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The Balkan Theme in *The Secret of Chimneys*

Abstract

In *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) Agatha Christie uses the all too familiar Balkan stereotypes of backwardness and brigandage, but not – as was usually the case at the time – as an Other to illustrate British virtue, but as a mirror to British vice. It is Britain, not the fictional Herzoslovakia, that is a nation of brigands. Herzoslovakia remains relatively unknown, as none of the novel's scenes take place there, but it is described by disinterested observers as democratic and prosperous. In London, however, the Foreign Office plans to overthrow its government to secure oil rights promised by a royal heir-in-exile to a London-based financial consortium.

Keywords: Christie, Balkans, Romania, oil, brigands

1. Balkan Oil

Agatha Christie's *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) has been faulted for being on the one hand a frothy mix of Anthony Hope and P. G. Wodehouse (Thompson 143) and on the other a mishmash of popular ethnic, national and regional stereotypes – including those of the Balkans (Todorova 122). It is, however, a far more subtle work than such accounts suggest. Though the influence of Hope and Wodehouse can certainly be seen in the novel's story of princes in disguise (reminiscent of *The Prisoner of Zenda*)^[1] and a country house setting that would have reminded readers of *Blandings*,^[2] its main plot addresses an important theme^[3] –and in exploring it Christie takes the Balkans very seriously. Oil has been found in the Republic of Herzoslovakia and the Foreign Office, represented by George Lomax, has secured the pledge

of the exiled Prince Michael Obolovitch "to grant certain oil concessions" to a consortium led by Herman Isaacstein if the Obolovitchs are restored to power. In other words: to secure those concessions the British Government has committed itself to the overthrow of Herzoslovakia's government. The Foreign Office's interest in the Balkans might not have surprised Christie's readers. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company had held a monopoly on the extraction, refining and sale of Iranian oil since 1901, and a similar monopoly on reserves in south-eastern Europe would have been welcome at time when large profits were to be made from investment in Romanian oil (Benson 55, 267-68; in the years after the War, British investments in the Romanian oil industry were the largest of any foreign country: Hichens 428). However, even so, the idea of financing a coup to secure British interests – though it might have made sense to the Foreign Office and the City – was not one Christie expected her readers to accept.

Christie was, as it happened, deliberately vague about the location of Herzoslovakia. The name suggests a location a little to the east of Vienna (modern Slovakia was Upper Hungary until 1918, when it became part of Czechoslovakia), and not surprisingly, when she revisited the country some fifteen years later for "The Stymphalean Birds" (1940), staff at an international hotel spoke German. However, we really need to travel further east to find the country's imagined location. The narrator of the 1940 story places it in the Balkans (208), and in *Chimneys* Anthony Cade (a native of the country) does the same. As he explains to a friend:

It's one of the Balkan States.... Principal rivers, unknown. Principal mountains, also unknown, but fairly numerous. Capital, Ekarest. Population, chiefly brigands. Hobby, assassinating kings and having revolutions. Last king, Nicholas IV, assassinated about seven years ago. Since then it's been a republic. (7)

Cade's humorous account might be thought to make Herzoslovakia merely Balkan in the sense of being primitive, tribalistic and "lagging *behind civilized Europe*" (Cioroianu 212, author's emphasis; cf. Goldsworthy, "Invention" 34-35), a place "disturbingly strange" that reveals "the otherness of our ourness" (Kristeva 201), and we should not doubt that Christie's readers would have thought of the Balkans in this way. Even a decade later, readers of detective fiction

would take it for granted that the countries of the Balkan peninsula were “still in the primeval dark” (Tey 70). Perhaps, to some extent, Christie did so as well. However, this did not mean that she was, as Maria Todorova puts it, merely offering “a crystallized collective image of the Balkans” in *Chimneys* (122). Though contemporaries had only vague ideas about the geography of Eastern Europe,^[4] Christie was not so uninformed: the reference to Ekarest clearly suggests the Romanian capital, Bucharest, and the resources that interest the British suggest Romania itself.^[5] Though her readers might have had confused images of the Balkans, Christie did not.

