Elephants Can Remember
1972
Main Blog

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

Identical twins, one might think, would be a gift for the writer of detective fiction, enabling alibis, misidentifications and assumed identities to conceal the plot. So attractive are they that in one TV adaptation of *At Bertram's Hotel* a pair of identical twins is introduced where no such characters exist in Christie's novel. In *The Big Four* (1927) Hercule Poirot himself, we are told, is one of identical twins. Although this fact helps conceal part of the plot it does not play a role in masking the solution to the main puzzle. In *The Murder on the Links* (1923) there are twin sisters who look similar to each other. One plays an important part in the denouement, and in Hastings' life, but the fact that they are twins is not an important part of the plot. *Elephants Can Remember*, the very last Poirot novel that Christie wrote, is the only one of her novels in which there is a pair of identical twins and in which this relationship is germane to the solution. Now more than 80 years old Christie is still experimenting with new plot ideas.

Elephants Can Remember, however, illustrates perhaps why Christie avoided identical twins for so long. Although such twins are superficially attractive to a writer of whodunnits it is very difficult to use them to fool a reader. Once the reader knows that a pair of twins is identical she will be on the look out for occasions in the story when one twin may be confused with, or assume the identity of, the other. And so it is with this novel. Few readers will not give serious thought to the possibility, or indeed probability, that the person shot dead in what appears to be a double suicide is not Lady Molly Ravenscroft but her identical twin sister, Dolly Jarrow. Christie even underlines the possibility with a lot of talk of wigs, and with a housekeeper who is 'rather blind and rather deaf'.

Some readers, particularly if they are afficionados of earlier Christie, may be thinking that Christie must be bluffing, but it turns out that she is not. The woman shot is indeed the twin sister, Dolly. So is the whole thing a double bluff? Does Christie think: the reader will assume that it is too obvious a plot if the identities of the twin sisters are mixed up and so the reader will conclude, wrongly, that they are not. At her best Christie might have pulled off such a double bluff but it would require there to be an interesting red-herring plot so that readers wrongly plump for the single bluff. There is, however, no such red-herring plot and one must conclude that Christie no longer has the intellectual energy to lay a cunning false trail for the reader to follow.

There are some attempts by Christie to lead the reader astray. There is the suggestion that both Lady Ravenscroft and her husband were attracted to other people, and that this might be a motive for why one of them murdered the other and then committed suicide. We learn that Dolly Jarrow disliked children and had possibly killed her own son. So when we are told that the biological son of Mrs Burton-Cox had died in an accident we wonder whether it was Dolly who had caused the accident, thus giving Mrs Burton-Cox a motive for murdering her. There is no evidence, or further clue, however, that this is the case. Desmond Burton-Cox,

whom Mrs Burton-Cox adopted after the death of her son, is the biological son of an actress and pop-singer who became very rich and died eighteen months before the novel opens. She has left most of her fortune to Desmond, in trust until he is 25 years old. This seems to be the start of a red-herring plot but it is not developed and fails to provide a motive for the murders.

Many whodunnit writers create a central plot providing motive and means for the murder or murders, and give one or two clues, and leave it at that. Christie, in her better novels, creates not only the central plot, and many clues, but also misdirections, and well-wrought sub-plots that act as red-herrings. Time and again she brings these together in a tight weave in which the true solution can be discovered by an act of insight on the part of the reader, but such discovery is difficult. She has a rare intelligence able not only to conceive good central plots and to properly provide clues, but also to enter into the perspectives of readers and to create further plots that will deceive without being unfair. In *Elephants Can Remember*, however, she shows little of this intelligence. There is the central plot, a few clues, and then a number of sub-plots none of which has been worked through.

The origin of the central plot is the idea of identical twin sisters. The story as it is presented to the reader is that Dolly Jarrow was staying with her twin sister and brother-in-law near the coast. One day she went out for a walk and accidentally fell over the cliff and died. Eighteen days after this accident the other sister, Lady Margaret Ravenscroft, and her husband, Lord Alistair Ravenscroft, are found near the same cliff both shot dead with Lord Ravenscroft's pistol. The question is whether the Ravenscrofts' deaths were a suicide pact or whether one murdered the other and then committed suicide, or whether someone else shot them both. The obvious alternative version, given that the sisters are identical twins, is that it was Lady Ravenscroft who fell over the cliff, perhaps pushed, and Dolly Jarrow who was with Lord Ravenscroft when they were both shot.

This latter version is supported by the fact, often repeated, that Lady Ravenscroft possessed at least four wigs, two of which appear to have been bought after the first, supposedly accidental, death. I say 'appear' to have been bought after that death because there is inconsistency in the evidence. A Mrs Buckle had worked for the Ravenscrofts until 'a month or two' before the shooting. She doesn't mention the apparent accident presumably because she was no longer in the Ravenscrofts' employ when it happened, but she does remember that Lady Ravenscroft had several wigs including one with curls. This suggests that Lady Ravenscroft must have possessed these wigs before that accident. The extra wigs, however, including the one with curls, were bought after the apparent accident, at a time when Mrs Buckle was no longer with the Ravenscrofts. Christie may have introduced this inconsistency simply as evidence that people are often inaccurate about timing when remembering events from several years previously. I suspect, however, that she was unaware of the inconsistency – it is not the only one in the novel. Christie seems to have lost that tight grip on detail that is so impressive in most of her work.

