

## Hickory Dickory Dock

1955

[plot spoilers ahead]

This is an interesting novel for three reasons. Firstly, it introduces Poirot's secretary, the calm and efficient Miss Lemon, as a humorous foil to Poirot. She is a Captain Hastings replacement with very different characteristics. Secondly, it is another book in Christie's series of exploring institutional life in the 1950s. *They Do it With Mirrors* is set in a school for juvenile delinquents [1952], and *Destination Unknown* ends in a secret world science laboratory and residential complex [1954]. *Hickory Dickory Dock* is set in a London 'rooming house', where University students rent bedrooms, and have breakfast and supper provided. It is the first multiracial book, with people from West Africa, Jamaica, Turkey, Egypt, France, Holland, Iraq, America and Britain. Christie had always been international, with previous books set in France or the Middle East, but this is the first book where all these very different adults are living together under one roof. This reflects the changes that occurred in Britain in the mid-1950s, particularly in higher education. Finally, there is the continued interest in psychology. This theme was explored in *They Do it With Mirrors*. In *Hickory Dickory Dock* Colin McNabb, studying for a Masters degree, lectures Poirot on practical clinical criminal psychology: 'You've got to have an understanding of the root of the trouble if you're ever to effect a cure of the young delinquent'. Dr Maverick from *They Do It With Mirrors*, would have completely agreed.

Miss Felicity Lemon makes three mistakes typing up a letter 'Miss Lemon, that hideous and efficient woman, never made mistakes. She was never ill, never tired, never made mistakes'. Miss Lemon apologises and explains to Poirot she is worried about her sister. Poirot 'had never conceived of Miss Lemon's having a sister. Miss Lemon ....was so completely machine made – a precision instrument..- that to think of her having affections, or anxieties, or family worries, seemed quite ludicrous.' This is a terrible indictment on Poirot's egocentricity that he knows nothing of his employee's private lives. For Poirot 'order and method ruled supreme in his life', and he only finds out about Mrs Hubbard, Miss Lemon's sister, when it is clear that Miss Lemon's mind is distracted by worry, rather than being completely focused on the great detective himself. 'Miss Lemon was seldom, if ever, unpunctual. Fog, storm, epidemic of flu, transport breakdowns – none of these things seemed to affect that remarkable woman. But this morning Miss Lemon arrived, breathless, at five minutes past ten.' Compare this with the earlier description of Anna Scheele in *They Came to Baghdad* 1951. Anna 'made her way in the world not by her charm but by sheer efficiency. She could memorize anything, however complicated, and produce names, dates and times without having to refer to notes...She was discretion itself and her energy, though controlled and disciplined, never flagged. Even germs respected Anna Scheele and kept out of her way.'

At the beginning of *They Came to Baghdad* Anna Scheele wants time off work to visit her sister. Her employer 'didn't know she had a sister. He had never conceived of Miss Scheele as having any family or relations.' Clearly Christie was pleased with the character of an extraordinarily efficient, clever working woman, and didn't want to

waste such a gem on just one novel. Christie developed Anna Scheele's character into Poirot's secretary, Felicity Lemon.

Poirot's personality does not come out well in this book. Poirot has never bothered to talk to his secretary as a person, but just gave her instructions on his correspondence. One could think his motive kind, selflessly investigating the thefts at Hickory Road, to oblige Miss Lemon's sister. 'Did he wish to embroil himself in the troubles of Miss Lemon's sister? But it was very annoying and inconvenient to have Miss Lemon making mistakes..he did not admit to himself that he had been rather bored of late and that the very triviality of the business attracted him.'

Poirot was very smug with Inspector Sharpe: 'Conversation and again conversation! All murderers I have ever come across enjoy talking...our clever subtle murderer- he is so pleased with himself that sooner or later he says something unfortunate and trips himself up.' This never happens. 'We want to prevent murders – not wait until they have been committed.' Again Poirot is a woeful failure, and indeed one might hypothesise but for Poirot's meddling, three people might still have been alive at the end of this book. He intentionally ignites the fuse that sets off a chain of events that lead to murder. The finally damning utterance: 'It is beautiful" said Hercule Poirot 'so clear – so beautifully clear.' This is after he has finally worked out the solution. He has no sympathy for the dead, or the bereaved.

The most interesting aspect of this book from the sociological point of view is how a 1950s multiracial group interact, both with each other and with the inhabitants of London. Christie does not moralise, but lets her different characters speak with all the prevalent attitudes.

Miss Lemon discussed her sister with Poirot: 'having lived in the East so long she understands racial differences and people's susceptibilities. Because these students at the hostel are of all nationalities:...some of them actually black, I believe' 'Naturally,' said Hercule Poirot.

'Half the nurses in our hospitals seem to be black nowadays,' said Miss Lemon..'and I understand much pleasanter and more attentive than the English ones.'

Not only race but social class comes in for comment. The medical student, Len Bateson, had 'a Cockney accent and mercifully free from any kind of inferiority complex'.

