

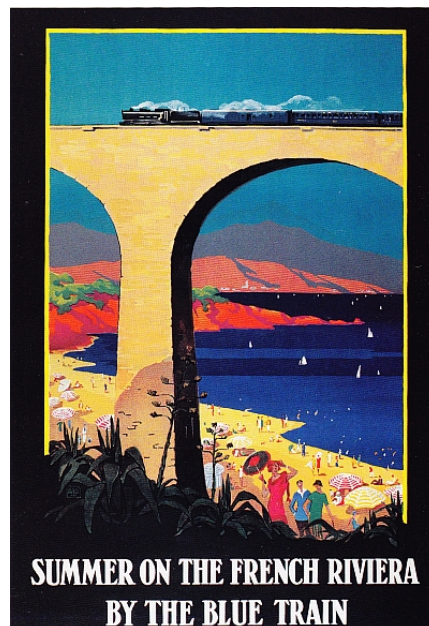
The Mystery of the Blue Train

1928

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

After Poirot the Imposter in *The Big Four* we are back in the company of the genuine Hercule. Christie has not quite shed the glamour of the adventure story but what remains is more in the phrasing than in the plot. On the first page we meet a 'little man with a face like a rat' and learn that 'negligible and inconspicuous as he seemed he played a prominent part in the destiny of the world.' His name is Boris Ivanovitch Krassnine but he disappears from the story as rapidly as he entered it. The rest of the novel concerns not the destiny of the world but a sordid murder in pursuit of the theft of a ruby. Poirot is the thoughtful and sedentary detective we know and love, and in contrast with his imposter in *The Big Four* his life is never in danger. He seldom hurries except near the end when he partly re-enacts the journey on the Blue Train where the murder was committed. The train is called *Blue* after the colour of its sleeping cars.

In chapter 2 when we meet M. Papopolous – a Jewish Greek jewelry dealer living in Paris – we might still be forgiven for thinking that we are in an adventure or spy story, more Eric Ambler than Agatha Christie. Had a movie of the book been made in the 1940's Papopolous might have been played by an unctuous Sydney Greenstreet. Papopolous is a larger character in the book than his significance to the plot might suggest. Indeed the most disturbing aspect of the novel is his relationship with Poirot.



[http://www.mittleeuropa.x10.mx/rennsport_drives_paris_riviera.html]

M. Papopolous, assisted by his grown-up daughter, Zia, deals in stolen jewels. He is essentially a high-class fence. And he doesn't care how the jewels came to be stolen. If murder is involved, as it is in the case of the Heart of Fire – the ruby at the centre of *The Mystery of the Blue Train* – then so be it. M. Papopolous is not, from a legal point of view, implicated in the murder, and the murder does not reduce the value of the jewels. Poirot is normally a man of integrity. On those very few occasions when he does not pursue the perpetrators of a serious crime to the very end it is because there are good reasons for thinking that morally the crime was not so serious – even praiseworthy perhaps. But M. Papopolous and his daughter are not only dealers in stolen property but also accessories to murder. At the end of the novel Papopolous and his daughter receive the stolen ruby, and sell it on. But far from pursuing these two criminals Poirot, who one suspects rather fancied Zia when he first knew her seventeen years earlier, talks amiably with them. Poirot says (chapter 35):

'I understand you sold him [the Greek ex-Minister] a very wonderful ruby which – strictly entre nous – is being worn by Mademoiselle Mirelle, the dancer?'

'Yes,' murmured Monsieur Papopolous; 'yes, that is so'.

'A ruby not unlike the famous "Heart of Fire".'

'It has points of resemblance, certainly,' said the Greek casually.

'You have a wonderful hand with jewels, Monsieur Papopolous. I congratulate you. Mademoiselle Zia, I am desolate that you are returning to Paris so speedily. I had hoped to see some more of you now that my business is accomplished.'

Poirot has caught the murderer but is on friendly terms with the murderer's accomplice and happily allows him to enjoy the fruits of the crime.



