

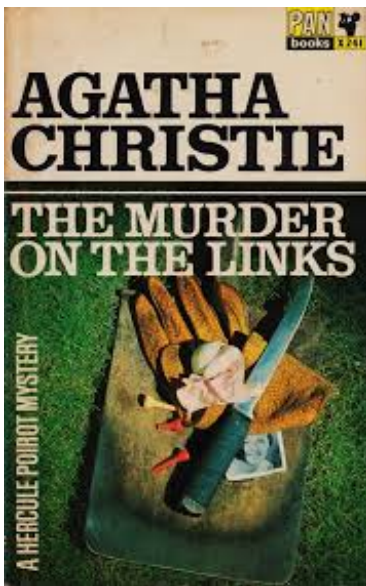
## The Murder on the Links

1923

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

No longer a caterpillar, not yet a butterfly. This is a novel in which Poirot and Christie are in the process of metamorphosis.

Half way through *The Murder on the Links* Hastings tells Poirot that a second dead body has been found. Poirot's first response is: 'Another murder? Ah, then, but I am all wrong. I have failed.' A few moments later the self-confidence returns. 'I must be



right, therefore this new murder is impossible unless – unless – Oh, wait, I implore you. Say no word. ... The victim is a man of middle age. His body was found in the locked shed near the scene of the crime and had been dead at least forty-eight hours. And it is most probable that he was stabbed in a similar manner to Mr Renauld ... ' Hastings, and the reader, are impressed. This could be Sherlock Holmes, or the Poirot of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, but there is a significant difference. Poirot's reasoning is based not on the observation of footprints, or cigarette ash, or a piece of thread, but on his understanding of the behaviour and psychology of the first victim.

We see in this novel Christie developing her own original approach to detective fiction, one in which the clues, plot and solution depend on understanding motive and structure rather than on physical observation and mechanism. And this new approach to plot requires a transformation in Poirot. In *The Murder on the Links* the transformation is not complete and the result is a Poirot of contrasts and conflicts.

Hastings alerts us early on to the new Poirot. '[Poirot] had a certain disdain' Hastings tells us, 'for tangible evidence, such as footprints and cigarette ash.' But immediately there is a qualification. Poirot's view is that such evidence *taken by itself* would never enable a detective to solve a problem. The 'tangible evidence' is still significant. But how significant? In order to contrast the methods of Poirot with those that focus mainly on 'tangible evidence' Christie creates the character of Giraud – a senior detective from Paris. Giraud examines the scenes of the crimes in great detail looking for tangible evidence – one can almost imagine him with magnifying glass in hand. At one point he discovers a cigarette end and a match. 'You haven't made a study of these things' he tells Poirot complacently, 'That's not an ordinary match – not in this country at least. It's common enough in South America.' Poirot contemptuously refers to Giraud as 'the human foxhound'.



***Inspector Giraud: a foxhound***

[\[http://www.english-dogs.co.uk/galleries/foxhound-picture-gallery/viewimage-1301.html#viewimage-1287\]](http://www.english-dogs.co.uk/galleries/foxhound-picture-gallery/viewimage-1301.html#viewimage-1287)

Poirot, however, is something of a foxhound himself. He finds a torn cheque under a rug, a strand of hair on the back of a chair, he makes deductions from the absence of dust, and carefully examines the second corpse. Christie oscillates between writing a Sherlock Holmes novel and a new kind of detective story, and this ambivalence goes right to the core of the plot.

This core is excellent and was inspired by a real case. To escape blackmail Paul Renauld wishes to be thought dead. He and his wife plan a faked murder. The plan is that the wife will be bound and gagged by the husband, and the husband will disappear. A dead body of a person who has died through natural causes will be found and the wife will identify the dead body, falsely, as that of her husband. Don't worry too much about how difficult it might be to find the dead body. The twist is that when the wife comes to identify the body she discovers to her horror that it really is that of her husband. What is of interest is that in the clueing and solution of the first crime – the faking of a murder – we see the new emerging Christie, but she appears to lack the confidence to make this the central puzzle. She tells us the solution – and shows Poirot's reasoning – well before the end of the novel. The solution to the second crime – the actual murder of Paul Renauld – is the one that is withheld until the dénouement.

Although there are two crimes it looks at first as though there has been a single crime: the abduction and murder of Paul Renauld. We learn that this apparent single crime is almost identical to a murder that took place 22 years previously, the Beroldy Case. It is this similarity that provides Poirot, and possibly the reader, with the central clue of the novel.

Two-thirds of the way through the book Poirot tells Hastings that what has looked like one crime is a combination of two crimes and he goes on to explain the drama that went wrong – i.e. to give the solution to the first crime of the fake murder. At no point is there a moment when the reader knows to put down the book and try and solve the puzzle – it is only once the puzzle to the first crime has been solved by

Poirot that it becomes clear that there are two crimes, and therefore two puzzles. So the solving of the first crime becomes part of the narrative and not the dénouement, thus isolating the second crime – the actual murder of Paul Renauld – as the puzzle for the reader.



