

## Curtain

Written sometime in the early 1940s. First Published 1975.

[This contains plot spoilers for this book and *within* this book there are many other plot spoilers for previous Christies, as Poirot and Hastings look back together on their careers]

*Curtain* is the last appearance of Arthur Hastings in a murder mystery. Although Christie 'resurrected' Poirot, like Sherlock Holmes, after World War II, Hastings never reappears: this is his final bow. Poirot and Hastings were previously together in *Dumb Witness* (1936).

Possibly because Christie was looking back at her whole oeuvre, as she contemplated this new work, there are some startling links to *The Big Four*, the Buchan-like Thriller, with Hastings and Poirot, published in 1927. *The Big Four* describes four despots bent on World Domination, and a evil 'scientific force more powerful than the world has dreamed of' about to be unleashed on the world, with experiments on coolies 'in which the most revolting disregard for human life and suffering': images of the atom bomb and the Nazi Concentration Camps, prophetically almost two decades before they occurred.

*The Big Four* and *Curtain* are the only two books in which Poirot dies. They are also the only two books in which Poirot shaves off his wonderful moustaches. In *Curtain*, Hastings finds out that Poirot wears a toupee and false moustaches; Poirot is so ill his hair had fallen out. In both novels Poirot arranges for a solicitor to send Hastings an explanatory letter from him *after* Poirot's death. Both letters start with the characteristic fond opening phrase 'Mon Cher Ami'. 'Cher ami' is the final, adieu Poirot murmurs as Hastings leaves his room on that last night at Styles.

*Curtain*, as Poirot and Hastings' farewell can also be viewed as a discourse on the ethics of guilt, murder and justice. It goes to the very heart of their beliefs, and tests their moral fibre to the limit.

Christie plans this book beautifully to bring her characters full circle: their final resting place being the first place they investigated together. Poirot is back staying at Styles St Mary, and invites Hastings to join him. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was Christie's first published novel (1920), written during the First World War in 1917. Set in 1916 the 30-year-old Captain Arthur Hastings, wounded in action, was invited to convalesce at Styles, the country home of his friend John Cavendish. Hastings met 'the limping figure ' of Poirot, billeted in the village: a fugitive from war-torn Belgium. Poirot, from the Belgian Police force, was in an unhappy state: 'a refugee, wounded, exiled from home and country, existing by charity in a foreign land.' They solve the mystery at Styles together and so the golden team was forged, like Holmes and Watson before them.

Over the next 30 years some things changed. Poirot has done well for himself. He is now rich, famous and accepted in the highest circles of Society, lauded by Royalty, and courted by Heads of State. Respectful Maître Die find a table for him immediately at the best, most crowded, London restaurants. He is a celebrity: a far cry from the refugee who existed on charity, but still in this foreign land. One never

knows *why* he never went back to Belgium, given that he usually complains about British cooking and watery coffee.

Styles Court, in contrast, has gone down in the world. Styles is now a paying guesthouse, rather than a grand countryseat: a sociological observation of the decline of the fortunes of the English aristocracy, and their privately owned country houses in England between 1916 and 1940's. Styles'

'old fashioned large bedrooms have been partitioned off to make several smaller ones'.

The cooking, as Poirot took pleasure in describing, because he found no delight in eating, was

'English at its worst. The vegetables that taste of water, water and again water.. the complete absence of salt and pepper in any dish. Plates of white gooey liquid were set before us.'

Even the coffee at Styles

'was an uninteresting muddy fluid.'

There is a sad deterioration in service, too. In the good old days, a battalion of scurrying servants in crisply starched aprons bought steaming copper jugs of water to the bathroom.

'The bathrooms, the taps everywhere and what comes out of them? Lukewarm water. And the towels, so thin, so meagre'.

Where are the thick, fluffy bath sheets of the Edwardian era? Unlike the classic Christie family owned country houses of the 1920s, there are no servants. Butlers and maids were now a thing of the past. There is only the mention of a cook, although Poirot would argue this was a misnomer.

