

The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side
1962

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

This classic Christie whodunnit was published three months after the death of Marilyn Monroe. The central character, Marina Gregg, had been a major Hollywood star. Her fourth husband – she is now on her fifth – is a playwright who, according to Miss Bence, will be called great, one day, and Marina was desperate to have a baby. About twelve years before the novel opens Marina became pregnant. The baby suffered from severe congenital learning disability and has been cared for in an institution since birth. After the birth, Marina had a breakdown, defaulted on many of her contracts, and became addicted to drugs. She can never again become pregnant (though we never learn why this is the case) and she cannot bear anyone to talk to her about children or happy families.

The world of Marina Gregg seems a long way from that of Miss Marple but in order to enjoy a more tranquil life, Marina and her latest husband, Jason Rudd, have bought Gossington Hall – Mrs Bantry's old house in St Mary Mead.

In the three Marple novels published between 1951 and 1961 Miss Marple has played surprisingly minor roles in the solving of the crimes, perhaps because none of those novels was set in her home village. *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* returns us to St Mary Mead and, as though gaining confidence in being back home, Marple herself is an altogether more active and vibrant presence. This is the Miss Marple of *A Murder is Announced* published twelve years earlier, although she has aged. She now has a live-in carer, the irritating Miss Knight: '... we mustn't catch cold, must we? ... I'll pop out and make you a nice egg-nog. We'd like that, wouldn't we?' To which Miss Marple replies, somewhat tartly: "I don't know whether *you* would like it. *I* should be delighted for you to have it ..'

Young people accept the world in which they are brought up. Older people see the present in contrast with the past: they may prefer aspects of the present, they may prefer the present overall, but nevertheless that present is always in comparison with what used to be. In the early 1960s, when this novel was written, rural Britain was changing rapidly and Christie, now in her early 70s, spends some time in detailing these changes. The traditional houses, with their 'old world charm', are popular but are being updated with an extra bathroom, new plumbing, electric cookers and dish-washers. Shops frequently change hands and are immediately modernised. The comfortable chairs that used to be placed near the counters to allow elderly customers a rest are being removed. Worse still, for many of the older residents, is the new supermarket. 'Packets of things one's never even *heard* of ... *And* you're expected to take a basket *yourself* and go round looking for things – it takes a quarter of an hour sometimes to find all one wants - and usually made up in inconvenient sizes, too much or too little.' Medicine is going the same way: 'The young doctors are all the same' says Miss Marple, '... whatever's the matter with you, you get some kind of mass produced variety of new pills. Pink ones, yellow ones, brown ones. Medicine nowadays is just like a supermarket – all packaged up.' But worst of all, the new housing estate – 'The Development' – 'like a neat model built with child's bricks.'

Christie has an eye for detail that sets her novels solidly in a specific location, in time and place. She rarely makes an authorial comment and when we sense the author's attitude it is often one of quiet amusement at the foibles and fashions of the times. After Miss Knight leaves Longdon's – the curtain shop in St Mary Mead – the assistant 'gave her attention to a young woman in tight trousers and a sail-cloth jersy who wanted plastic material with crabs on it for bathroom curtains.'

Servants are, for almost everyone, a thing of the past. Miss Marple's wealthy old friend, Mrs Bantry, reminisces about when she and her late husband lived at Gossington Hall with 'Only four servants! *Only!* Those were the days!' And when Miss Marple mentions the Lauriston's parlourmaid, Miss Knight replies: 'If you're talking about parlourmaids that must have been a *very* long time ago. I've never heard of a parlourmaid for many years now.' Domestic help is still available – indeed Miss Marple employs Cherry Baker for a few hours a week. Cherry Baker lives in 'The Development' and her husband earns good wages but she does housework and cooking for Miss Marple since, 'owing to the snares of Hire Purchase', she is always in need of ready money. Miss Marple draws comparisons between Mrs Baker and the parlourmaids she had employed in the past. Unlike Mrs Baker they had not been good at taking telephone messages, and were no good at all at arithmetic, but they could make a bed, turn a mattress and wash up delicate china with gilt edging. Mrs Baker's method of washing up was 'thrusting everything into the sink together and letting loose a snowstorm of detergent on it'. The parlourmaids of the past 'had had skills, rather than education' and Miss Marple muses that it is odd that nowadays it is the educated girls who go in for domestic chores – young married women like Mrs Baker, university students in the vacation, and students from abroad: girls *au pair* – that is 'on a par with' the family.