'She's free, white and twenty-one.' Says Nigel Chapman about Celia Austin's engagement. 'That,' said Mr Chandra Lal, 'is a *most* offensive remark.'

Len Bateson, when interviewed by Inspector Sharpe, says that Nigel Chapman is 'a spiteful sort of cove..I think he might have a bit of a racial feeling. About the only one of us who has.'

The Greek owner of the rooming house, Mrs Nicoletis, is described unflatteringly: 'a big dark woman, still good-looking, with a bad-tempered mouth'. Mrs Nicoletis is extremely rude to Inspector Sharpe: 'Beast and pig of a policeman, I spit at you. I spit!', and about her own staff 'All Italians are liars and thieves!'

When Mrs Nicoletis discusses the students staying in her house with Miss Lemon's sister, who is her manager:

'these coloured students, these Indians, these Negresses – then they can all go..The colour bar, it means everything to these Americans ..- as for these coloured ones – scam'

'Not while I'm in charge,' said Mrs Hubbard coldly.

Elizabeth Johnston, Jamaican Law Student, is called Black Bess 'The nickname was an affectionate one and had been accepted as such by the girl herself.' Elizabeth is recognised as being the cleverest and most ambitious of all the students, and is keen to do good. Elizabeth learned about child nutrition in the Hospital even though she was studying Law. All the students, bar one, like Elizabeth. They are outraged when her Law notes are maliciously destroyed.

The West African student, Akibombo, is one of the few residents of Hickory Road who presents the Police with very useful information about the murder, by proving the white powder in two medicinal bottles had been switched.

Oblivious of Mrs Nicoletis' racial prejudice, the American Fulbright scholar Sally Finch and Akibombo walk to lectures together, and meet for lunch in Regent's Park.

The plot is complex. There are thefts by two separate students for different reasons, and three murders. The clue that Celia Austin must be the 'kleptomaniac' is she was the only person in the room 'to give a frightened gasp' implying guilt, after Poirot's lecture to the students.

The clue that Nigel Chapman must be the murderer, is not intentionally written in the text itself but *the way* Christie writes about him. Christie refers to this character as just *Nigel* from page 32 onwards, whereas all the other students in Hickory Road are called by their first and second names throughout. This shows Christie was thinking about *Nigel* more than any of the other residents, which is deeply suspicious.

There are several weaknesses of plot. The smuggling operation does not stand close scrutiny. Students 'hitchhike all over Europe', and become unwitting mules for cocaine or jewels placed secretly in the false bottom of their rucksacks. Quite how the contraband gets put in, without the students knowing, or how it is retrieved in the UK is never convincingly explained. This is sixty years before tracking people by using their mobile phone devices. Red hairs are found clutched in a dead girl's fingers, but she was hit from behind, so could not have grasped her assailant's hair. This clue is a red herring - or red hairing.

The missing diamond ring turns up in Valerie Hobhouse's soup. Poirot implies that as the servant served the soup to each student, Valerie must have slipped the ring into her own bowl. Also, the expensive diamond had been substituted for zircon, when it was returned, so Valerie must know about jewels to have organised the substitution, and be a thief.

Valerie Hobhouse 'looked tired'..'there were dark circles under her eyes' after the death of Celia Austin. Valerie was not sleeping. Although this point is not made in the book by any character, it is very odd that Valerie Hobhouse, who is part owner in

a successful Mayfair beauty salon, should be living in a basic student hostel. All the other occupants are students, or newly qualified young girls on the lowest NHS wages; a physiotherapist, and a pharmacy assistant. One would expect Valerie to have her own Mayfair flat? Valerie confessed to being a gambler. The news of Mrs Nicoletis' death, the owner of Hickory Road, affects Miss Hobhouse more than one might expect, Valerie's voice 'came harshly: Dead?' with a tremor in her husky voice. This is Valerie's first expressed emotion, she is otherwise a very cool customer. This betrays her inner turmoil; the owner of the rooming house, Mrs Nicoletis, was her mother.

When Nigel is at the Police Station, a telephone call comes through for him said to be from Miss Patricia Lane:

'Pat? Nigel here.' The girl's voice came.'

Christie does not say *Pat's* voice, and 'the voice' broke off. Christie is always fair. This is a clue that the phone call was not from Pat, but someone pretending to be Pat, to give Nigel a concrete alibi. Nigel and Valerie must be in the plot together.

There is no final Poirot dénouement, which many readers will think obligatory. One is left to assume that the murderer is indeed apprehended by the Police and then sentenced to death, but Christie prefers to end on lighter, happier notes with a female student proposing matrimony to a male medical student, and Miss Lemon's efficiency restored.

Sally and Len ask Akibombo to be their Best Man.

Achmed Ali is described as 'Egyptian and frightfully political'. 'You ask why does Egypt resent the Suez Canal?' One feels if only Anthony Eden had taken time to read this book in 1955, he might have averted the Suez Crisis of October 1956.

[SH]