There are of course Serbian dimensions to the novel,^[6] with its tale of the Obolovitch dynasty, and the murder of Nicolas IV and his Queen Varaga at the instigation of the Comrades of the Red Hand, broadly echoing that of the Serbian Obrenović, and the 1903 assassination of Alexander I and Queen Draga by the Black Hand. There were differences between the stories. Draga was not, like Varaga, a “little Parisian actress” (*Chimneys* 198), but a woman who had a place in society in her own right; the Black Hand was not recruited from the masses, as the Comrades of the Red Hand would be, but drew members from the officer class and the government. Nevertheless, the similarities are hardly coincidental. Though Prince Carol of Romania’s affair with Elena “Magda” Lupescu in the 1920s and the time he spent with her in Paris might have suggested details of the Nicholas-Varaga liaison, the source of the Obolovitch story was clearly Belgrade. Herzoslovakia could be thought a version of Serbia, were it not that it was Romania that had the oil. For plot reasons, oil is a recent discovery in *Chimneys* (10), but in real life the deposits of the Carpathian foothills, the largest in continental Europe, had been exploited from 1857, and by 1900 Romania had become the third largest oil-producer in the world – the United States and Russia were the first and second – and as noted above, Britain was very much interested in its resources (for the background, see Pearton).

Christie would not be the only one to write in the inter-war years of Balkan oil and British attempts to control it. In Margery Allingham’s *Sweet Danger* (1933) we learn how Averna’s landlocked oil reserves had held no interest for Britain until an earthquake gave the country an Adriatic coastline (30).^[7] Then the possibility that Averna might become a fueling station for

Mediterranean shipping makes the question of exploration rights one of importance, and gives Albert Campion and his companions the challenge of establishing that Avena is British, a hereditary possession of the Earls of Pontisbright. Strictly speaking, they are not involved in regime change (though one suspects that Campion would not have hesitated to topple a throne)^[8] but revolution is on the agenda four years later in Eric Ambler's *Uncommon Danger* (1937). The price of Stefan Saridza's criminal assistance in helping right wing forces gain power in Romania will be "the immediate use of that power to revise the oil concessions in Pan-Eurasian's favour" (111). Nothing in *Chimneys* is so explicitly corrupt as the bargain between Pan-Eurasian and Saridza, but Christie's story is a dark one nonetheless for (as noted) the British Government and Isaacstein's consortium are working together to manage a coup in order to gain the oil rights they desire.

2. Balkan Politics

Opposing the Foreign Office and the City are the Herzoslovakian revolutionaries mentioned above, the Comrades of the Red Hand. Peter J. Fitzpatrick has dismissed them as "a picturesque, if by and large ineffectual, ... group" (25) and others have agreed (e.g., Van Dover 89). However, such reactions do not do justice to them. Though the Comrades' plan to assassinate Nicholas IV when he visited Paris had failed (they had approached an actress and offered her a huge sum if she would decoy him to some agreed upon spot, but she "was cleverer and more ambitious than her employers suspected" and persuaded the King to marry her and make her queen [*Chimneys* 198]), they still toppled the throne:

The Comrades of the Red Hand, furious at her betrayal, twice attempted her life. Finally they worked up the country to such a pitch that a revolution broke out in which both the King and Queen perished. Their bodies, horribly mutilated and hardly recognizable, were recovered, attesting to the fury of the populace against the lowborn foreign queen. (199)

As this account comes second-hand from master criminal "King Victor," a Fantômas figure albeit one who does not kill, it may be thought suspect. However, King Victor had persuaded a

group of American financiers that he was Prince Nicholas Sergius Alexander Ferdinand Obolovitch, and could promise them the rights to Herzoslovakian oil that they had failed to secure from his cousin Michael, and presumably he had done the research necessary for him to sustain the role. Further, as some of his gang had been Comrades before they joined him, his account no doubt reflects their understanding of what had happened seven years before.^[9] Certainly, when Cade hears the explanation he accepts it as true, even though he had originally understood the story quite differently:

Nicholas married [the actress] in the cathedral at Ekarest with a couple of unwilling archbishops to do the job, and she was crowned as Queen Varaga. Nicholas squared his ministers, and I suppose he thought that was all that mattered – but he forgot to reckon with the populace. They're very aristocratic and reactionary in Herzoslovakia. They like their kings and queens to be the genuine article. There were mutterings and discontent, and the usual ruthless suppressions, and the final uprising which stormed the palace, murdered the King and Queen, and proclaimed a republic. (9-10)

