

## The Pale Horse 1961

[This contains plot spoilers to this novel]

Agatha Christie was in her 70's, yet she attempts to capture the London of the 'Swinging Sixties' with a gusto that shows her open mind. This book was published in 1961. John F Kennedy has just been elected President of the United States, The Beatles first perform in the Cavern Club in Liverpool, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had become the first human in space, and Rudolph Nureyev defected to the West, whilst dancing in Paris.

The wind of change had swept through Europe after two terrible World Wars. Christie was a child in the 1890's, in a Victorian Upper Class household with nursery maids, and a debutante season to look forward to. Mrs. Miller, Christie's mother, wore dresses that did not show an ankle, let alone 5 inches of thigh. Some disgust for the modern world does peep through on occasion, disguised in the words of the narrator and chief sleuth Mark Easterbrook: The Off-beat generation 'the girls looked, as girls always did look to me nowadays, dirty.' Easterbrook remembers a girl he sat next to recently at a restaurant 'she smelt of perspiration-soaked wool and also strongly, of unwashed hair.' This feels like the authorial assessment of a 70 year old woman, rather than the fictional hero, Mark Easterbrook, a testosterone fuelled young man.

Christie firmly begins this novel in the trendy coffee bars of the Kings' Road, Chelsea, complete with a new red neon sign across the window and the Espresso machine, which 'hissed like an angry snake.' While Mr Easterbrook enjoyed his coffee, two girls in their 20s behaved badly: 'fought each other like fishwives, screaming abuse hysterically', over the same worthless young man. The proprietor, Luigi, explained afterwards to Mr Easterbrook, that one of the girls, Thomasina Tuckerton, was 'filthy rich' but 'lives in a slummy room halfway to Wandsworth Bridge...they seem to get a kick out of living the way they do.' This is the 'Chelsea set. Where heiresses ..marry corner boys on the make.' Female liberation. Mr Easterbrook also reflects on modern machinery noise 'domestic noises of to-day dish-washers, the refrigerators, the pressure cookers, the whining vacuum cleaners' as well as jet planes, tube trains and heavy road transport.' This again seems more authorial than the mind of a bright young bachelor, who would be excited by this Brave New World.

Christie seems to be regretting this attempt at cutting edge modernity, bringing in her alter-ego, Ariadne Oliver, in the next scene who remarks 'Beatniks and sputniks and squares and the beat generation. I don't write about them much because I'm so afraid of getting the terms wrong. It's safer, I think, to stick to what you know.' Indeed, most of the action takes place on safer ground: the sleepy English village of Much Deeping, complete with the wonderfully competent, empathic Vicar's wife, Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

The Pale Horse is often sited as the novel in which Christie shows her love and knowledge of Shakespeare, since at the start of the novel Mark Easterbrook has been to a production of *Macbeth* at the Old Vic. Easterbrook and his friends discussed the subject of evil and how it is portrayed. They agreed that the

production had good points but the witches were 'awful. They always are.' Easterbrook argued that a theatrical production of *Macbeth* would be much scarier if the Witches were not like unreal wicked pantomime characters but 'just sly quiet old women.' Easterbrook's Oxford friend added 'There's still a witch in every village in rural England'. The action then moves to the Pale Horse at Much Deeping where three sly, quiet old women practice black magic. Clearly Christie was trying to write about witches in a convincing but frightening way, as a modern interpretation of *Macbeth*. I have argued that the plot of *Death Comes as the End 1944* owes much more of a debt to Shakespeare and his Scottish play, rather than just the transposition of three witches to a modern English village. Indeed, Mark Easterbrook owes more of a debt to *Hamlet* when he used a Mousetrap ploy on a suspect. Easterbrook suddenly springs the name Pale Horse at the end of a conversation. 'There wasn't any doubt of the reaction. Panic, sheer panic, showed in those pale eyes. Beneath the make-up, her face was suddenly white and afraid.' Easterbrook took this as positive proof of guilt, exactly like Prince Hamlet testing King Claudius' reaction to watching a play about a murder.