The village of Styles St Mary has also

'altered out of all recognition. Petrol stations, a cinema, two more inns, and rows of council houses.'

Rural England has changed radically between the wars, and the implication was – for the worst. Even the character of the British has changed. Sir William Boyd Carrington is described with admiration as never doing anything unsuccessfully:

'the sort of man we no longer seem to breed in these degenerate days'.

Poirot, possibly now in his 80s, is an invalid in a wheelchair, crippled by arthritis and subject to terrible, life threatening attacks of angina (a narrowing of his coronary artery blood flow). He requires a strong manservant, Curtiss to carry him down stairs, and dress him 'like a baby'. His faithful, aging manservant, Georges, had been sent away.

Because Christie was reflecting back upon the career of Hercule Poirot, knowing this would be his final case, there are a more mentions of earlier cases or specific characters, or references to previous plots than any other book. It is a resume of his entire career. Hastings mentions the *ABC crimes*, and also Miss Carlisle who appears in *Sad Cyprus*. Oddly, Hastings calls her, incorrectly, *Evelyn* Carlisle, rather than Elinor. Poirot mentions 'The butcher becomes a butcher simply to murder the baker': a reference to *The Big Four*. There are also the echoes of *Murder on the Orient Express*, with the person assumed to be Norton limping down the corridor in his dressing gown, only seen from behind by Hastings, after a knock to make Hastings open his bedroom door. This is Poirot repeating the trick played on him, in that fateful Wagon-Lit. The idea of a murder meeting out justice to those guilty of murder, who have escaped the rigors of the Law is the theme of *Murder on the Orient Express*, and *And Then There Were None*. In this book, Poirot says he has twice warned a murderer not to murder 'once in Egypt [*Death on the Nile*], once elsewhere' [*Peril at End House*].

The 5 previous murders that 'X' has caused before *Curtain* begins are summarised by Poirot to Hastings on his arrival at Styles. Most of these plots are previous novels thinly disguised:

"Case A: Etherington. A sadistic character; drugs and drink. Wife young and attractive and desperately unhappy with him." For Etherington read *Edgeware*, in *Lord Edgeware Dies*.

"Case B: Miss Sharples: elderly spinster, invalid suffering looked after by niece." This has similarities to *Sad Cypress*. Hastings mentions Miss Carlisle, by name.

"Case C: Edward Riggs; shot wife and lover." Similarities to *Murder at the Vicarage*: this is a Marple not a Poirot. Perhaps Christie forgot it was a Marple?

"Case D: Derek Bradley, married man affair with a young girl: Bradley's beer poisoned." This is the basic plot of *Five Little Pigs*.

"Case E: Lichfield: elderly tyrant to four daughters". If you replace daughters with sons, you have the plot of *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*.

Poirot at one point says 'One can catch a murderer, but how to stop a murder?' There are three methods:

- 1] Warn the Victim, if you know whom that will be.
- 2] Warn the murderer [*Death on the Nile*, *Peril at End House*: neither worked]
- 3] Step in at the 'psychological moment' to pre-empt the event. Usually Poirot fails to prevent murders but eventually catches the murderer.

In this final book Poirot *does* prevent a murder, by drugging Hastings before he manages to kill Allington. There is a fourth option Poirot does not mention, but ultimately resorts to: killing the murderer before the murderer kills again.

Poirot succinctly brings Hastings up to speed about why they are at Styles, despite the food. There is a person 'X' staying at Styles who has links with 5 previous murders, but in each of these cases there was a prime suspect: 'the person accused, or suspected, had actually committed the crimes in question'. Person X was '*the catalyst* to murder, a reaction between two substances that takes place only in the presence of a third substance'.

