cunning the Folliahs are!'

Poirot just thinks he's referring to old Mrs. Folliah, but Merdell has given Poirot the key to unlock this mystery. Note Merdell did not say the *Folliahs were*, which does imply he knows more than one Folliah is still alive. Marlene Tucker, Merdell's granddaughter also confided to Poirot, before she was strangled:

'My granddad saw a body in the woods once. He was scared and ran away, and when he came back it was gone. It was a woman's body.' Adding, but 'of course he's batty'. Christie is fair with her clues, but immediately writes something to distract or misdirect the reader. Both Marlene and Merdell are then killed, which should give the reader the hint that they knew too much.

There are plot weaknesses. It is impossible to think a faithful ancient retainer like Merdell, who had been on the Nasse estate all his life, would not recognise James Folliah, even though James was over a decade older, and had grown a beard. There must have been many other social acquaintances of the Folliahs who would also recognise Sir George Stubbs. People's voices and mannerism do not change [see *Murder in Mesopotamia*]. Poirot was also told by Merdell that James Folliah was 'a bad lot. Debts and women..he were real wild in his temper.'

There are two neatly interlinking clues. First, the architect points out that The Folly was erected in the wrong place, in the midst of trees rather than 'top of that grassy bank by the house', over a hole that an old oak tree left when it fell. Secondly, there are diametrically opposite descriptions of Lady Hattie Stubbs that are impossible to reconcile. Ariadne Oliver's forthright opinion was that Hattie is 'rather beautiful, but

dumb as a fish...definitely half-witted', and the local Policeman Hoskins says she has 'Got a low I.Q'. Mrs. Folliat, who had known Hattie the longest said she is 'completely suggestible'. Yet Hattie defiantly goes off to bed, to avoid doing any work for the fete, when asked to help. Poirot was startled to observe Lady Stubbs 'cast a glance so shrewd and appraising... As their eyes met, the shrewd expression vanished – emptiness returned.' The architect, Michael Weyman's opinion is 'if you're thinking she's not all there, you're wrong. I'd say she was very much all there. Nobody more so.' The efficient Miss Brewis, a clone of Miss Lemon acting as personal secretary to Sir George, described Lady Stubbs as 'A sly, scheming, clever cat'.

Inspector Bland asks the local police constable Hoskins for his opinion about who murdered Marlene. Hoskins promptly replies 'Foreigner if you ask me. 'Twouldn't be anyone local.....you never know with foreigners. Turn nasty'. It is the ironic authorial twist that the oldest and most respected family in Devon are the perpetrators of this deeply selfish crime, although it is with the aid of an Italian assassin.

There is a beautiful authorial misdirection. Poirot wrote out a list of all the suspects for Marlene's murder, but Lady Stubbs was missed out, although she disappeared at the same time that Marlene was murdered. The implication was that Lady Stubbs has also been murdered. The Police have failed to find her body, believing it has been washed out to sea. There is another clue that Lady Stubbs must be involved in Marlene's death. Lady Stubbs asked the secretary to take refreshments to Marlene in the boathouse. This was very out of character, as the architect points out, since Lady Stubbs was entirely self-centred.

The solution was that James Folliat in his new persona, as 'Sir George Stubbs' had murdered the real Hattie Stubbs a year ago, on the night the Stubbs arrived in their new home. Hattie's body was buried where a large tree had been uprooted, with the new Folly built on top. James Follett's clever Italian first wife acts the part of poor, stupid Hattie. There are links with other 1950s Christies. Christie's previous novel, *Hickory Dickory Dock* 1955, also features rucksacks and hitchhikers as pivotal to the plot. There are also other Christies where someone acts the part of a dead person for financial gain for a long period of time.

In *Dead Man's Folly*, Mrs. Folliat explains her maternal feelings about her son, James: 'Even as a child he frightened me..Ruthless..Without pity..And without conscience..But he was my son and I loved him..I should have spoken out after Hattie's death..But he was my son. How could I be the one to give him up? And so, because of my silence – that poor silly child was killed..And after her, dear old Merdell'.

The most shocking part of the plot is Mrs. Folliat's lack of morality. Mrs. Folliat was a well respected and loved pillar of the County community, entrusted with the

guardianship of Hattie, a 'subnormal but very rich girl....docile, affectionate, suggestible.' How could she countenance Hattie marrying her psychopathic son, James? Mrs. Folliat knew only too well James' real character. However, Mrs. Folliat needed Hattie's money to hold on to the Nasse Estate. Mrs. Folliat was just as evil, 'rare and cunning' as her son, but of course, poor Merdell knew that.

This grim plot line is leavened by humour. Since Ariadne Oliver had written '40 or so novels', exactly like Christie, she is often thought to be Christie's alter ego. This gives the reader a keyhole glimpse of Christie's private life, which was a closed book. The very shy Christie did not give many interviews, and preferred to observe others than talk herself. Miss Lemon, Poirot's efficient secretary has no time for Mrs. Oliver. 'Miss Lemon only read improving books and regarded such frivolities as fictional crime with contempt'. 'I have always noticed that these artists and writers are very unbalanced – no sense of proportion.' The prevalent view was that Christie wrote 'low brow' thrillers, and many people treated her art with contempt. Please see the trivia on *Towards Zero* Robert Graves' views on Christie's oeuvre – and Graves was a close friend.

