

Agatha Christie's Poirot

The Life and Times of Hercule Poirot



Anne Hart

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The definitive companion to the POIROT novels, films and TV appearances. 'My name is Hercule Poirot and I am probably the greatest detective in the world.' The dapper, moustache-twirling little Belgian with the egg-shaped head, curious mannerisms and inordinate respect for his own 'little grey cells' has solved some of the most puzzling crimes of the century. Yet despite being familiar to millions, Poirot himself has remained an enigma – until now. From his first appearance in 1920 to his last in 1975, from country-house drawing-rooms to opium dens in Limehouse, from Mayfair to the Mediterranean, Anne Hart stalks the legendary sleuth, unveiling the mysteries that surround him. Sifting through 33 novels and 56 short stories, she examines his origins, tastes, relationships and peculiarities, revealing a character as fascinating as the books themselves.

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**AGATHA CHRISTIE'S POIROT
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF HERCULE POIROT**

Anne Hart

HARPER

For Susan, Peter and Stephen

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PREFACE

This is a biography of the illustrious Hercule Poirot who, behind a façade of dandyisms and mannerisms, was as shrewd and subtle a detective as ever walked the streets of London. For his creator, the incomparable Agatha Christie, he was at times a torment. In 1938, a mere twenty-two years after his genesis, she exclaimed in an interview: ‘There are moments when I have felt: “Why-Why-Why did I ever invent this detestable, bombastic, tiresome little creature? ... Eternally straightening things, eternally boasting, eternally twirling his moustaches and tilting his egg-shaped head” ... I point out that by a few strokes of the pen ... I could destroy him utterly. He replies, grandiloquently: “Impossible to get rid of Poirot like that! He is much too clever.”’ Indeed he was. Poirot knew a supreme story-teller when he found one and never let go. For him she set her most perfect puzzles, thereby achieving immortality for them both.

As with my biography of Agatha Christie’s other major detective, Miss Jane Marple, I owe a great debt of thanks to Rosalind Hicks, Agatha Christie’s daughter, for her kind permission to use her mother’s writing in this way. In working on this second book I have also received the benefit and pleasure of her direct encouragement and hospitality, for which I am immensely grateful. I would also like to thank Anthony Hicks for his lively and helpful comments at the early stages, particularly on the ever controversial matter of Hercule Poirot’s age.

Two people have helped me enormously in the writing of this book. Peter Hart’s knowledgeable, rigorous and witty editing has saved me from many a pitfall (the ones that remain are entirely of my own digging), and Vernon Barber’s encouragement and assistance from the very beginning made the whole enterprise possible. I am grateful as well to Debbie Edgecombe for her heroic and intelligent deciphering of a seemingly interminable number of drafts and revisions. I would also like to thank Brian Stone, my astute and encouraging agent, Bob Comber, his assistant, Nancy Grenville, who gave discerning attention to the final draft, Christopher Burton, who kindly pursued the mystery of Poirot’s telephone numbers in the archives of British Telecom, and Pamela Hodgson who helped so much in the final stages.

Finally, at risk of appearing precious, I would like to thank Hercule Poirot. In my preoccupation for almost two years with this endearing and elegant little detective, there have been many moments of trepidation and exasperation. At the end of it all Poirot is firmly in my heart, a delightful condition I share with millions of readers. All of us are indebted to his inspired creator and sternest critic, Agatha Christie.

Anne Hart

1 THE CURTAIN RISES

'My name,' said Poirot, contriving as usual to make the simple statement sound like the curtain of the first act of a play, 'my name is Hercule Poirot.'

—THE LABOURS OF HERCULES

That benevolent despot, Hercule Poirot, who to this day keeps a firm grasp on the affection of countless subjects, made his debut as a fully formed foreign eccentric on page 34 of his creator's first book, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. On page 35 Cynthia Murdoch of Styles Court made a pioneer English attempt to describe him. 'He's a dear little man,' she said.

Her remark was to stand the test of time wonderfully well, though not everyone who was to meet Poirot over the next six decades – especially not those attempting to cover up crimes – would agree with her. 'You unutterable little jackanapes of a foreigner!' more than one was to cry, purple with rage. Poirot himself would have been annoyed if he had heard Cynthia's remark. 'My name is Hercule Poirot,' he was apt to say to those not appropriately impressed, 'and I am probably the greatest detective in the world.'