In Poirot's last case he has finally met 'the perfect criminal', because he had 'such a technique that he could never be convicted of crime'. In his beyond the grave letter to Hastings, Poirot uses Shakespeare's characters in *Othello* to explain the plot. The 'Deaths of Desdemona, of Cassio – indeed of Othello himself – are all Iago's crimes, planned by him, carried out by him. And he remains outside the circle, untouched by suspicion'. Like Norton, some of Iago's plots go wrong: Iago goads Roderigo to kill Cassio, and in fact Cassio defends himself and kills Roderigo. This is echoed in this book: Norton has encouraged Mrs. Franklin to kill her husband, but the 'tables are turned' literally and metaphorically on Mrs. Franklin, and she dies by her own poison. Unlike Iago, whose revenge is focused upon Othello, Norton just craves the thrill, the sway of power over life and death, not really minding *who* dies, as long as he has induced the action. Iago goaded Othello to destruction. Othello also attempted to kill Iago, once he realized Iago's duplicity, and then committed suicide. As a parallel plot to Shakespeare's play, Norton goaded Poirot to the uttermost point, ending in both their deaths, but as readers would suspect, Poirot was more efficient at murder than poor Othello.

Hastings is trying to solve a crossword puzzle on the night Mrs. Franklin dies. The clue was read out:

'Jealousy is a green-eyed monster.'

The solution to the crossword was 'Iago', and hence by inference, the solution to 'Who is X?' was Norton, our seemingly mild, nature-loving villain. Christie gives the reader the solution to this book, via *the solution* to *The Times* crossword. It is one of those 'triple slot machine clues', in three parts, that confirms the reader's suspicions must be correct. It is such a brilliant piece of misdirective writing that an inattentive reader might easily speed-read this passage, thinking it was waffle before the dramatic ending of the chapter.

Mrs. Franklin had invited everyone up to her room to hold court after dinner, and make decent coffee, 'with freshly ground berries'. Experienced Christie readers have learned to discount anything as padding at their peril. *The Times* clues are woven so carefully into the general postprandial dynamics: Boyd Carrington being devoted to Babs Franklin, and the rising sexual tension between Judith Hastings (Hastings' unmarried daughter) and her employer, Dr Franklin. The solutions to each of the clues were isolated, by other conversations. There was a pattern in the solutions to this exceptionally gloomy *Times* Crossword: 'Tormentor', 'Death', and 'Iago'.

Poirot explains the psychology to Hastings from beyond the grave: 'Norton developed a morbid sense of power by creating violence at second hand (the only son of a masterful and bossy woman). He was an addict of pain, of mental torture..the lust of the sadist and the lust for power.'

The basic premise of this book is that everyone is capable of murder, if goaded beyond endurance – even Hercule Poirot. Poirot explains to Hastings

'Everyone is a potential murderer. In everyone there arises from time to time the wish to kill ...But you do not do it. Your will has to assent to your desire.'

This wish to kill, the angry impulse is a thread throughout. Mild and law-abiding Papa Poirot writes of Mrs. Luttrell 'I would take a hatchet to her', yet he did not. The shy, thoughtful, gentle Dr Franklin calmly states 'about 80% of the human race ought to be eliminated'. Sir William Boyd Carrington, ex-Governor of a province in India, says in anger:

'I'd like to hang draw and quarter all contractors and builders'.

Later in a serious discussion Boyd Carrington calmly states:

'I've always thought a blackmailer ought to be shot'.

As far as the novel text is concerned, Boyd Carrington had never hurt anyone.

The next discussion in *Curtain* set out how people might be driven to murder for their belief in the greater good, or as an act of mercy (euthanasia), in those terminally ill to ease their suffering. Poirot says

'a man thinks he has a divine right to kill a dictator or a moneylender or a pimp. You consider a guilty deed- but what he considers is an innocent one.'

The sting in the tail of *Curtain* is the ending. Norton worked first on Colonel Luttrell to shoot his wife. When that failed, Norton turned his attention to Captain Hastings to kill Allerton. That plan also failed, thanks to Poirot. Finally Norton goads Judith Hastings to kill Mrs Franklin. Norton's method is 'Not hypnotism – more insidious, more deadly': subtle psychology.