In short, if King Victor is to be believed, and popular outrage *had* been worked up by the Comrades of the Red Hand, the Comrades' organization was efficient enough for Cade to mistake the uprising for a manifestation of popular anger.^[10]

Needless to say, this recognition of the Comrades' efficiency went against the conventional wisdom that revolutionaries were really bungling fools who could be appropriately written-up as such^[11] – wisdom that Christie had herself exploited in "Jane in Search of a Job" (1924), where a jewel thief disguising herself as the Grand Duchess Pauline of Ostrova counts on her hearers accepting that revolutionaries were "vodka-soaked brutes [without] any sense of proportion" (114). Cade was merely reflecting popular conviction when he suggested that the Comrades engaged in "pointless killings" and so was Superintendent Battle when he described the Comrades' fondness for executing traitors as picturesque (*Chimneys* 149).^[12] Christie consciously undercuts the contempt shown by her characters with the facts of the case:

Nicholas IV died without blame accruing to the Comrades – and revolutionary action that achieved its objectives so efficiently can hardly be dismissed as comedy.

The Herzoslovakians who are loyal to the Obolovitch family are comic figures, however. As Maria Todorova points out, Prince Michael's personal servant Boris Anchoukoff is a ridiculous figure (122, thinking of *Chimneys* 171), while Baron Lolopretjzyl (called Baron Lollipop by Cade: 44) can hardly be taken any more seriously. He does little except preen himself and spout pro-Obolovitch propaganda. His rhetoric is "bosh" – just like that of George Lomax and the Foreign Office (63) – because it is based on unfounded claims. We see this when the Baron meets Cade:

"I represent in London the Loyalist party of Herzoslovakia."

"And represent it admirably, I am sure," murmured Anthony. . . .

"The moment has come for the restoration of the monarchy, in abeyance since the martyrdom of His Most Gracious Majesty King Nicholas IV of blessed memory."

"Amen," murmured Anthony. "I mean, hear, hear."

"On the throne will be placed His Highness Prince Michael, who the support of the British Government has." (42-43)

What is important to the Loyalists is the financial and diplomatic support that will put them back in power. The question of legitimacy – of popular support – does not concern them.^[13]

Of course, it is hard to imagine how popular support could figure in Loyalist plans, given that they were trying to overthrow what Lord Caterham calls a "broad-minded and democratic form of government" (26);^[14] but noting that only begs the question as to why, given that support in Herzoslovakia would be doubtful at best, the British Government thought the restoration of the monarchy so desirable. After all, as a well-briefed Chief Constable would observe in a later Christie novel, it is a matter of political reality that, "When it comes to large interests in oil, mineral deposits, all that sort of thing, we have to deal with whatever government's in power" (*Cat Among the Pigeons* 263); that being the case we might have expected the Foreign Office

and the consortium to deal with the Republicans in Herzoslovakia rather than risking a public relations disaster in casting around for an Obolovitch heir.^[15]

Presumably the British Government feared that the government in place would not come to terms. That was certainly the danger in the real world. In 1924 the Romanian government had announced plans to nationalize the country's oil resources and thereby reduce foreign participation in the economy (Hitchens 410; for details, see Pearton 116-25), and neither Lomax or Isaacstein would have wanted this to happen in Herzoslovakia.^[16] After all, the oil apart, it is hard to come up with reasons for regime change. Although the American geographer Isaiah Bowman had argued in 1921 that Romania and Poland could form a buffer zone, extending from the Black Sea to the Baltic, to prevent the expansion of Bolshevism (294), and such a strategy required governments hostile to the Left, there is no evidence that Christie envisaged a similar role for Herzoslovakia – or that the Republicans in Ekarest looked to Moscow for guidance. Neither should we suppose that in a fit of paternalism she had felt that the fissures in Herzoslovakian society (arguably similar to those dividing the "two Romanias" – for this, see Boia, *Romania* 95) could best be addressed by an authoritarian ruler whose iron hand was clothed in a glove of royal velvet.