A number of Christie scholars have debated his origins. The most important clues, of course, have been provided by Agatha Christie herself. In 1916, in her twenty-sixth year, she set herself the task of writing a detective novel:

Who could I have as a detective? I reviewed such detectives as I had met and admired in books. There was Sherlock Holmes, the one and only – I should never be able to emulate *him*. There was Arsène Lupin – was he a criminal or a detective? Anyway, not my kind. There was the young journalist Rouletabille in *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* – that was the *sort* of person whom I would like to invent ... then I remembered our Belgian refugees. We had quite a colony of refugees living in the parish of Tor ... Why not make my detective a Belgian? I thought. There were all types of refugees. How about a refugee police officer? A retired police officer. Not too young a one ...

Anyway, I settled on a Belgian detective. I allowed him slowly to grow into his part. He should have been an inspector, so that he would have a certain knowledge of crime. He would be meticulous, very tidy ... always arranging things, liking things in pairs, liking things square instead of round. And he should be very brainy – he should have little grey cells of the mind – that was a good phrase: I must remember that – yes, he would have little grey cells.

Other possible predecessors and contemporaries have been suggested: G. K. Chesterton's Hercule Flambeau, Robert Barr's Eugène Valmont, A. E. W. Mason's Inspector Hanaud, Marie Belloc Lowndes's Hercules Popeau, and inevitably – despite Agatha Christie's disclaimer – Sherlock Holmes.

Like Holmes, Poirot was vain, brilliant, and a bachelor; like Holmes he possessed, in Arthur Hastings, a faithful Watson; and, as readers will discover, there occur from time to time in the Poirot canon situations and frames of mind distinctly Holmesian. 'Ah, well,' as Poirot himself said complacently in *Cards on the Table*, 'I am not above stealing the tricks of others.' He knew perfectly well who he was. He was the one and only, the unique Hercule Poirot. If *he* had been asked about origins, I imagine him stroking his moustaches, his eyes as green as a cat's. 'Once upon a time,' he might have replied, with an imperious wave of his hand, 'there was born in the kingdom of Belgium a baby with an egg-shaped head ...'

The kingdom of Belgium was – and still is – a neat, cautious, Catholic country that knows what it's about. Family businesses flourish. Education and the arts are taken seriously and so is food. Its restaurants are well known to gourmets and its pastry chefs are famous.

Its capital, Brussels – the city where Poirot was probably born, and certainly flourished for many years – possesses what is probably the most beautiful and sociable square in Europe, the *Grand Place*. Here, high atop the magnificent Hôtel de Ville, a gilded figure of St Michael watches over the

city. It is perfectly possible that, once upon a time, St Michael watched a procession of Poirots taking a new baby to church to be christened.

When was Hercule Poirot born? In what he himself would have called 'supreme exercises of imagination', a number of serious attempts have been made to pinpoint one improbable year or another. Usually these calculations depend on a remark of Poirot's in *Three Act Tragedy* that he was 'due' to retire from the Belgian Police Force at the time of the outbreak of the First World War. Making an undocumented guess at a retirement age of sixty to sixty-five years, the conclusion has then been reached that he was born between 1849 and 1854.¹

Tempting as it is to reconstruct a chronological Poirot in this matter of age – particularly as he was still flourishing in the early 1970s – I suspect that Agatha Christie, and Poirot himself, would have been amused by all this arithmetic. In context, Poirot seems to be a man in his late fifties or early sixties when he arrives in England and somewhere in his mid-eighties in *Curtain*, his last case. That close to sixty years of elegant ageing elapsed between, with never a diminution of his grey cells, was a *tour de force* for his adroit creator and one of Poirot's great charms. 'Men have as many years as they feel,' says an Italian proverb. In this matter of years, and of his age at any particular time, Poirot was always extremely – and wisely – reticent.