Miss Marple also notes the ways in which language develops, the changes sometimes driven by the latest pretensions. She used to visit her uncle who lived in a cathedral close, and in another novel (*They do it with Mirrors*) she is described as an 'English girl from a Cathedral Close.' A Close is an originally gated area around a cathedral generally owned and managed by the cathedral administration rather than by the civic authorities. Marple dislikes the way in which, on the modern housing estate, the word 'Close' has been used in the names of many of the roads – Aubrey Close, Longwood Close – presumably to make the roads sound grand and exclusive, and treating the word as though it means nothing more than a *cul de sac*. She is amused by the new sign describing the local hairdresser as a 'hair stylist'. She also tries to correct Cherry Baker who calls Miss Marple's sitting room 'the lounge'. 'It's the drawing-room, Cherry.' Cherry compromises on calling it the 'living room'. The modern reader will note changes between the vocabulary and fashions of the 1960s and the present day. The word 'neurasthenic' (used to describe Marina Gregg) is all but obsolete, and few now call the TV 'the telly'. Detective-Inspector Cornish describes the gay business partner of photographer Margot Bence as her 'pansy partner'. The word *imbecile* would no longer, I hope, be used for someone who has suffered congenital brain damage, but it should be remembered that the terms *imbecile*, *moron* (another word used in this novel), and *idiot* were once medical terms denoting specific ranges of cognitive ability. Indeed, the word *moron* was coined for this purpose, becoming only later a term of abuse. How will the term *learning disability* come to be viewed? Ardwyck Fenn is voicing a view, widely held in 1960s Britain, when he says: 'Plenty of good Georgian houses in England ...Gossington Hall is a purely Victorian mansion. Where's the attraction in that?'

Miss Marple, however, if she is old-fashioned she has the wit to know it. Early in the novel she muses to herself: 'One had to face the fact: St Mary Mead was *not* the place it had been. ... You could blame the war (both the wars) or the younger generation, or women going out to work, or the atom bomb, or just the Government – but what one really meant was the simple fact that one was growing old.'

This novel is enjoyable for its sly humour and the acute observations of a Britain that is rapidly changing as the generation which has little or no memory of the Second World War grows towards adulthood. It is also a very good *whodunnit* – the best Christie for almost a decade.

The victim is Heather Badcock – a generally harmless woman whom Miss Marple describes as self-centred but not selfish, kind but not considerate. Heather helps other people, and does not want more for herself than is reasonable, but she sees only her own point of view and is blind to that of others. In the central scene of the book Heather Badcock is talking to, or rather *at*, Marina Gregg, when Marina suddenly stares with what Mrs Bantry calls the Lady of Shalott look: 'as though she'd seen something awful. Something frightening, something that she could hardly believe she saw and couldn't bear to see.' A little later Heather Badcock is dead from poison put in her glass of daiquiri – or rather in Marina's glass, for Heather spilt her drink and Marina offered Heather her own untouched glass. The initial question for the reader is whether the intended victim was Heather or Marina.

In two previous novels Christie has used, to very good effect, a plot where it looks as though the actual victim was killed by mistake and that the intended victim was someone else, when in fact that someone else is the murderer. Perhaps because she realises that readers of this novel might assume, correctly as it turns out, that it has this same central plot, she goes to greater lengths than usual to misdirect the reader. At first we are handed a potential murderer of Heather Badcock: her husband, and a motive – that he is sweet on another woman. The reader may think that this is too obvious a plot and start to wonder whether Marina was the intended victim. Then Marina's doctor suggests that the poison was intended for Marina. By half way through the novel Miss Marple herself says that it would seem 'almost certain' that the intended victim was Marina Gregg. A few pages later this supposition is being treated as fact. 'Well, there's always the husband,' said Craddock. 'Back to husbands again' said Cornish, with a faint smile. 'We thought it was that poor devil, Badcock, before we realised that Marina was the intended victim. Now we've transferred our suspicions to Jason Rudd.'

Two chapters later we have the equivalent of a double bluff. Miss Brewster – another Hollywood star – says to Inspector Craddock: 'I expect whoever it was meant to kill [Heather Badcock] ... I expect someone comes into money when she dies.' Craddock replies: 'She hadn't any money, Miss Brewster.' 'Oh well, there was some other reason' Miss Brewster responds, rather lamely, and immediately the conversation returns to discussing who might have a motive for killing Marina.