It was perhaps natural for Cade, who turns out to be the real Prince Nicholas, to think that one could "coerce [people] into behaving more or less decently to one another" by the use of "judicious force" (*Chimneys* 305).^[17] As he reflected, high-handedness ran in his family's blood (42). However, other texts by Christie indicate some uneasiness about such ideas,^[18] and we might well wonder whether Superintendent Battle was right to assume that this would make Cade "a very fine king" (305). There is certainly no reason to assume that Christie believed that if Britain was well-served by a monarchy, the same would necessarily be true for Herzoslovakia. A hundred years before her birth, Edmund Burke had argued that "The foundation of government [was] ... laid, not in imaginary rights of men ... but in political convenience, and in human nature; either as is universal, or as it is modified by local habits or social aptitudes" (534), and though we should not imagine that Christie had read these words, their presumption that no political system was by definition right in every situation fits well with the

social conservatism that Johann Hari finds in her work. Certainly nothing in the novel suggests that Herzoslovakia had to be a monarchy to prosper – all that we learn is that it had to be one for Britain to get access to its oil.

3. Balkan Brigands

By the end of the novel, Cade is revealed to be the real Prince Nicholas and, married to Virginia Revel, the widow of a diplomat formerly posted to the British Embassy in Ekarest, has decided to return to Herzoslovakia. Cade is too apolitical to be entirely happy with the idea, but his wife is delighted at the thought – looking forward to “[t]eaching the brigands not to be brigands, and the assassins not to assassinate, and generally improving the moral tone of the country” (*Chimneys* 310), and apparently finds nothing wrong in taking the consortium’s money to make this possible. The project itself, possibly suggested by the example of Queen Marie of Romania,^[19] is perhaps little more than the stuff of colonial fantasy – a fantasy in which it is enough for the English-educated to enter a Balkan country and take control for its future to be secured (Goldsworthy, *Inventing* 60). Nevertheless, we might suspect some irony in its expression, given Christie’s hostility to the City.

Such hostility was perhaps little more than we might expect of her day and class, with its suspicion of capital and resentment of wartime profiteering (Keynes 235; cf. Peel 6).^[20] As Ross McKibbin has observed, the post-war years “were among the few occasions in modern English history when many members of the middle class were hostile to some forms of property and some kinds of capitalism” (45). Wartime fears that a range of domestic disturbances were the work of German *agents provocateurs* (Doyle 972) had been quickly refocused on those who, it was believed, sought to profit financially from civil unrest and popular novelists had been quick to take note (see, for example, Buchan 37; Sapper 247). Christie might be thought to be doing little more than following the trend were it not that she was, as Michel Houellebecq has noted, uncompromisingly hostile to those who betrayed class or country (97). In 1922 she had found it natural to assume that a man like Sir James Peel Edgerton, K.C. (the mysterious Mr. Brown of *The Secret Adversary*) would seek to play on the weaknesses of individuals and nations,

overthrow the existing order, and then take power himself, and two years later she had made Sir Eustace Pedler, MP ("the Colonel") the mastermind behind "jewel robberies, forgery, espionage (the latter very profitable in war-time), sabotage, [and] discreet assassination" (*The Man in the Brown Suit* xi). We might well suppose, therefore, that she would view a financial consortium's interest in Herzoslovakia cynically²¹ or that, when Bundle and her father speculate as to who killed Prince Michael, Lord Caterham opts for Isaacstein.

"Meaning—"

"The all-British syndicate."

"Why should Mr Isaacstein murder him when he'd come down here on purpose to meet him?"

"High finance," said Lord Caterham vaguely.... (*Chimneys* 104)

Though such suspicions make no sense at this point in the novel, they are there. Mademoiselle Brun (the former Queen Varaga, and the real murderer) relies on them when, later in the novel, she plants the revolver used to kill Prince Michael in Isaacstein's bag. Indeed, they are not entirely unjustified. "There are always unscrupulous tools to be got hold of," Isaacstein would admit when he thought that Wall Street was behind Michael's death (137); he too, he explains, knew where to find them.