The most detailed example is hen-pecked Colonel Luttrell. Norton 'spoke loudly to Hastings:' incautiously gave way to his feelings: 'poor old boy bullied like that'. 'Poor chap. He couldn't assert himself if he tried'. Hastings naively says 'Ssh. Afraid the old Colonel would overhear.' Which, of course, was Norton's exact intention. Norton stage-managed the whole public humiliation of Luttrell by his wife.

'Been a hot day,' said Norton. 'I'm thirsty.' When Luttrell said happily 'Have a drink, you fellows. On the house, what?' and Mrs Luttrell stepped in harshly with 'Give me that bottle.' 'Drinks here will be paid for.'... Leaving the hapless Colonel cringing out an apology: 'Awfully sorry, you chaps..Seem to have run out of whisky.' Hastings again naively describes how Norton then 'quite lost his head, hurriedly saying that he didn't really want a drink...then elaborately changing the subject.' But this was *exactly* Norton's plan: 'still talking feverishly....telling a long and rather pointless story of an accident that had occurred in Scotland when a beater had been shot.'

Boyd Carrington then chimed in, retelling a story Norton had previously told him, about a man shooting his own brother. Norton later praises Boyd Carrington 'What a splendid chap he is. Always been a success everywhere. Clear headed, knows his own mind -essentially a man of action.'

When Luttrell said 'Some people have all the luck', Norton replied 'Not in our stars, dear Brutus – but in ourselves.' Hastings suggested Boyd Carrington ought to remarry, Norton laughingly retorted 'suppose his wife bullies him.' Sweet, innocent Hastings said 'it was purest bad luck. The sort of remark that anyone could make.' But this was the final straw for Colonel Luttrell, who was famed as a good shot in the army.

Luttrell snaps 'No Boyd Carrington won't get bullied by his wife...He's a man.' He raised the rifle and fired at his wife.

Norton is a shrewd psychological manipulator. The one precious thing left for Hastings since the death of his beloved wife, is his daughter, Judith. The thought that some utter cad, Allerton, had immoral designs upon his daughter is more than Hastings can bear. Hastings is gulled into thinking Judith was having an affair with Allerton. Norton pretending to see something improper through his field glasses when 'bird watching'. This is just like Othello being duped by Iago into believing Desdemona is unfaithful by hearing Cassio talk about a woman. Shakespeare and Christie both teach the reader not to believe their senses. In *Curtain*, after an acrimonious discussion with his daughter, entirely at cross-purposes; Judith thinking Hastings mention of 'the married man' referred to Dr. Franklin, whereas Hastings meant the cad, Allerton. Judith is furious 'how dare you interfere'. Judith is a strong, independent woman who had a University education, and wishes to be in charge of her own destiny. Judith Hastings is a modern girl. Hastings resolves to kill Allerton with the Lothario's own barbiturates. Poirot prevents the murder.

This is one of the very few murders Poirot ever prevents. Hastings wakes up the next morning,

'overwhelmingly relieved. I saw how overwrought and wrong headed I'd been.'

Norton engineered two events, both, fortunately 'near misses', but this did not stop him from trying again. It was his addiction.

The final tableau of Norton at work is a discussion started by him on euthanasia, hoping to encourage Judith to kill Mrs. Franklin. The Franklin's marriage was miserable, and Judith and Dr Franklin were in love. Norton saw this although, predictably, Captain Hastings is oblivious to his own daughter's true feelings. Norton says 'It's really a question of courage.' Again implying to the listeners they *could* commit euthanasia but simply have not 'got the guts': hoping for the 'O yes I have' response. Which was exactly the desired reaction Norton gets from Judith:

'I've got more – more guts than you think'

and she storms off. Just to make sure the gimlet went home Norton says to the others

'It's the sort of half-baked idea one has when one is young, but fortunately one doesn't carry it out. It remains just talk.'

Judith overheard this intentional remark, and cast a 'furious glance over her shoulder'.

When Mrs. Franklin dies of physostigmine poisoning soon after, the reader wondered of Judith or Dr Franklin, or both of them, have committed murder. The clueing is fair that Hastings turned the coffee table before Mrs. Franklin drank her poisoned coffee.