*The Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Saint-Omer, Northern France  
Jack Renauld is taken to St Omer (chapter 24). Most of the novel takes place nearby at the fictional  
village of Merlinville between Calais and Boulogne  
[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint-Omer>]*

The clues and solution relating to the first crime are far superior to those relating to the second crime and it is in the plotting of the first crime that we see Christie's first steps towards the creation of the sophisticated puzzle whodunnit of which she became the supreme exemplar. Christie, through Poirot, calls the clues, and the reasoning, in this new type of whodunnit *psychological*, in contrast to physical clues. The foxhound, Guiraud, runs around looking for tangible evidence. The thinker, Poirot, quietly considers the psychological aspects of the case. 'To begin with' Poirot explains to Hastings 'we apply our psychology. We find three points at which Monsieur Renauld displays a distinct change of view and action – three psychological points therefore.'

By the end of chapter 19, about two-thirds the way through the book, the reader is in possession of the following facts.

1. Monsieur Renauld has sent his chauffeur away on holiday and his son on a ship to South America.
2. Madame Renauld appeared genuinely shocked when she saw the dead body of her husband – more so than when she had previously been informed of his murder.
3. Monsieur Renauld has been meeting Madame Daubreuil on a regular basis and has been paying her substantial sums of money.

4. Monsieur Renauld was unaccountably angry with his son when his son said that he wanted to marry Madame Daubreuil's daughter.

5. The whole set-up for the crime – the tying up of Madame Renauld, the abduction and murder of her husband, the story that Mrs Renauld tells of two masked men attacking her and abducting her husband – is almost identical to a crime committed 22 years ago. That crime was almost certainly carried out by the wife and her lover as a means of eliminating her husband. The lover escaped and his whereabouts is unknown. The wife was tried for the murder of her husband but she convinced the jury that she had been a pawn in the hands of her lover and was found not guilty. Her whereabouts is also unknown. The lover is still wanted for the murder. The wife double-crossed the lover and went off with another (very wealthy) man.

None of these clues by itself is sufficient for working out the solution. Neither is there a straightforward way to deduce the solution from the clues. But, somewhat like solving a good cryptic crossword clue, if, through an act of intelligent insight, readers hit on the truth then they will be almost certain that it is the truth. Everything falls into place.

So the plot, clues and solution relating to this first crime are sophisticated and show that Christie is well on the way to developing her signal approach to detective fiction. The trouble is that this first crime – the faked murder – is not the crime of the whodunnit puzzle. The understanding of this first crime is a plot development, rather than the puzzle. It enables the second crime – the real murder – to be seen for what it is. The last third of the novel leads the reader to puzzle over who committed the murder and why. Various people are suspected at various times, so the story twists and turns. At the dénouement Poirot reveals the truth. In contrast to the first crime, the clues for this second crime are poor (they are summarised by Poirot in chapter 28), and the truth is somewhat arbitrary. A case as convincing as the solution could be made for at least four different people being the murderer (Madame Daubreuil, Jack Renauld, Mr Stonor, Mrs Renauld, and perhaps even Cinderella's sister).

In *Styles* Christie showed she can write an engaging detective story with an ingenious plot in the mould of a Sherlock Holmes novel. The clues were physical and the ingenuity lay mainly in the murder method. Much of the author's skill in that novel was in her misdirections. A weakness in *Styles* was that several alternate solutions were equally plausible. In *Links* a new Christie begins to emerge in which the clues are 'psychological', the solution is uniquely convincing, and several clues have to be put together in order to solve the puzzle.

The Poirot of *Links* is a hybrid animal. He chases physical clues whilst also despising them. It is no wonder that he shows weaknesses not apparent in *Styles* nor in most of the later novels. The strain of the inner conflicts on Poirot begins to show. He is not consistent. For example, his belief in hereditary determinism leads him to conclude that Marthe Daubreuil must be immoral because her mother is immoral. Indeed this is one of the four main clues to the solution of the second murder. But

Poirot brushes aside Jack Renauld's concerns about his inheritance from his father on the grounds that Jack will have inherited his mother's goodness rather than his father's wickedness. On this (overly deterministic) view Poirot should have shown more interest in the personality of Marthe Daubreuil's father before concluding anything about her moral character. A more blatant example of Poirot's inconsistency is when he advises Madame Renauld to tell her son the truth about his father. 'To hide the truth never does it avail, madam! Be brave and tell him everything.' A few lines later we find Poirot saying that he will hide that very truth from the police.

Most worrying of all, Poirot puts Madame Renauld's life in serious danger. Her death is prevented only by the acrobatic skills and strength of Bella Duveen, the Cinderella from the first chapter.

Poirot is evolving rapidly as a detective between *Styles* and *Links* but he remains constant in two things: his friendship to Hastings, and his romantic sentiments. At the end of *Styles* after Hastings has been disappointed in love Poirot consoles him and suggests that if they 'hunt together again' Hastings may be luckier next time. At the end of *Links*, with a little help from Poirot, Hastings at last kisses Cinderella. We will learn in later novels the sequelae of that kiss.

[TH]



***Hotel Normandy Barrière in Deauville***

***Used as the setting for where Poirot and Hastings stay in the 1996 TV episode of the novel***

*[<http://www.sothebysrealty-france.com/english/partners.html>]*