[<http://mubi.com/topics/the-auteurs-film-cast-member-database?page=34>]
English Actor Sydney Greenstreet

The starting point, I suspect, for Christie was her experience of the Le Train Bleu. This luxurious train ran from the northern French channel port of Calais to the French Riviera. There was no need to change in Paris: the train stopped at the Gare du Nord but then carried on circling Paris on what was known as La Grande Ceinture (the big belt) before stopping again, and picking up more passengers, at the Gare de Lyon. It then left Paris for the South. The journey through the Paris suburbs along La Grande Ceinture was notoriously slow and lumbering although it stopped at no stations between the two large termini. Christie had the idea that a person could board and alight from a train during this slow journey without leaving Paris. And this was the kernel of the idea for how a murder could be committed on the train by someone who was never a passenger. With the ruse of an accomplice who could impersonate the dead woman for a few hours the scenario was set for the time of death to be incorrectly put at sometime after the train left Paris, and for the murderer to be unsuspected because he was in Paris at the crucial time.



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ligne_de_Grande_Ceinture_OSM.png]

A map of the railway line round Paris known as La Grande Ceinture.

Part of this line was used by the Blue Train to travel from the Gare du Nord to the Gare de Lyon. It plays a key role in the plot of Christie's novel

I imagine that Christie had one other idea that she wanted to include. It is a cliché of crime fiction, before the era of DNA testing, that if the victim's face is disfigured beyond recognition then the victim is not who she seems to be. Christie enjoyed playing with the conventions of the form. In *Blue Train* the victim is apparently Ruth Kettering, but the face of the corpse is disfigured. Could the victim be her maid, or, indeed, someone else? Is Ruth Kettering the murderer? Many thoughtful readers will pursue these red herrings but Christie is teasing us, for Ruth Kettering is indeed the victim. And Christie supplies a rather clever reason for the disfigurement. Ruth Kettering's maid had impersonated her mistress when talking to the train conductor. The disfigurement is to ensure that when Ruth Kettering's body is later discovered the train conductor does not realise that the dead woman is not the person whom he thought was Ruth Kettering.



[<http://www.wagons-lits-diffusion.com/album/plans-divers-ciwl/>]
The Blue Train in 1922 a few years before Poirot travelled on it to Nice

Laying aside his dubious morals, how is Poirot, the detective? The answer is, much as he was in *Ackroyd*. There is one moment (chapter 11) when he is 'the human foxhound' and finds four strands of auburn hair but these play little role in either Poirot's thinking or in that of the reader. Most of the clues for both Poirot and the reader come from what people say.

The reader is unlikely to solve the puzzle by realising the *modus operandi*. The slowness of the train as it travels around La Grande Ceinture is emphasised twice, and near the end, we are given a hint that the murderer was not a passenger on the train. But readers will only find these clues helpful, if at all, once they are pretty sure they know who the murderers are. The main clues are clues to the identities of the criminals not to the means. Neither is motive an issue since the theft of the ruby provides motive for anyone, although I remain unconvinced that murder in addition to theft was necessary.

There are two main sets of clues and the reader must realise that each is a set in order to feel at all confident about the conclusion. The first set is about timing. At different points, well separated in the book, we are told:

1. That it was a little over two months ago that Rufus van Aldin, the rich American and father of the victim, made it known in the relevant circles that he wanted to buy the famous ruby The Heart of Fire.
2. That van Aldin first met Knighton in Switzerland two months ago and almost immediately employed him as his personal secretary.
3. That Ada Mason has been maid to the victim, Ruth Kettering, for two months.

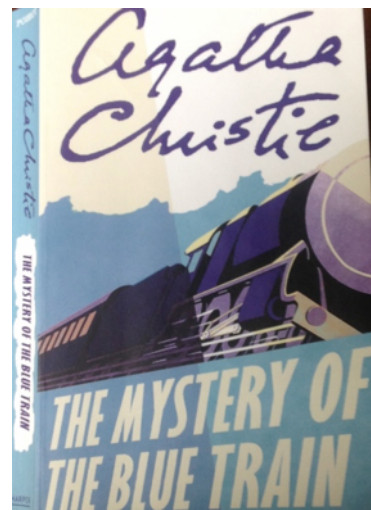
The second set of clues is about jewel thefts. Again, at different points in the book we learn:

1. Knighton tells Katherine Grey, in casual conversation, that Lady Clanarvon's jewels were stolen while he was staying nearby.
2. That during the First World War when Lady Tamplin was using her villa at Nice as an Officers' Hospital her jewels were stolen.