Much Deeping is the sort of rural English idyll where one fully expects Jane Marple to pop up any moment, judging the best sponge at the Summer Fete, or staying with her friends the Dane Calthrops at the Vicarage. Miss Marple would have happily fitted in, knitting in the 'Vicarage sitting room {which} was big and shabby..here there would always be time to talk'. Indeed, there is evidence that Christie did an original sketch of this book *with* Miss Marple, and then changed her mind. This may explain why the Dane Calthrops were in the vicarage at Much Deeping.

Christie chose to return to her original 1920s *Secret Adversary* thriller template, with Mark Easterbrook as the Tommy character and Katherine Corrigan (Ginger) as Tuppence. The female lead is known by her nickname, Ginger, rather than her real name, like Tuppence forty years earlier. Again, just like Tuppence, Ginger had an incisive intelligence and courage to put her own life on the line to catch the murderers. After the death of Mrs. Davis, and the immediate murder of her confessor, Father Gorman, Ginger says: if they could investigate Mrs. Davis's background 'we might find out how she knew what she did know.' One wonders why Detective-Inspector Lejeune did not think of this?

Christie's idea of making murder a legal 'bet' or proposition is brilliant. The struck-off lawyer, Mr Bradley of Birmingham, a suitably oleaginous front man, explained the heist to Mark Easterbrook, who posed as a man who wants to murder his wife. Mr Bradley suavely reassures the nervous Easterbrook:

'Everything I recommend is perfectly legal..A man can bet on anything he pleases..whether the Russians can send a man to the moon....You bet me a certain sum that Aunt Eliza will be hale and hearty still next Christmas, I bet you that she won't. If you're wrong, you – pay me! The odds work out usually at five hundred to one.'

The rest of the novel is taken up with Easterbrook and Ginger working out how these people could successfully eliminate all the victims to order, without any police or

doctors realising that a murder had been committed. The novel is an indictment on the new consumerism that had taken hold in England after World War II rationing ended on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1954. The murdered Mrs Davis worked for Customers' Reactions Classified (C.R.C.): 'asking people what soap powder they used, or flour...there's a craze for that sort of thing nowadays.' The neatness of the plan was a woman calls at the door doing 'consumer research', to find out the victim's preferences. A few days later, an unremarkable workman calls to read the metre, to enter the house. The 'workman' replaces the victim's breakfast cereal or some other consumable with an identical pack laced with thallium. This 'workman' is the mastermind behind the whole enterprise, a pharmacist called Mr Osborne. The victim dies of thallium poisoning. Meanwhile the beneficiary has had to travel to The Pale Horse in Much Deeping, to participate in a theatrical séance with three witches that live in that house. The beneficiary believes the victim was killed by the witches' magical powers.

Mr Venables, who also resided in Much Deeping, was the main 'red herring' for the role of criminal mastermind. Mr Venables 'had polio and is semi-crippled, so he has to go about in a wheel-chair.' He was suspiciously rich, which also allows Christie to vent her spleen on the subject of taxation. The Inland Revenue were a very longstanding thorn in Christie's side; she'd been hounded for unpaid tax on royalties for about 20 years. 'Death duties and taxation' had put an end to large unearned incomes. The 'Inland Revenue {had been} smelling around Venables for some time. But he's clever' remarked the Police surgeon, Dr Corrigan. Having been a Police Surgeon myself, I have no idea how Dr Corrigan would have access to such information.

Mr Venables talked to Mark Easterbrook, over a splendid tea : "The curse of living in England is undoubtedly our system of taxation. I have thought very seriously of late of going to live in Bermuda." Mr Venables is portrayed as a man who knows what he wants and how to get it: "I must have the best {cook}...Naturally – one has to pay! I pay." Easterbrook enjoyed the 'smoky China tea, and delicate cups..hot buttered anchovy toast, and a plum cake of the luscious old-fashioned kind that took me back to tea-time at my grandmother's house when I was a little boy. Venables was deeply thoughtful about riches:

'It all depends..on what one wants out of life....Just the getting of money – that is really the be all and end all for most rich men...Do they ever stop to ask themselves why? They don't know...They never stop to enjoy...I knew what I wanted. Infinite leisure in which to contemplate the beautiful things of this world, natural and artificial."

Anyone this thoughtful, clever and rich *has* to be a criminal, but Venables was not mixed up in the Pale Horse murders. Venables may have been a bank robber, but one too intelligent to have been caught. He lived on, a free man, greatly enjoying his wealth, and avoiding paying Income Tax. It is one of the few examples of a criminal not being arrested in a Christie novel. One feels Christie was on his side.