Later, Poirot in his posthumous letter, rather unfairly writes to his *Cher* Hastings  
‘you killed Barbara Franklin’.

Mrs. Franklin set up the poisoning for her husband, in order to be free to marry Boyd Carrington. When everyone was outside watching the shooting star, Hastings literally turned the table on Mrs. Franklin. The coffee table was also a small bookcase, which Hastings innocently rotated by 180 degrees, looking for a copy of *Othello*. It would have been kinder for Poirot to say: ‘you foiled the attempt by Mrs. Franklin to kill her husband’.

Honest, gentle Hastings had inadvertently caused the death of Mrs. Franklin, but saved Dr Franklin, the man his daughter loves, thereby serendipitously ensuring Judith’s future happiness. Norton’s tireless schemes have at last come to fruition. *Someone is* murdered, even though the coroner brings in a verdict of suicide, largely due to Poirot’s evidence. Norton assumes that Judith or Dr. Franklin murdered Mrs. Franklin, providing mouth watering future scope for his psychological sadism.

What completely surprises the reader is Norton’s suicide in the night, after he has spent some time talking to Poirot alone. Has Poirot shamed him into taking his own life, rather than facing a criminal charge of incitement to murder? This happens in many other Poirots: *Roger Ackroyd*, *Peril at End House*, and *Death on the Nile*. Hastings ‘sees’ Norton, from the back, in his dressing gown in the corridor that night; echoes of the red kimono misdirection from *Murder on the Orient Express*. Norton has a bullet hole precisely in the middle of his forehead. Most suicides place the gun at their temple or shoot through the mouth.

This is an echo of Mr Justice Wargrave’s death in *And Then There Were None*(1939)  
‘marking me on the forehead. The brand of Cain.’

Norton died in a locked room, with the bedroom key in his pocket, the pistol in his hand. Poirot gave all these clues to Hastings, who has never managed to solve any puzzle, let alone this final, perfect, locked room murder.

‘Ma foi! Anyone can wear a dressing gown’, and Poirot’s last sentence ever spoken to Hastings ‘He was deliberately killed’.

Who could possibly commit **the** perfect, unsolvable locked room murder? There is only one person’s little grey cells ‘still function magnificently’ despite the body being worn out by age and disease. Of course, it has to be the one and only Hercule Poirot, himself, doing the unthinkable. In his posthumous letter to Hastings he makes all things clear to his baffled friend:

‘I, who do not approve of murder – I, who value human life – have ended my career

by committing murder. Perhaps it is because I have been too self-righteous. My work in life to prevent murder - this is the only way I can do it!

Poirot has killed before: 'As a young man in the Belgian police I shot down a desperate criminal who sat on a roof and fired at people below.' He justifies the act,

'By taking Norton's life, I have saved other lives – innocent lives. But still I do not know. It is perhaps right that I should not know. I have always been so sure – too sure.'

This is indeed a startling confession from Poirot, who has rarely been troubled by self-doubt in the past. He went on to reflect:

'For the worst part of murder, is the effect on the murderer. I, Hercule Poirot, might come to believe myself divinely appointed to deal out death to all and sundry'.

*And Then There Were None (1939)*, was written just before *Curtain*. The ethical issues still echoing in her mind, and Christie thought about this next book.

It is a frequent theme in Christie books that once a murderer steps over the boundary to commit one crime, there is then no moral barrier to further deaths.

Poirot knows at the start of the book that he has very little time left, he is terminally ill; this is his final act. This book was written half a century before angiography for coronary stents became a commonplace treatment for angina. Poirot intentionally puts the angina medication away from his bed, so he cannot reach it in the night. Like Othello, he opts for suicide. One wonders if Norton had foreseen that his behaviour would lead to his own murder. You could argue that Norton was supremely successful, even goading the great Hercule Poirot to commit murder.

Poirot and Hastings both end up in this final book by each taking a human life. Poirot brings down his final curtain with the most perfect of locked room murders, which can never be solved by any one else, and then bows out:

'I prefer to leave myself in the hands of the *bon Dieu*.'

[SH]