Towards the end of the novel Miss Marple seems to take it for granted that Marina was the intended victim – indeed she talks as though Marina had already been killed. She says: 'It

seems to knock out the idea that Marina Gregg's killer could have been someone in humble circumstances..'

In addition to these stylistic misdirections, aimed at ensuring that the reader's perspective is dominated by the idea that Marina was the intended victim, Christie creates a number of red-herrings. We learn, for example, that Marina adopted three children but abandoned them when she became pregnant and that they would now be young adults. Any of these people might hate Marina because of the way she had treated them. And so the reader's attention is focussed on which young adults might have been one of her adopted children, thus distracting the reader from doubting whether Marina was the intended victim in the first place. Christie has used a very similar red-herring plot in a previous novel.

Christie is mistress of combining a genuine clue, with a misdirection. Miss Marple asks Craddock: 'What about the children?' and Craddock says: 'there is only one. An imbecile child in a sanatorium in America.' Miss Marple replies: 'No, that's not what I mean. It's very sad of course. One of those tragedies that seem to happen and there's no one to blame for it. No, I meant the children .. [whom] ...Marina Gregg adopted.' This exchange combines a clue and a misdirection. A clue because the key to the motive for the murder is that there *is* someone to blame for the congenital brain damage to Marina's biological child, or at least Marina believes so. A misdirection because the reader's gaze is directed towards the children whom Marina adopted and the possibility that one of them might be trying to murder Marina.

In many of Christie's novels the detective, at a point before the denouement, sums up some aspect of the case. Often this summing up contains both a clue and a misdirection. So it is here. Miss Marple, in conversation with her general practitioner, Dr Haydock, is wondering why no one has admitted to having noticed the murderer's putting the large number of pills into the drink that killed Heather Badcock. Marple suggests three possible reasons. The first is that whoever noticed did not realise that what they saw was important. The second reason Miss Marple explains as follows: 'it would be .. audacious but possible, for someone to pick up that glass which as soon as it was in his or her hand .. would be assumed to be his or her own drink and to add whatever was added quite *openly*. In that case .. people wouldn't think twice of it'. The doctor sums up Miss Marple's first two reasons: 'Possibility One, a moron. Possibility Two, a gambler – What's Possibility Three?' And so the reader has almost dismissed possibilities one and two and focuses on possibility three – which is that someone did see and is blackmailing the murderer. The next chapter – which immediately follows this discussion – is about a possible blackmailer. And so we are misdirected. Possibility two, however, was a clue – although with its own misdirection – for the most obvious person who could have picked up Marina's glass and added the tablets quite openly would have been Marina herself.

A third example of a clue that is combined with a misdirection is when Gladys (who was working as a caterer at the party when Heather Badcock was killed) is talking to Cherry Baker about the moment when Heather Badcock spilt her drink, over her dress, which prompted Marina to offer Heather her own drink. Gladys says: 'I'm almost sure she did it on purpose.' From the context it seems as though the 'she' refers to Heather and this is how Cherry understands it. Neither Cherry, nor Miss Marple (when Cherry reports the

conversation to her), can understand why Heather would spill her drink over her own new dress, nor why Gladys decides to tell the Italian butler, Mr Giuseppe, about it and ask him what she should do. When, a little later, Giuseppe is found murdered the reader knows that somehow Gladys' observation is important but Christie misdirects the reader to wondering why Heather would want to spoil her own dress. Later Miss Marple talks, apparently inconsequentially, about a parlourmaid whose grammar was bad and who would use pronouns in most confusing ways. The combination of Gladys' statement and Miss Marples' inconsequential chatter is one of those arch clues which Christie does so well. Gladys too uses pronouns loosely and when she said 'I'm almost sure she did it on purpose' she was referring not to Heather but to Marina. Readers who pick up this clue and realise that Marina purposely caused Heather to spill her drink will know that Marina is the murderer.

This novel is a masterclass on ways to misdirect readers but it is also well clued. The two key clues are laboured again and again: first that Marina was desperate to have a child and continues to be overwhelmed by the tragedy that the one child she had eleven or so years ago, is severely learning disabled; second that Heather Badcock, about a dozen years ago, in Bermuda, got up from her sick bed, put on plenty of make-up, and met Marina Gregg to obtain her autograph. If the reader successfully puts these two pieces of information together then the solution may fall into his lap.

