

## The Clocks 1963

(This contains plot spoilers to this novel)

*The Clocks* is unique in Christie's oeuvre, in that Poirot works out what *sort* of man the dead person must have been, and who had murdered him, without ever knowing the corpse's identity. Poirot sits in his square armchair and puzzles the problem out. Poirot's manservant, George, and secretary, Miss Lemon, are still faithfully serving their master at 203 Whitehaven Mansions. This is a stylistic link to the previous *The Pale Horse* [1961] where Ariadne Oliver illuminates the method of murder, without any hands on experience. Mrs. Oliver is mentioned by Poirot several times in *The Clocks*, but does not appear in person.

In another similarity with *The Pale Horse*, a dashing young man is the main storyteller and principal sleuth. In *The Clocks* the hero is 'Colin Lamb', a Special Branch agent, with a false name; a wolf in sheep's clothing. Lamb's mission is to track down a Communist cell that has infiltrated the nearby Royal Navy Base. The cell were passing military secrets to the Russians. Just as in all good spy plots, the previous British Agent on this assignment had just been killed at the start of the book, with only a scrap of paper with a 61 M and a drawing that looked like a crescent moon in his pocket. Lamb was looking for 61 Wilbraham Crescent, when an attractive young secretary, Sheila Webb, came screaming out of number 19, having discovered a murdered man, and collapsed in his arms. Such was fate.

There are many clues that Sheila was set up, but the reader is puzzled as to why she should be targeted. The boss of the typing bureau said Sheila was asked for by name, but Miss Pebmarsh, the blind owner of No 19, denied ever making the phone call. One of Sheila's childhood clocks has been put in the room with the murdered man, pointing to her involvement. It seemed too much of a coincidence that Sheila should come running out *just* as a Special Branch Agent should be strolling by on the pavement. Colonel Beck, Colin's boss at Special Branch, and Detective Hardcastle of the local Crowdean Police both separately speculated that Sheila must somehow be involved in the murder. This rather brilliant authorial misdirection which threads through the book focuses the reader's attention on Sheila, rather than who would have framed her, and why her in particular.

Colin Lamb has fallen in love with Sheila, at their first embrace, and set out to prove her innocence.

'I minded about this girl – minded in a way I had never minded about a girl before. It wasn't her beauty – she was pretty, pretty in a rather an unusual way, no more. It wasn't her sex appeal – I had met that often enough – had been given the full treatment.

It was just that, almost from the first, I had recognized that she was *my* girl. And I didn't know the first damned thing about her!'

Lamb realised 'Sheila was a liar. If I wanted Sheila I must accept her as she was – be at hand to prop up the weak places. We've all got our weak places. Mine were different from Sheila's.'

This is a common Christie theme: young people falling in love at first sight or touch, without knowing anything about each other. Sometimes it works out well, other times, not. Other Christie heroines are also untruthful {see *They Came to Baghdad*}, or Tuppence as far back as *The Secret Adversary* (1922), forty years earlier. The reader never finds out about Colin's past sexual experiences, despite the surprising line about him being 'given the full treatment', whatever that might be. Although *The Clocks* is contemporaneous in the 'Swinging Sixties', with working girls wearing

stiletto heels, Colin is old-fashioned, thinking about matrimony by the end of the book, rather than simply cohabiting.

In a further authorial misdirection, Colin discussed with Inspector Hardcastle another inhabitant of Wilbraham Crescent; Mr Bland, who lives at No 61, after they've interviewed him together:

'a crooked little builder isn't what I'm after..And as regards your murder case, you've got the wrong kind of murder. Now if Bland was to feed his wife arsenic ..in order to inherit her money...' This is the truth, warped into a misdirection, as only Christie can manage so masterfully.

Inspector Hardcastle replies:

'We'll see about that when it happens. In the meantime we've got to get on with *this* murder.' So the reader crosses Bland off her mental list of suspects. However, hidden amongst the exuberant descriptions of Bland's garden as 'a model of suburban perfection in a small way. There were beds of geraniums with lobelia edging. There were large fleshy-looking begonias, and there was a fine display of garden ornaments – frogs, toadstools, comic gnomes and pixies', are *clues*. Mrs. Bland has inherited money recently as the last surviving member of her Canadian family. Bland pompously says to Lamb and Hardcastle:

'I've toyed with the idea of going to live in Spain or Portugal or even the West Indies. Saves income tax.'