In *The Labours of Hercules* Dr Burton, a Fellow of All Souls College, ruminated on Hercule Poirot's first name. 'Hardly a *Christian* name,' he pointed out. 'Definitely pagan. But why? That's what I want to know. Father's fancy? Mother's whim?' Whether moved by fancy or whim, the Poirots showed no timidity. In an inspired moment they delved into Greek mythology and named their son after Hercules the Strong, the mightiest of the ancient heroes. Poirot himself loved his name; it was to prove a glorious compensation for his diminutive size. 'It is the name of one of the great ones of this world,' he boasted in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*.²

All his life Poirot preferred privacy and was particularly unforthcoming about his earlier (and long) life in Belgium. References to his past are rare, but in *Three Act Tragedy* we are permitted an insight into his childhood: 'See you, as a boy I was poor. There were many of us. We had to get on in the world.' One glimpses the Poirots again, hard-working and close-knit, in his lifelong devotion to The Family. 'I am very strong on the family life, as you know,' he declared to Hastings on one occasion, and 'Family strength is a marvellous thing,' he said on another.

Papa Poirot is scarcely mentioned. All evidence suggests that the mother was the strong one in this family. 'Madam, we, in our country, have a great tenderness, a great respect for the mother. The *mère de famille*, she is everything!' was how he introduced himself to a matron in 'The King of Clubs'; and 'I comprehend the mother's heart. No one comprehends it better than I, Hercule Poirot,' he told the Dowager Duchess of Merton in *Lord Edgware Dies*. Throughout his life he was to stand in awe of mothers. 'Mothers, Madame, are particularly ruthless when their children are in danger,' he said to a somewhat enigmatic one in *Death on the Nile*. Perhaps Madame Poirot had cause to be formidable? One imagines her determined and orderly, keeping strict accounts, supervising lessons, fighting against considerable odds to bring her children up to be good little *bourgeois*, and insisting, in their small quarters, that everyone have good manners and be very neat. Is it Madame Poirot we are seeing, shepherding her large flock to church, in Poirot's recollection of how women looked in his youth: '... a coiffure high and rigid – so – and the hat attached with many hatpins – là – là – là et là.'

But life was not all obedience and hard work. Madame Poirot's children had some good times as well. '*Les Feux d'Artifices*, the Party, the Games with balls,' recalled Poirot in *Peril at End House*. Little Hercule must have been especially enthralled with 'the conjurer, the man who deceives the eye, however carefully it watches'. And they all must have had a splendid time at the *Ommegang*, the great holiday in July when the *Grand Place* is thronged with merrymakers. Like most Europeans, however, Poirot regarded childhood as not a particularly desirable state, but as something to be got over with as quickly as possible. In *Mrs McGinty's Dead*, listening to Superintendent Spence dwell in nostalgic detail on the pleasure of childhood:

Poirot waited politely. This was one of the moments when, even after half a lifetime in the country, he found the English incomprehensible. He himself had played at *Cache Cache* in his childhood, but he felt no desire to talk about it or even think about it.

What of his brothers and sisters? 'There were many of us,' he told Mr Satterthwaite, but there is a mention of only one of them in all the Poirot literature, and it is a mention that is quickly erased. In the original version of 'The Chocolate Box', a short story that recalls his earlier days in Belgium, Poirot says:

'I was informed that a young lady was demanding me. Thinking that it was, perhaps, my little sister Yvonne, I prayed my landlady to make her mount.'³

Later versions of this story omit this reference to Yvonne, but it does provide an affectionate glimpse of Poirot as an older brother, a glimpse reflected in an avuncular way a generation later in *Cards on the Table* when Poirot says to a young woman:

'It is, you understand, that Christmas is coming on. I have to buy presents for many nieces and grand-nieces.'

One has to be a bit wary about this mention of nieces and grand-nieces, however, as Poirot, who practically never mentioned his real family, was apt to invent imaginary relatives to suit his purposes. The most outrageous example of this is the appearance among the *dramatis personae* of *The Big Four* of a twin brother, Achille. When first told of this hitherto unsuspected twin, Hastings was understandably surprised. 'What does he do?' he demanded, 'putting aside a half-formed wonder as to the character and disposition of the late Madame Poirot, and her classical taste in Christian names.' Replied Poirot, smoothly:

'He does nothing. He is, as I tell, of a singularly indolent disposition. But his abilities are hardly less than my own – which is saying a great deal.'

'Is he like you to look at?'

'Not unlike. But not nearly so handsome. And wears no moustaches.'⁴

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* Poirot invented a nephew to extract information from that indomitable purveyor of village news, Miss Caroline Sheppard. 'I never knew that Poirot had an imbecile nephew?' said her brother, Dr Sheppard.