When all of this is remembered, we can hardly miss the irony of a plan to teach Herzoslovakian brigands not to be brigands (310) being financed by commercial brigandage in London. After all, by the time that Christie wrote, the association of the City with brigandage was conventional; indeed, over twenty years before, one of Edith Durham's informants found it perfectly natural to contrast Albanian brigands ("poor men ... [who] rob to live, and do so at the risk of their lives") with the financiers of London who "rob to obtain luxuries by lies and false promises" (Durham 286-87; for brigandage in the Balkans as a logical response to the insecurities of nomadic pastoralism, see Gerolymatos 98; cf. Hobsbawm 72). As the Pirate King had boasted in *The Pirates of Penzance* (Gilbert and Sullivan 5), "contrasted with respectability, [piracy] is comparatively honest". (In "the cheating world," he tells Frederic, "pirates all are well-

to-do".) Although Virginia was no doubt naively blind to the irony of her position,^[22] we should not imagine that Christie was.

Neither should we doubt that the irony was deliberate. Christie's first steps towards the creation of the Comrades of the Red Hand – the use of Russian terrorists in the back-story of "Jane in Search of a Job" – offered far less ambiguity than the narrative of *Chimneys*. So did earlier versions of a royal romance. Christie had used the idea of a secret marriage between a Balkan royal in exile and a British aristocrat formerly posted to her country in 1924 in "The Girl on the Train," but she makes the relationship of Anthony Cade (the future Nicholas V) and Virginia Revel (who is the daughter of an Earl [*Chimneys* 45, 302]) much more ambiguous and ironic than that of the earlier couple, Lord Roland Gaigh and the Grand Duchess Anastasia. These two meet at diplomatic functions in Catonia, where he is secretary to the British Embassy, and fall in love. After a revolution exiles her from her country, they marry without, as far as we can tell, ever having pretended to be other than who or what they are.^[23] But in *Chimneys* Cade and Revel hide behind masks and treat life as a game (as when she plays at being a blackmail victim: 59); they are far more complex characters than those that Christie created for her short story. More to the point, we can even see a growth in ironic awareness in her reflections on property and wealth. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), Christie had been content to end her tale with "[l]aw, order and property ... secure" (Grossvogel 265); now, however, she shows that these values are ignored by those who are supposed to uphold them. Christie's greatest irony, however, was in the subversion of genre expectations, for though, by the end of *Chimneys*, we have discovered who killed Prince Michael, learned the identities of King Victor and Prince Nicholas, and even recovered the Koh-i-Noor, we have learned nothing of the state of affairs in Ekarest. When it comes to the Herzoslovakians – those who occupy the last of four main character roles in mystery fiction: the victim, criminal, detective and "those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it" (Cawelti 91) – we learn nothing.^[24] With the murder of Prince Michael and the theft of the Koh-i-Noor, all is clear. We know the victims, the criminals and the detectives who identify the criminals, and we understand how people can suffer financially or in their reputation by losses that they cannot justify or explain. But when it

comes to the theft of Herzoslovakia's oil, everything changes. The nature of the crime is clear, as is the identity of the criminal (the triumvirate of Lomax, Isaacstein and whatever Obolovitch heir is available). So far so good. But the only detective around is the reader, and "those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it" are the hidden people of Herzoslovakia. What we learn of them are just the clichés of Balkanism, offered by those who seek to justify British intervention, and therefore suspect – not as absolute fabrications, of course (brigandage and assassination have to be fitted into Herzoslovakia's story somehow), but as distortions of the truth. Christie wanted readers to look harder at the region, and question what they thought they knew.

Christie does not shake off all of her own prejudices in *Chimneys*. Cade talks too easily of "yellow-faced" Jewish financiers (16) and dagos (46) for us to dismiss his prejudices as simply a matter of characterization,^[25] and the waiter at Cade's London hotel is perhaps too conveniently Italian *and* dishonest for us to think Christie free of xenophobia – or at the least, not to find her guilty of laziness in her use of ethnic stereotypes. Neither does she directly address the issues of economic imperialism raised by her story. She is after all, writing a mystery, not a political novel. And yet, as we have tried to show, underlying the excitement and romance of *The Secret of Chimneys* lie dark matters. Herzoslovakia is not Ruritania; commoners who marry kings can end up as murderers; and it is the British Government itself, not the over-used figure of the master-criminal, that seeks to buy a throne (for the trope, see Chesterton, "The Domesticity of Detectives" 27). *Chimneys* was not Christie's only glance at the dark side of politics, of course. As others have noted, her 1930s colonial mysteries brilliantly present serious political questions as literary and political satire (Lassner 47). Nevertheless, her achievements in this early novel merit respect. Her managing the details so that we are troubled by the ending even as we enjoy it, feel that we should hate George Lomax even as we laugh at him, and resent the invisibility of the Balkans even as the clichés of Balkanism are trotted out – all of this shows considerable skill. For those sensitive to contemporary Balkan politics, the story of Herzoslovakia looked like ending up a tragedy, and Christie knew it.

