

A Murder Is Announced

A notice appears in Chipping Cleghorn's local newspaper: "A murder is announced and will take place on Friday, 29 October, at Little Paddocks, at 6.30 pm. Friends accept this, the only intimation." This surprises Letitia Blacklock, owner of Little Paddocks. She prepares for guests that evening. Some villagers appear at the house, showing definite interest. As the clock strikes 6.30, the lights go out in the parlour, and a door swings open, revealing a man with a blinding torch who demands the guests "Stick 'em up!" Shots are fired into the room, and when the lights go back on Miss Blacklock is bleeding from the ear and the masked man is dead on the ground. Miss Blacklock's companion, Dora "Bunny" Bunner, recognises the man as Rudi Scherz, a Swiss man who worked for a local hotel and had recently asked Letitia for money.

The crime scene, together with interviews with all who witnessed it, lead police to drop the case, but Inspector Craddock is not satisfied. He learns that Scherz had a criminal background of petty theft and forgery. Then Craddock meets Miss Jane Marple, at lunch with his boss and Sir Henry Clithering at the hotel where Scherz worked. Craddock brings Miss Marple in to help with the case after her suggestions prove correct. Scherz's girlfriend Myrna Harris tells Craddock that Scherz had been paid to appear as the holdup man — a fall guy, as Miss Marple had said. He had not told her who paid him. The police feel the real target is Letitia Blacklock, and that Scherz was killed by his unknown employer to prevent him talking.

Inspector Craddock discovers oil on the hinges of a door into the parlour that was thought to be unused. Bunny mentions that a table had been placed against that door until recently, further supporting the theory that someone slipped out behind Scherz, come around through the other door and shot at Letitia. The motive for an attack on Miss Blacklock is straightforward, as she will soon inherit great wealth. She worked for the financier Randall Goedler, whose estate passed to his wife Belle, who is near death. When Belle dies, Miss Blacklock will inherit. If she predeceases Belle, the estate goes to Pip and Emma, twin children of Sonia, Randall's estranged sister. Sonia broke with her brother 20 years ago upon her marriage to Dmitri Stamfordis.

Craddock travels to Scotland to meet Belle. He learns that neither Belle nor Letitia knows where Sonia, Dmitri, Emma, or Pip are now. No one knows what the grown twins look like. Belle tells about Letitia's sister Charlotte who had a goitre. Their father, a doctor, did not believe in goitre surgery. Charlotte became a recluse as her goitre worsened. Dr Blacklock died shortly before the Second World War, and Letitia gave up her job with Goedler to take her sister to Switzerland for surgery. The two sisters waited out the war in Switzerland. Charlotte died suddenly of consumption, and Letitia returned to England alone.

Miss Marple takes tea with Bunny, who suspects Patrick Simmons; he, his sister Julia, and the young widow Phillipa Haymes are all staying at Little Paddocks as paying guests. Bunny mentions that the positions of two decorative lamps in the house — a shepherd and a shepherdess — had been swapped. Their tête-à-tête is interrupted when Letitia arrives.

Letitia holds a birthday party for Bunny, inviting almost everyone who was at the house when Scherz was killed. Mitzi, the cook, makes her special cake, nicknamed "Delicious Death". After the party, Bunny has a headache and takes some aspirin from a bottle in Letitia's room. The next morning, Bunny is found dead, poisoned.

Craddock finds that any photos of Sonia Goedler have been removed from Letitia's albums. He finds old letters from Letitia to Charlotte in the attic at Little Paddocks. Miss Marple compares one to a current letter, and when the vicar's cat shorts out a lamp at the vicarage by spilling water on the cord, the final clue falls into place for Miss Marple.

Miss Blacklock receives a letter from the real Julia Simmons, and she confronts her house guest, who reveals herself to be Emma Stamfordis. She denies attempting to kill Miss Blacklock, and says she has not seen her twin Pip since they were toddlers when their parents separated, each taking a child.

Misses Hinchcliffe and Murgatroyd, present at the Scherz shooting, work out that Miss Murgatroyd had stood behind the opened door and was not blinded by the torch. She could see who was in the room. They realise that the person who left the room when the lights went out came around behind Scherz and fired the shots. Just as Miss Murgatroyd realises who was the one person not in the room, the phone rings, summoning Miss Hinchcliffe away. As Hinchcliffe drives away, Murgatroyd runs out, shouting, "She wasn't THERE!" On the way back home, Miss Hinchcliffe offers Miss Marple a ride, and together they discover Murgatroyd's body, strangled. Hinchcliffe tells Miss Marple of their discussion.

Inspector Craddock gathers everyone at Little Paddocks, where Mitzi claims to have seen Miss Blacklock shoot Scherz. Craddock dismisses her claim and accuses Edmund Swettenham, a neighbor of Letitia in love with Phillipa Haymes, of being Pip. However, Phillipa admits that she is Pip. Craddock then accuses Edmund of wanting to marry a rich wife by murdering Miss Blacklock, so Phillipa would be wealthy. As Edmund denies this, a scream is heard from the kitchen, where they find Miss Blacklock attempting to drown Mitzi in the sink. When Miss Blacklock hears Dora Bunner's voice telling her to stop, she releases Mitzi, breaks down, and is arrested by Sergeant Fletcher.

Miss Marple explains that it was Letitia who died of pneumonia in Switzerland. Knowing that her sister was in line to inherit a fortune, Charlotte posed as Letitia and returned to England the previous year, moving to a village where few people knew her. She avoided people like Belle Goedler who knew Letitia well and covered her throat with strings of pearls to hide the scars from her goitre surgery. Rudi Scherz had innocently recognized her, having worked at the Swiss hospital where she had her surgery, and Charlotte killed him to prevent him talking to anyone. She hired Scherz and had him put in the advertisement to gain witnesses. She oiled the door and frayed a lamp cord, which she later shorted by pouring water on it when everyone was distracted by the clock chiming, so the room would be suddenly dark. She then came behind Scherz and shot him, cutting her own ear with nail scissors before returning. That night, she replaced the frayed lamp with a new one (shepherd vs. shepherdess, as Bunny said).

Bunny knew both sisters from childhood. Charlotte had taken Bunny into her confidence about the inheritance but not about the murder of Scherz. Bunny sometimes called her "Lotty" (Charlotte) instead of "Letty" (Letitia). Charlotte feared that Bunny might inadvertently reveal the truth, so she had poisoned some aspirin tablets that she offered to Bunny. Amy Murgatroyd had realised that Miss Blacklock was the one person whose face was not illuminated by Rudi Scherz's torch. Charlotte had overheard Hinchcliffe and Murgatroyd's conversation and killed Murgatroyd as soon as Hinchcliffe left.

Miss Marple persuaded Mitzi and Edmund to play parts in tripping up Charlotte Blacklock. Phillipa's admission to being Pip was not expected, and Inspector Craddock kept up the act to claim Edmund was after Phillipa's money. Mitzi had agreed to serve as the bait, and Miss Marple imitated Bunny's voice to cause Charlotte to break down and confess. Ultimately, Mitzi takes up a new post near Southampton. Phillipa and Emma inherit the Goedler fortune. Edmund and Phillipa marry and return to live in Chipping Cleghorn.