'Didn't you? Oh, he told me all about it. Poor lad. It's a great grief to all the family. They've kept him at home so far, but it's getting to such a pitch that they're afraid he'll have to go into some kind of institution.'

'I suppose you know pretty well everything there is to know about Poirot's family by this time,' I said, exasperated.

'Pretty well,' said Caroline complacently. 'It's a great relief to people to be able to tell all their troubles to some one.'

In *Dumb Witness*, to Hastings's amusement, Poirot produced three more unfortunate relatives: an invalid uncle, a cousin with jaundice, and an ailing but belligerent mother:

This time he had an aged mother for whom he was anxious to find a sympathetic hospital nurse.

'You comprehend – I am going to speak to you quite frankly. My mother, she is difficult. We have had some excellent nurses, young women, fully competent but the very fact that they are young has been against them. My mother dislikes young women, she insults them, she is rude and fractious, she fights against open windows and modern hygiene. It is very difficult.'

There may, of course, have been germs of truth in some of these confidences, but one thing we can be sure of is that Poirot once had a grandfather who possessed 'a large turnip of a watch' (Hastings called it 'a large grotesque turnip of a watch') and that Poirot fell heir to it. 'Take my watch in your hand – with care,' he once instructed. 'It is a family heirloom!'

As a young child, Poirot, a good little Catholic, was 'educated by the nuns'. There is an evocative scene in 'The Apples of the Hesperides' when, working on a case in Ireland, he heard the tolling of a convent bell. At once he was transported back in time: 'He understood that bell. It was a sound he had

been familiar with from early youth.' He may have heard it with mixed feelings. In *Five Little Pigs* there is a clue that his convent school had its share of dragons. In meeting 'the shrewd, penetrating glance' of a retired governess, Poirot 'once again felt the years falling away and himself a meek and apprehensive little boy'.

As to his later education – and despite Dr Burton's suspicions that he was never properly taught the classics – Poirot appears to have undergone a thorough and conventional schooling including the study of English, German and Italian in addition, of course, to the two languages of Belgium, French and Flemish. 'Alas, there is no proper education nowadays,' he lamented in *After the Funeral*. 'Apparently one learns nothing but economics – and how to set Intelligence Tests!'

It is not easy to imagine Poirot as a youth, his moustache in mere infancy, but bits and pieces emerge in the kindness he later showed to injudicious and awkward young men. 'I cannot overcome my shyness. I say always the wrong thing. I upset water jugs,' confessed one of them in *Murder in Mesopotamia*. "'We all do these things when we are young," said Poirot, smiling. "The poise, the *savoir faire*, it comes later"; and 'It is the time for follies, when one is young,' he said encouragingly to another in 'Christmas Adventure'.⁵

An endearing glimpse of Poirot himself as a youth is provided in *Evil Under the Sun*:

'When I was young (and that, Mademoiselle, is indeed a long time ago) there was a game entitled "*If not yourself, who would you be?*" One wrote the answer in young ladies' albums. They had gold edges and were bound in blue leather.'

From an early age Poirot knew exactly who he would be:

'To most of us the test comes early in life. A man is confronted quite soon with the necessity to stand on his own feet, to face dangers and difficulties and to take his own line of dealing with them.'

And here we have it, the surprising lure to this tidy and diminutive young man of a life of dangers and difficulties. 'I entered the police force,' he told Mr Satterthwaite.⁶

In police circles, in Poirot's day, Belgium, which claimed to have an almost perfect statute book, was considered one of the least policed countries in Europe, so law-abiding were her citizens. Nevertheless, Poirot – who quickly became attached to the judicial police whose duties were to investigate crimes and apprehend offenders – had at least one combative moment. A reminiscence in *Curtain* recalls him in a startling role – Poirot, the Sharpshooter:

'As a young man in the Belgian police force I shot down a desperate criminal who sat on a roof and fired at people below.'

In a few laconic sentences, Poirot, many years later, summed up perhaps forty to forty-five years he spent with the Belgian police:

'I worked hard. Slowly I rose in that force. I began to make a name for myself. I made a name for myself. I began to acquire an international reputation.'