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---. *Something Fresh*. 1915. London: Arrow Books, 2008. Print.

[¹] Ruritania was possibly brought to mind by the first filmed version of Hope's novel (directed by Rex Ingram), released in 1922; however, we should not exaggerate the influence of either novel or film. Christie does not give us the story of a man disguised as a prince but the much more common one of a prince disguised as a commoner.

[²] Christie's Lord Caterham is very much in the mold of Wodehouse's Lord Emsworth (introduced in *Something Fresh* [1915]); his daughter, Lady Eileen ("Bundle") is an updated version of Lady Patricia Maud Marsh, an important character in the Blandings-like *A Damsel in Distress* (1919).

[³] A subplot is concerned with a stolen jewel – the Koh-i-Noor, no less!

[⁴] Vera Brittain heard people refer to two Slovakias, "Czechoslovakia and Jugoslovakia" (Brittain 648); similar experience no doubt led Christie to have journalists refer to a singer "as a Jugo Slav, a Czech, an Albanian, a Magyar, and a Bulgarian" "with a beautiful impartiality" ("The Face of Helen" [1927] 177).

[⁵] Strictly speaking, only southern Romania is part of the Balkan peninsula; however, we should not expect more than a broad correspondence to real world geography. As Bernard Westphal has observed, "La description des lieux ne reproduit pas un référent; c'est le discours qui fonde l'espace" (134).

[⁶] Christie would probably have been more aware of Serbia than any other Balkan country; as she had worked as a nurse in 1915 (*Autobiography* 227-231), she had no doubt read reports in the *Nursing Times* of British and American medical volunteers going to the Serbian front as Jane Harding and George Chetwynd do in *Giant's Bread* (1930). For the background see Hallett 123; Krippner 91.

[⁷] Averna was in the Bosnian Alps (*Sweet Danger* 29) and perhaps too far north to be described as a Balkan state (but cf. fn. 5, above); the story is relevant all the same, as evidence that in the early 1930s it could be thought natural for political actors to step outside of the law to secure oil reserves in Eastern Europe for Britain.

[8] Brett Savanake (who is hoping to secure rights in Averno for himself), pretends to recruit Champion to engineer a counter-revolution in Peru – a hot spot at the time. Though this is just a ploy to get the young man out of the way, those who had read *Mystery Mile* (1930) would have recognized the irony in the invitation. In that novel Champion's business card had declared, rather ambiguously (and derivatively), that he was available for the neat execution of coups (22; cf. Wodehouse, *Leave it to Psmith* 38).

[9] Victor's men have many nationalities – we learn of French and Italian gang members, as well as Herzoslovakian ones – but some of the latter had been Comrades of the Red Hand. Though their use of revolutionary rhetoric was probably more a matter of cover than one of conviction, they would have known what had happened in Ekarest.

[10] To be sure, there really had been outrage in Serbia thirty years before, when Draga Mashin became King Alexander's mistress and then his queen – as Rebecca West noted, "she was hated as few women since the beginning of time, as no cruel mother, as no murderess, has ever been loathed" (459) – but contemporaries suspected that the outrage was driven by the political fears and resentments of those who would support the Black Hand (Mijatovic 148), not a genuinely popular sense of decency.

[11] Even a decade later, Ngaio Marsh could make the "treasonable and theatrical goings-on" of a "bolshie gang" the subplot of her first Roderick Alleyn novel (151, 125).

[12] Both Battle and Cade fail to notice that the Comrades of the Red Hand that they see at work in England are members of King Victor's gang, not political actors (*Chimneys* 135).