There are further clues. After the murder Marina wants it to appear that someone is still trying to kill her (although she is rather unwise, I think, to do this). She claims to have received a threatening note and when Inspector Craddock asks where that note is now she says that she shoved it into the pocket of a coat. Without any attempt to check the coat she says that it is not there now and probably fell out. The reader is given a significant clue after Marina takes a sip of coffee, says it tastes bitter and drinks no more. Her husband (Jason Rudd) has the coffee analysed and finds that it contains arsenic (thus apparently supporting the idea that someone is still trying to kill Marina). Jason Rudd shows his secretary, Ella Zielinsky, the report from the analysis. Ella looks down at the report. '*Arsenic*. She sounded incredulous ... So Marina was right about it tasting bitter?' Jason replies: 'She wasn't right about that. Arsenic has no taste. But her instinct was quite right.' Ella responds: 'And we thought she was just being hysterical.' Here again we see Christie giving a clue but immediately distracting us. We are told the important point that arsenic has no taste - so Marina could not have tasted it in the coffee. She was lying. But Christie gives us no time to think. For if we did we would realise that it makes little sense that Marina's instinct would cause her to find the coffee bitter. And Ella's response keeps the reader's mind focussed not on the very odd fact that Marina apparently tasted a poison that has no taste but on the idea that she was indeed being poisoned.

One of the difficult skills for a whodunnit writer is to make the clues fair but the solution opaque. This calls for fine judgement. For those readers who consider the possibility that Marina might have murdered Heather there is the stumbling block of motive. Christie keeps a part of the jigsaw puzzle back – a key piece of information. We know Heather met Marina at about the time that Marina was pregnant and that Heather was ill at the time, but not so ill that she could not force herself out of bed to meet Marina. We also know that Heather put on a lot of make-up, perhaps to cover a rash.

In the early 1960s when *Rubella* was known as German measles ('German' here being *germane* meaning related to, or similar to, measles) the congenital effects of the infection, if acquired in early pregnancy, would have been widely known. The development of almost universal vaccination in the late 1960s has made the disease and its congenital effects fortunately much less common. We see here that even the clueing of detective stories can fall victim to the effects of time. Was it unfair on readers for Christie to assume that they would know of the clinical features of German measles (the mild fever, the facial rash) and of its potential congenital effects? Christie herself seems uncertain. Near the end of the novel she gives clues to help the reader to identify the illness from which Heather Badcock was suffering when she met Marina in Bermuda. These clues become more and more obvious until finally she tells all. But it is not clear at what point the reader should commit to his solution: it is not clear when the denouement begins.

The plotting in this novel is pretty sound. There is one oddity of timing. Miss Marple in a rare instance when she probably saved a life - she more frequently causes people to be murdered by her sleuthing - visits Gladys and gives her some money to go away to a secret destination. She does this because she realises that Gladys is in danger of being murdered. She must have visited Gladys before the police find that Gladys has disappeared. It is inconceivable that Miss Marple, at that visit, would not have found out what Gladys had meant when she spoke to Cherry about the purposely spilled drink. And yet in a later chapter Miss Marple is still puzzling over why Heather Badcock would have spilt her own drink and ruined her own dress.

The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side is dedicated: 'To Margaret Rutherford in admiration.' Rutherford had played Miss Marple in the film *Murder, She Said* (based on *4.50 from Paddington*) and released in 1961. Rutherford would go on to play Miss Marple in three further films. I have a great fondness for Margaret Rutherford from some of her other films, and partly for that reason she remains my favourite screen Miss Marple. Objectively speaking, however, I think that it is Angela Lansbury in the rather good 1980 film made of *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* who best captures that difficult combination of steely ruthlessness, fluffy warmth and intelligent humour that makes up Marple's complex character.

It is, however, not Margaret Rutherford, but the ghost of Marilyn Monroe - another great comic actor - that hangs over this novel. Marina Gregg, like Monroe, is an intelligent and glamorous Hollywood actor who has married many times, and on one occasion married a great playwright. Even the names are similar: Marilyn and Marina differ in only a few letters; and Monroe and Gregg are both of Scottish origin. At the end of the novel Marina is dead from an overdose of barbiturates: was it suicide or did her husband kill her? The novel was first published on November 12th 1962. On 4th August 1962 Marilyn Monroe had died from an overdose of barbiturates, probably suicide but some believe she was murdered. Did Christie have the opportunity to write the ending after Marilyn Monroe's death? Or had she somehow intuited, from imaginatively entering into the mind of a film star, that sad ending?

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