Poirot's career was brilliant. In time he became head of the force. As Hastings described him in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*:

... this quaint dandified little man ... had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police. As a detective, his *flair* had been extraordinary, and he had achieved triumphs by unravelling some of the most baffling cases of the day.

In his English life Poirot occasionally spoke of these Belgian days, and when he did it was almost always of the one case in which he had been utterly fooled.

This dreadful experience was recounted one stormy night as Poirot and Hastings traded confidences before the fire ('Outside, the wind howled malevolently, and the rain beat against the windows in great gusts'). 'You ask me if I have ever made the complete ass of myself, as you say over here?' said Poirot, and there followed the story of 'The Chocolate Box',⁷ a case of a political murder in Brussels in which, outfoxed by a most unlikely killer, he had completely misread the evidence

and nearly arrested the wrong person. '*Sapristi!* It does not bear thinking of!' he cried (but what a consolation for Hastings, one can't help thinking).

Another case Poirot recalled from time to time – 'one of my early successes' – was the affair of the soap manufacturer of Liège, a man of porcine appearance who was found guilty of poisoning his wife in order to marry his secretary. In 'The Nemean Lion', while gazing upon 'the swelling jowl, the small pig eyes, the bulbous nose, and the close-lipped mouth' of his client, Sir Joseph Hoggin, 'a memory stirred dimly. A long time ago ... in Belgium ... something, surely, to do with *soap* ...' On a hunch that his client was up to no good, Poirot immediately recounted the story of The Soapmaker of Liège to Sir Joseph, who went quite pale. Before long his wife, Lady Hoggin, was saying to her husband: 'Funny, this tonic tastes quite different. It hasn't got that bitter taste any more. I wonder why?' Poirot was especially proud of this case. 'Prevention, always, is better than cure,' he said of it in *Hickory Dickory Dock*.

Two collaborations with the British police in these earlier days (Poirot spoke a tolerable, if mannered, English) were to have important consequences as it was through them that he met the ebullient Inspector Jimmy Japp of Scotland Yard. In 1916, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* – Poirot's first case as a private detective in England – he encountered Japp again:

'I fear you do not remember me, Inspector Japp.'

'Why, if it isn't Mr Poirot!' cried the Inspector. He turned to the other man. 'You've heard me speak of Mr Poirot? It was in 1904 he and I worked together – the Abercrombie forgery case – you remember, he was run down in Brussels. Ah, those were great days, *moosier*. Then, do you remember "Baron" Altara? There was a pretty rogue for you! He eluded the clutches of half the police in Europe. But we nailed him in Antwerp – thanks to Mr Poirot here.'

After this, Japp took Poirot under his wing – or was it the other way around? No matter, in England their guarded friendship would flourish for years.

In the long run, the most significant link Poirot forged with England in his Belgian days was the assistance he gave to Arthur Hastings, a young employee of Lloyd's. The nature of the business that brought Hastings from London to Brussels is not recorded, but through it he met Poirot and fell hopelessly under his spell. Hastings was ripe for this. 'Well, I've always had a secret hankering to be a detective!' he confessed to a new friend in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

'The real thing – Scotland Yard? Or Sherlock Holmes?'

'Oh, Sherlock Holmes by all means. But really, seriously, I am awfully drawn to it.'

Hastings came back from Belgium inspired and reciting, at every opportunity, 'the various exploits and triumphs of Hercule Poirot'. That in a few years he would be permitted to work under the tutelage of this great man would have been, at that time, the stuff of his wildest dreams.

As we have seen, Poirot was due to retire in about 1914. Perhaps he had already begun to plan a quiet new life amidst '*les dunes impeccables*' of Knocke-sur-Mer? In August of 1914, however, catastrophe struck with the invasion of neutral Belgium by Germany. The Great War had begun.

The years of German occupation were a period of great suffering for Belgium. Under a German governor, many Belgians who refused to collaborate were executed or deported. In defiance workers withdrew their services, universities voluntarily closed, and newspapers ceased publication. A British heroine, Edith Cavell, the Matron of the Belgian School of Nursing, was shot for aiding escaped Allied soldiers. Countless patriots went underground.