3. That Knighton, then a Major in the army, was one of the officers who spent some time in Lady Tamplin's Hospital.

There is one other significant clue. Ada Mason, the maid, says in her evidence that Ruth Kettering met a gentleman while the train was stopped at the Gare de Lyon. Mason says that she did not see the gentleman clearly. When Poirot later suggests that the man could have been Ruth's husband, Derek Kettering, Mason at first thinks this unlikely but some time later she appears to change her mind and is 'almost certain' that the man was Derek Kettering. There seems no way in which she could become 'almost certain' given her previous testimony. On the other hand, the real criminals might well seize an opportunity to help to frame Derek Kettering, who is already suspected of the crime by the police.

How do the plot, clues and solution of *Blue Train* match up to Christie at her best? The crime method is cleverly constructed so that the perpetrators, to use a modern term, appear at first sight to be innocent because they were not in the right place at the right time. As we have seen, there are several clues suggesting that Knighton and Ada Mason might both be involved. These clues, furthermore, are constructed in a way that requires the reader to make connections between information given at different places in the book. So is this the perfect Christie novel? Good though it is I think it falls short of her best. One of the most difficult things for a crime writer is not so much ensuring that there are clues to the correct solution but making sure that only the



correct solution is ultimately satisfactory. At her best Christie achieves this. A reader of *Blue Train* who picks up all the clues might still fail to be sure of the correct solution and might even prefer other solutions. The correct solution, in short, is not the only plausible solution. In contrast, say, with *Ackroyd* there are no facts that fall into place when the correct solution is discovered. The solution does not in my opinion pass that stringent test of the best whodunnits – the cryptic crossword test – that although the puzzle is difficult to solve, once readers hit on the correct solution they are sure that it is correct. The two sets of clues given above are not so convincing that the reader can be sure that they are not coincidences or indeed red herrings. Other solutions, although not perhaps quite as good, are plausible. Derek Kettering might have been the murderer, and his being seen outside Ruth Kettering's compartment might have been a clue rather than a red herring. In addition he has the strongest motive as he stands to inherit her considerable wealth over and above the value of the ruby. A grim solution could be that van Aldin killed his daughter and framed her husband. There is a ruthless strain in his character and his daughter is certainly not obedient to his will. That dark horse, the Comte de la Roche, might be playing a clever game and using the paste rubies to put the police off the trail – and his alibi for the time of the murder turns out to be worthless. Mirelle, the dancer, has motive and opportunity and is also keen to frame Derek Kettering.

I tried hard to see Katherine Grey as the murderer perhaps misled by the fact that she is Poirot's little helper. Mademoiselle Grey is an intelligent, observant woman in her early thirties. She turns out, however, genuinely to be Poirot's helper and the focus for his enjoyment in encouraging romantic intrigues. He nudges her towards a liaison with Derek Kettering. I don't think that he is doing her any favours. Poirot believes more strongly than I do that a good woman can make a bad man good. He may however be more psychologically correct in his assessment of Derek Kettering's attractions. Derek Kettering in a moment of confession tells Poirot of his feelings towards Katherine Grey. Kettering says (chapter 24):

'You will say that I have no earthly chance of marrying Katherine.'

'No,' said Poirot, 'I would not say that. Your reputation is bad yes, but with women – never does that deter them. If you were a man of excellent character, of strict morality who had done nothing that he should not do, and – possibly everything that he should do – eh bien! Then I should have grave doubts of your success. Moral worth, you understand, is not romantic. It is appreciated, however, by widows.'

Bad, mad and dangerous to know. Perhaps in letting Papodolous and his daughter get away with receiving stolen goods Poirot knew he was acting immorally. He may still have entertained hopes for himself of conjugal bliss. And not with a widow.

[TH]