Christie could not help taking a swipe at the Inland Revenue, her personal *bête noire*. Again this is a brilliant distraction, so much so that I missed Mrs. Bland saying 'my sister lives here' [Crowdean] on first read through, when she is supposed to be the *sole* surviving family member. Mrs. Bland, 'had all the airs of an invalid who accepts her invalidism with a certain amount of enjoyment', says about living abroad 'I shouldn't care at all for a foreign doctor', which is an odd turn of phrase for a Canadian. It is much more probable from the lips of a typical British xenophobe, with very little experience of foreign travel. An omission in the text is that none of the characters notice her lack of Canadian accent. Usually, even though people have lived in a country all their adult life, their foreign accent and idioms do not leave them. Poirot himself, who has lived in London since the First World War, nearly half a century ago, is still unmistakably 'foreign'. Indeed, in *The Clocks* Christie makes linguistic fun of two *au pairs*, one Danish and one Norwegian. If Mrs. Bland, a Canadian, had come to Britain to help fight in the Second World War, twenty years earlier, as an adult, one would think she still had a soft Canadian accent. Both Hardcastle and Lamb feel the Blands are crooked, but missed all these vital clues.

Christie was fair, since Poirot gleaned these clues through Lamb's diligent notes. Lamb threw down the gauntlet to Poirot to solve this crime without leaving his armchair. Poirot never met the suspects, or inspected the crime scene. Poirot entirely feeds his little grey cells on the information in Lamb's transcripts of the interviewees' conversations.

Poirot instructs Lamb:

'Let them talk to you. And from their conversation always, somewhere, you will find a clue. They may be talking about their gardens, or their pets or their hairdressing or their dressmaker, or their friends, or the kind of food they like. Always somewhere there will be a word that sheds light.'

Poirot, exactly 40 years earlier in *Murder on the Links*, scornfully described Inspector Giraud as a 'fox hound'. In *The Clocks*, Poirot returns to the canine analogy for detectives:

'I said that it was not necessary to be the foxhound, the blood hound, the tracking dog, running to and fro upon the scent. But I will admit that for the chase a dog is necessary. A retriever, my friend. A good retriever...I am not like the English,

obsessed with dogs. I, personally, can live without the dog. But I accept, nevertheless, your ideal of the dog. The man loves and respects his dog. He indulges him, he boasts of the intelligence and sagacity of his dog to his friends. Now figure to yourself, the opposite may also come to pass! The dog is fond of his master. He indulges that master! He, too, boasts of his master, boasts of his master's sagacity and intelligence. And as a man will rouse himself when he does not really want to go out, and take his dog for a walk because the dog enjoys the walk so much, so will the dog endeavour to give his master what that master pines to have. To solve any problem one must have the facts. For that one needs the dog, the dog who is a retriever, who brings the pieces one by one and lays them at –

'At the feet of the master' {said Lamb}

'One's facts must be accurate, and newspapers are seldom, if ever accurate...But in Colin here, I have a dog of remarkable ability..He has always had a remarkable memory.'

So Poirot, in the comfort of his armchair, sipping *sirop de cassis*, or a tisane, or drinking a cup of hot chocolate, read through Colin Lamb's meticulous notes and thought out the solution.

Poirot then tasks 'Miss Lemon to write a letter to an old lawyer friend of mine, Mr Enderby', consult marriage records at Somerset House, and send a 'certain overseas cable'. When Lamb remonstrates that this was cheating, Poirot replied with dignity: 'to verify for me the answers that I have already arrived at. I ask not for information, but for *confirmation*.'

The least convincing clue is related to poor, foolish Edna Brent. Christie often has a slightly unfortunate, unattractive young girl as a second murder victim in her novels. A girl who has seen or heard something, but doesn't quite realise the gravity of what she knows until too late, just as in *Hickory Dickory Dock*, *The Mirror Crack'd* or *Dead Man's Folly*. The Cavendish Secretarial and Typing Bureau had eight employees: we are told four lunched 12.30-1.30, and four 1.30-2.30, so someone would always be in the front office. On the day of the murder, the early group were all off on afternoon assignments away from their desks. Edna Brent tore off the stiletto heel from her shoe so couldn't walk, as she set off for lunch. Edna 'bought a bun and ate in the office instead'. If Miss Martindale, the terrifying boss of the bureau was going to pretend a call had come through at 1.49pm, you would think she would have checked the front office was empty first. Or arranged for her sister to phone in, pretending to be Miss Pebmarsh at the time in question. Edna, being in the office by the phone, knew that no external call came in during her lunch hour. Edna was confused, since Miss Martindale was 'never wrong', and would never lie to the Police.

Edna 'wanted to talk to Sheila Webb away from the bureau'; a huge clue that it must be Miss Martindale's coroner's evidence that Edna was worried about.