Miss Lemon was ready to rebuff Mrs. Oliver's urgent request for help, when to Miss Lemon's surprise, Poirot leaps into action, and a taxi.

Oliver explains to Poirot when he arrives at Nasse House:

"A Murder Hunt ..all much harder to arrange than you'd think..real people being quite intelligent, and in my books they needn't be.

'If you know anything at all about writers, you'll know they can't stand suggestions. People say "Splendid, but wouldn't it be better if so and so did so and so?"

I mean, one wants to say: "All right then, write it yourself if you want it that way."

When Poirot remarks he has no idea how she comes up with all these ideas, Ariadne Oliver replies:

'It's never difficult to *think* of things. The trouble is that you think of too many, and then it all becomes too complicated, so you have to relinquish some of them and that *is* rather agony.'

'I never discuss my plots with anyone. I've learned not to, because if I do, they just look at me blankly and say 'er- yes-, but – I don't see what happened – and surely that can't possibly make a book.' So damping. And *not* true, because when I write it, it does.'

Poirot wonders how Mrs. Oliver managed to turn out coherent detective stories, with her muddled effervescent brain, but she often 'surprised him by her sudden perception of truth.'

Mrs. Oliver talks about 'the fatal flaw' of a plot. 'There always is one. Sometimes one doesn't realise it until a book's actually in print. And then it's *agony!* The curious thing is that most people never notice it. I say to myself, 'But of course the cook would have been bound to notice that two cutlets hadn't been eaten.' But nobody else thinks of it at all.'

Later, Poirot turns the tables on Mrs Oliver, by interrupting *her*: 'sacrificing Mrs. Oliver's creative genius upon the alter of his own impatience.' However, for once, Ariadne Oliver is delighted:

'I was just going out to give a talk on *How I Write My Books...* I'd have made the most awful fool of myself. I mean, what *can* you say about how you write books? What I mean is, first you've got to think of something, and when you've thought of it you've got to force yourself to sit down and write it. That's all. It would have taken me just three minutes to explain that, and then the Talk would have ended and everyone would have been very fed up. I can't imagine why everybody is always so keen for authors to *talk* about writing. I should have thought it was an author's business to *write*, not *talk*.'

Near the end of the book, Ariadne Oliver is the only one to reproach Poirot for his slowness:

'It's about time. That you did see things, I mean. Up to now you don't seem to have done *anything*.'

Mrs. Oliver accurately gives Inspector Bland the solution to Marlene's murder in her very first interview, when asked to speculate why 'a nondescript, rather moronic kid' without an enemy in the world should be strangled. Mrs. Oliver replies she can 'imagine anything: she may have seen somebody bury a body at night, or she may have recognised somebody who was concealing his identity'. The author in a swirling pile of more florid suggestions neatly buries these two nuggets, and so Inspector Bland, and the reader, discount the lot.

Poirot comes out less well. He was slower than normal to grope towards the solution and felt a failure. 'He, Hercule Poirot, had been summoned to prevent a murder – and he had not prevented it. It had happened. What was even more humiliating was that he had no real ideas, even now, as to what had actually happened. It was ignominious. His ego was seriously deflated – even his moustaches drooped.'

Inspector Bland describes Poirot as a 'Kind of music hall parody of a Frenchman, but he's actually a Belgian. But in spite of his absurdities, he's got brains. He must be a fair age now.' Later, the Chief Constable also suggests he's past it: 'Maybe he was a

little Belgian wizard in his day – but surely, man, his day’s over. He’s what age?”

Poirot himself worried, having made not one but two errors:

‘I am not often wrong, and it exasperates me.’

In a discussion with Ariadne Oliver, Poirot says:

‘Wait a moment there is something else I wanted to ask you. Now, what was it?’

‘That’s a sign of age,’ said Mrs Oliver. ‘I do that, too. Forget things-’

Christie usually wrote contemporaneously. Poirot asked Oliver why she put an atomic scientist in her Hunt plot.

‘Oh that! That was just to be up to date..I went to buy presents for my nephew, there was nothing but science fiction and the stratosphere and supersonic toys, and so I thought ‘Better have an atom scientist as the chief suspect and be modern’.

There was very recent real defection of Harwell’s atomic scientists to the communists; please see the trivia on *Destination Unknown*.

Alec Legge, an irascible, young atomic scientist having a nervous breakdown, subconsciously influenced Mrs. Oliver. Legge rented a cottage on the Nasse Estate.

Rather improbably, Poirot gives marriage guidance advice to Alec Legge who angrily retorts ‘And what the hell business is it of yours?’

‘None,’ said Hercule Poirot. He withdrew towards the door. ‘But I am always right.’

Clearly, Poirot’s memory *is* going.

[SH]