Setting aside any inconsistency, most readers, I suspect, will consider the 'obvious alternative' –that it was Lady Ravenscroft who fell over the cliff, and Dolly Jarrow who, together with Lord Ravenscroft, was shot. But what then? The reader who explores that possibility – which indeed turns out to be what happened – is still left with many different

plausible accounts of events, and there are none of the usual Christie clues to ensure a unique best solution. In the end we learn that Dolly murdered her sister by battering her with rocks and stones, perhaps because she loved her brother-in-law and also because of a kind of madness. Lord Ravenscroft found the dying Lady Ravenscroft who pleaded with him that her sister should not be arrested by the police. So Lord Ravenscroft pretended that it was Dolly who had died and using the wigs to help the disguise, passed Dolly off as his wife for eighteen days. He then shot Dolly, in a kind of mercy killing somewhat similar in motive to the killing of Lennie by George in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. And then he shot himself.

This solution hangs together but there are other possible solutions as to who killed whom some of which do not require any misidentification of the twin sisters. For example, Lady Ravenscroft may have killed her sister knowing that Dolly had killed at least two children and remained dangerous. Lord Ravenscroft may have then murdered his wife, because he had loved Dolly, and then committed suicide. Or Dolly may have killed both Ravenscrofts and then committed suicide. Perhaps Mrs Burton-Cox murdered them all because Dolly had killed her son and the Ravencrofts were protecting Dolly from facing justice.

Christie's plot, in short, originated from the promising idea of identical twins being mistaken for each other, but she failed to develop interesting red-herrings or clever clues.

Elephants Can Remember is the last novel in which Ariadne Oliver appears. She is a friend of Poirot's and is a character in seven of Christie's novels. She writes successful detective stories and is generally a kind, humorous, slightly scatty person with an intuitive intelligence that even Poirot respects. Her personality is well captured by Zoë Wanamaker in the Poirot TV series that stars David Suchet. In this novel, however, we see Ariadne Oliver as selfishly insensitive towards her godchild, Celia, the daughter of Lord and Lady Ravenscroft, a godchild she barely even remembers. When Celia's parents were killed, twelve years before the novel opens, Celia was no more than twelve years old. At the time Ariadne Oliver was on a lecture tour in America. She read of the deaths in the newspaper. In remembering this period of her life she says to Celia, who is now in her mid-twenties: 'I was interested [in the deaths] because I had known your father and your mother. I was at school with [your mother]. … She did ask me to be godmother to one of her children. You.' Ariadne Oliver goes on to say that she was shocked by the deaths, 'and then I forgot it. … the whole thing passed out of my mind.' Mrs Oliver does not seem to consider that it would have been appropriate to contact her god-daughter and give her support after the sudden and tragic deaths of her parents. She goes on to say: 'It was some years later when I next saw you and naturally I did not speak of [your parents' deaths] to you.' The extraordinary reply of Celia to this is: 'No, I appreciate that.' Such avoidance of anything to do with emotion, and such distance between godparent and godchild, might perhaps have been common in Christie's youth around the beginning of the twentieth century, but it seems out of touch with the 1960s and 1970s, and reflects badly on Ariadne Oliver's character.

One of the themes to which Christie returns again and again is the issue of nature versus nurture. When the issue is raised, most of Christie's characters emphasise the significance of genetics – of nature. 'I think now we realize that heredity does more than environment' says Mrs Burton-Cox to Poirot, who agrees with her.

Studies of identical twins have long been the gold standard for trying to tease out the relative contributions of nature and nurture. Such twins have (almost) the same genes as each other and so any differences between them are likely to be due to differences in nurture. Poirot says of Dolly: '[She] was a tragic figure. By no fault of her own but by some accident of genes, of birth, of hereditary characteristics, she was always mentally unstable.' It seems that Poirot believes that Dolly suffered from a genetically determined mental disorder (of an unspecified nature) – indeed she is Christie's only mentally ill murderer. If this disorder were genetically determined, however, then Dolly's twin sister, Lady Ravenscroft, should also suffer it. But she does not. On the evidence in this novel, genetics might still play a role in making someone vulnerable to the disorder but it cannot be deterministic.

Celia is concerned to find out the truth about her parents' deaths because she wants to know whether there might be some 'mental flaw' that she could have inherited. At the end of the novel Poirot seems to believe that Celia has no reason for this worry. Although her father did in fact murder Dolly, this was forgiveable, perhaps even the right thing to do, because it was a mercy killing, and Celia's mother never killed anyone. Poirot appears to hold three logically incompatible beliefs: first that Dolly's 'mental flaw' is strongly genetically determined; second that Celia's mother is Dolly's identical twin sister; and third that Celia is at little risk of inheriting her aunt's 'mental flaw'. The reader has to think the unthinkable: that Poirot's superb intelligence is, at last, vulnerable to the ravages of age.

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