Edna, like Cherry in *The Mirror Crack'd* 1962, is poor with her use of pronouns when talking to a young Police Constable, when she eventually plucked up the courage to confess:

'I don't see how what she said can have been true.'

This sealed Edna's fate before Inspector Hardcastle could clarify her grammar. Three women gave evidence at the coroner's court: Miss Pebmarsh, Sheila Webb and Miss Martindale.

Edna 'knew there was no telephone call at all.' It was the classic Sherlock Holmes clue of the dog that did not bark. Poirot had mentioned the Holmes story to Lamb earlier in this novel to refresh the reader's memory.

Poirot: 'in Miss Martindale we have the Lady Macbeth of this crime, a woman who is ruthless and unimaginative...But very efficient. A good planner.'

I would dare to disagree with Poirot on all his statements; Lady Macbeth's conscience and florid imagination lead to her madness and death. Also Miss

Martindale should have made adequate plans for this telephone call, which was critical to her plot, to get Sheila Webb to 19 Wilbraham Crescent. It should have been a real telephone call, as the 'pretend' one led to Martindale's detection and downfall. However, a discussion about Christie, Lady Macbeth and Shakespeare is for another essay.

Inspector Hardcastle guessed that Mrs. Rival had lied about the identity of the dead man and gave her a very hard time:

'Perjury..a serious offence in law..You could get into trouble, even go to prison.'  
Witnesses are not on oath in coroner's court, but would be when giving evidence in a criminal court for a murder trial. Christie has other characters who deceive a coroner's court intentionally: in *Taken at the Flood* 1948, and *Witness for the Prosecution* 1953. Mrs. Rival opts to blackmail the murderer, and is murdered. Should the Police be held responsible? They watched as the murder took place on a crowded platform in the rush hour, failing to identify the assailant. This is another example of the inept Police causing a death, rather than saving lives, as in *Cat among The Pigeons*, or Poirot stirring up trouble and causing several murders in *Hickory Dickory Dock*. Christie was rather fond of middle-aged alcoholic women, as useful characters; Mrs. Rival has many echoes of similarity with Mrs. Nicoletis from *Hickory Dickory Dock* 1955, although their temperaments are very different.

At the end of Lamb's first discussion with Poirot, Poirot unexpectedly closes his eyes and quotes:

'The time has come, the Walrus said,  
To talk of many things.  
Of shoes and ships and sealing wax,  
And cabbages and kings.  
And why the sea is boiling hot  
And whether pigs have wings.'

This is supposed to be annoyingly obtuse advice on how to solve this murder mystery. Colin Lamb at least knows this verse from Lewis Carole's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Things are different from what they seem. Poirot is a great analyst of patterns. Of the circumstances Poirot says 'The whole thing is melodramatic, fantastic and completely unreal. It is the kind of thing that could occur in the writings of such people as Garry Gregson. Since this murder has so many fantastic trappings to distract one it must be really very simple...A man has been killed.' Poirot goes on to explain at the dénouement 'A pattern familiar because I had just been reading such patterns...I attended this week a sale of authors' manuscripts. Among them were some of Garry Gregson's...it is all here!..He did not live to write this one – but Miss Martindale, who was his secretary, knew all about it. She just lifted it bodily to suit her purpose.' Poirot also speculated about the demise of Garry Gregson 'he left her [Miss Martindale] a legacy- did he not? How and of what did he die, I wonder?'

The 10 year old girl, Geraldine Mary Alexandra Brown, lives opposite 19 Wilbraham Crescent, and has a pair of very intelligent grey eyes, and some excellent binoculars to alleviate her boredom whilst waiting for her broken leg to mend. Geraldine told Lamb about the new Snowflake Laundry van delivery to No.19 at the right time for the murder: 'In a great big basket, too. Much bigger than the usual one.' This is another Christie nod to Shakespeare. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Sir John Falstaff manages to escape a house hidden in a very large laundry basket. With an *Alice through the Looking Glass* twist, the Laundry Basket was delivering a body to this house.

The final clue to find the Communist spy cell is when Lamb realised that 61M and a crescent on a scrap of paper, looked at upside down [not reflected through a looking glass, but a 180 degree rotation], reads 19 W – standing for 19 Wilbraham Crescent. Miss Pembmarsh, the blind teacher, was the spymaster, with Braille notes as her safe coding.

You might think a Special agent would have considered the possibility of reading the scrap upside down early on, or that the other special agent might have had the sense to write out the address of a communist cell properly and post it to his boss before he was killed. I have also wondered why the oysters were ever foolish enough to accept an outing along the beach with the walrus and the carpenter.

[SH]