Ariadne Oliver glances tangentially through this book like a Deus ex-machina, in a very similar pattern to Poirot at the end of *Cat among the Pigeons*, the preceding novel. Oliver did give Mark Easterbrook the absolutely critical information about

thallium toxicology, so saving Ginger's life in the nick of time: 'the simple truth behind the Pale Horse. Poison. No witchcraft, no hypnotism, no scientific death rays. Plain poisoning!'

However brief Oliver's appearances are in this book, they are always humorous, and a valuable insight into Christie's personal thoughts as an author [*John Bull Magazine* 1956]: 'I never take my stories from real life, but the character of Ariadne Oliver does have a strong dash of myself.'

'I only write very plain murders,' Ariadne Oliver said apologetically. Her tone was of one who says 'I only do plain cooking.' Oliver's 'maid was an efficient dragon who guarded her mistress from the onslaughts of the outside world.' One wonders if this was a fervent wish of Christie's; she was known to be very shy.

When Mark Easterbrook first goes to Ariadne Oliver's house, it is to ask her to open a village Church fete 'Never again' is Oliver's firm reply, describing to Mark what happened in *Dead Man's Folly* 1956. However, Oliver was stuck with her plot, and ruminates out loud about the fictional characters:

'Monica. The nicer I try to make her, the more irritating she gets..such a stupid girl..smug , too!'

She offers Mark a cigarette 'Or drink. I wish I did. Like those American detectives that always have pints of rye conveniently in their collar drawers. It seems to solve all their problems.'

'Say what you like, its not natural for five or six people to be on the spot when B is murdered and all to have a motive for killing B – unless, that is, B is absolutely madly unpleasant and in that case nobody will mind whether he's been killed or not, and doesn't care in the least who's done it.'

Mark Easterbrook unintentionally solves Oliver's plot problem by mentioning a cricket match at the village fete, which gives her a brilliant idea for her new book, *The White Cockatoo*. Oliver can suddenly see a way forward with her plot: people will be watching the cricket and not notice a white cockatoo. Rather than effusive thanks, Oliver is swept away into her own imagination and says peremptorily to Easterbrook:

'I'd really like you to go away.. At once.'

Christie is harsh with her descriptions of all three witches who live at the Pale Horse. Miss Thyrza Grey 'a tall, slightly masculine figure in a tweed coat and skirt' with Irish and Scottish ancestors, 'hence the second sight'. Thyrza seems to manage the affairs of all three women, and often does most of the talking to 'clients'. It's not at all clear if this is a sexual 'ménage a trois', or three slightly unconventional women conjuring black magic who have come together for their common spiritual interest. Bella, the maid, with 'a witless primitive face', is the representative of Old English magic. Bella was 'a half-witted old peasant woman – like hundreds of other women of her kind – inbred, untouched by education or a broader outlook'. Sybil Stamfordis 'dark, greasy hair, a simpering expression and a fish-like mouth' had explored yoga in India and wore a green sari. Sybil is of Greek extraction, and as her name implies, really does go into a trance-like state. Here indeed are the three scary witches as 'sly quiet old women'. Except, they are not at all scary. Perhaps if Christie had given them more

cunning and charisma, like Mr Venables, they might have been powerful and frightening. I found the description of the séance extremely tedious. Miss Grey tells Easterbrook that ‘People seek magic for two reasons ‘Love and death’’. In *Macbeth* this is not true: Macbeth demanded to know his future from the three weird sisters when he seeks them out.

It is also not at all clear how much of the ‘murder by order’ operation these three witches knew about, or whether they were being duped by Mr Osborne, into being an elaborate exotic front for his operation. There is no explanation of how Osborne knew Thyrza, Sybil and Bella, or how he knew and communicated with Mr Bradley. At the unsatisfactory end of the book, Ginger is cleaning the pub sign of The Pale Horse, when the house is clearly empty. There is no mention at all of the three witches, so the reader is left in the dark as to whether they have been arrested or, as in the Scottish play:

‘Whither are they vanished?  
Into the air, and what seemed corporal  
Melted, as breath into the wind.

[SH]