[13] As Cade notes later, the Loyalists want a "claimant to the throne, full of pro-British sympathies" (277-78; Britain would supply the money and the diplomatic support); the question of his popularity in Ekarest is irrelevant.

[14] Cade reports that the Herzoslovakians had "assassinated a president or two just to keep their hand in" (*Chimneys* 10), but as we never learn what had happened or why, Lord Caterham's perspective seems as reliable as any: the overthrow of the monarchy had led to the institution of a form of democracy.

[15] Criticism of a coup might be brutal, as Lord Caterham points out ("Policy dictated by the blood-sucking capitalists. Down with the Government. That kind of thing – eh?" [*Chimneys* 26]), and the danger was sufficient for the Loyalist Party and the British Government to hope to suppress (or at least edit) Count Stylptitch's memoirs. The Count was the Grand Old Man of Balkan politics, responsible for "every move and countermove in the Near East for the last twenty years" (8), and there are concerns that some of his revelations might discredit the Obolovitchs and "upset the apple-cart" (26).

[16] This is the first of many ironies. While foreign ownership of forest land and oilfields was at risk in Romania (Bowman 293; cf. Szilágyi-Gál 84-85; Hitchens 409), in Herzoslovakia, national rights to oil were for sale to foreign powers. British attitudes to the Romanian legislation are suggested by the refusal of Anglo-Dutch Shell to conform to its demands (Lampe and Jackson 431).

[17] Particularly as Cade was completely apolitical. He had abandoned his early democratic views without developing any alternatives, either left-wing or right (137; cf. 136, 305), and his reduction of monarchy to a job, necessary to support a wife but not otherwise desired, offers a sardonic commentary on any monarchist ideal.

[18] See, for example, *Destination Unknown* (113) for a late, critical reflection by Christie on high-handedness in government.

[19] The 1922 coronation of Marie and her husband (Ferdinand I, who had acceded to the throne in 1914) received extensive coverage in the British press (see, for example, "Fairy Tale Coronation Scenes in Romania"), as did a diplomatic visit to the UK eighteen months later (for this, see Mandache 152-53); indeed, as an American observer rather breathlessly observed in 1927, the Queen had been "a front-page subject all her life" (Morris 18). She had been brought up in Britain and was famous for her commitment to her people during the First World War (for this, see Boia, *History and Myth* 208-209).

[20] In 1922 Jeeves, reflecting on the *savoir-faire* of a previous employer (Mr. Montague-Todd, "the well-known financier"), would find nothing odd in the way that he was "now in the second

year of his sentence" (Wodehouse, "Bertie Changes Its Mind" 268); note the way in which, in 1926, Chesterton would wonder why the murder of an American millionaire should be treated "as a sort of calamity" ("The Arrow of Heaven" 378).

[21] The cynicism is tarnished by Cade's distasteful comment that those "getting ready to be interested" in Herzoslovakia were "Hebraic ... financiers in city offices" (*Chimneys* 16); however, though one can hardly approve of Christie's "casual anti-semitism" (Gill 89-90; cf. Himmelfarb 261), what is important in the present context is not that these men were Jewish but that they were financiers – and that their profession was un-English (*Cat Among the Pigeons* 61; *Chimneys* 25). As Levinas noted, "the Other" is "infinitely foreign" (194) by definition. Though some characters – notably Cade – engage in racial slurs, it is important to note that regime change in Herzoslovakia is demanded by the interests of an "all-British" syndicate, not a "Jewish" one.

[22] Given the events of Bloody Sunday and the other assassinations attributed to the Irish Volunteers (some 230 in 1920 alone), only the naivest of political observers could have thought that assassins could be "taught" not to assassinate, or really believed that education could be the answer to tensions in Herzoslovakia.

[23] The wedding is held in secret to escape the pressure on Anastasia to marry Prince Karl (the Chancellor's cousin), but that is the limit to the lovers' secrecy and deception.

[24] Since a detective novel is structured to offer one solution that forecloses all others (Eisenzweig 171; cf. Bayard 54, 25, 144), Christie's refusing to bring closure in *Chimneys* would have been as deliberate as her irony.

[25] Cade's reference to a family servant as his dog (*Chimneys* 234) is similarly unpleasant, but tells us nothing of Christie's feelings.



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