Somewhere in this resistance, we may be sure, was Poirot. As chief of a police force that declined to co-operate, he would have been a prime target for imprisonment by *les Bosches* – or worse, for under the occupation the penalty for those in the Belgian intelligence service was death. For almost two years Poirot dropped from sight. Evidence of his importance to the resistance surfaced towards the end of the war in the case of 'The Kidnapped Prime Minister', a commission which came from the highest levels of the British Government. 'What made you come to me?' he asked a delegation from the War Cabinet. 'I am unknown, obscure in this great London of yours.' From

the reply it is clear that it had been King Albert himself, the Belgians' monarch in exile, who had suggested his small compatriot as the one person in England capable of wresting a missing prime minister from the enemy.

In the spring of 1916 the Germans must have been closing in on Poirot. Badly wounded, he was smuggled out of Belgium into France. Years later, in *Murder on the Orient Express*, he reminded a French General of the debt he owed him:

'But indeed, do I not remember that once you saved my life?' And then the General had made another fitting reply to that, disclaiming any merit for that past service; and with more mention of France, of Belgium, of glory, of honour and of such kindred things they had embraced each other heartily.

From France Poirot came, 'a sad and weary refugee to England'.

From the outset of the war the English had opened their hearts and homes to Belgian refugees. 'REMEMBER BELGIUM', admonished enlistment posters, and '*Vivent les braves Belges!*' was the cry, even some seven years later, of the young people in 'Christmas Adventure'. Hard-working officials toiled to place these bewildered exiles with appropriate benefactors. Where, they must have wondered, should they send this funny little policeman? Perhaps to Mrs Inglethorp?

Emily Inglethorp, the autocratic mistress of Styles Court in the pretty Essex village of Styles St Mary, had already established a colony of six Belgians in a small cottage called Leastways, not far from the park gates. In the early summer of 1916 her seventh refugee limped down from a train at the village station.

'A kind lady gave me hospitality,' said Poirot of Mrs Inglethorp. 'We Belgians will always remember her with gratitude.' At Leastways he was given an upstairs room and there he seems to have spent most of his days sitting by a window overlooking the village street, smoking an occasional Russian cigarette, and pondering his fate. 'You may speak for yourself, Hastings,' said Poirot in *Curtain*. 'For me, my arrival at Styles St Mary was a sad and painful time. I was a refugee, wounded, exiled from home and country, existing by charity in a foreign land.'

What was he to do now, the famous Hercule Poirot, suddenly without aim and far from young? Time must have passed very slowly in this quiet sanctuary 'in the midst of green fields and country lanes'.

I am sure that, as an occasional diversion, Poirot and his compatriots were hospitably summoned to Styles Court – Styles, as the family called it – to have tea with Mrs Inglethorp and her *ménage*. At Mrs Inglethorp's side would have been her new husband, her junior by twenty years, the black-bearded Alfred Inglethorp (the 'fortune hunter', her bitter family called him). The refugees would have been introduced as well to Mrs Inglethorp's two stepsons from an earlier marriage, John Cavendish, who played at being a country squire, and Lawrence, who published 'rotten verses in fancy bindings'. And they would have met Mary, John Cavendish's stormy-eyed wife, and plucky Cynthia Murdoch, another of Mrs Inglethorp's protégées.

'You've been entertaining a celebrity unawares,' Hastings was to tell them later, and it is interesting to imagine Poirot observing this promising group as he politely sipped a cup of the dreaded English tea. Perhaps, for the first time since coming to England, a gleam of professional interest appeared in those inquiring green eyes?

NOTES

¹ For reasons not explained, some researchers and obituaries have taken a mention in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* that Poirot and Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard first met in Brussels in 1904, while working on the Abercrombie Forgery Case, as the year of Poirot's retirement and have concluded that he was born between 1839 and 1844. Assumptions have then been made that he worked as a private detective in Belgium or France between 1904 and 1914. Adding to the confusion, a charming but suspect foreword to *Hercule Poirot: Master Detective*, an omnibus collection published in 1936, has Poirot stating: 'I began work as a member of the detective force in Brussels on the Abercrombie Forgery Case in 1904.' As we know Poirot joined the Belgian police force as a young man, this red herring would have us believe he was born about 1884 and arrived in England at about the age of thirty-two.

² His family name was to cause difficulties later on. Pwarrit, Porritt, Peerer, Porrott and Prott were some of the ways the English attempted to pronounce it. On three different occasions, in the interests of subterfuge, Poirot himself garbled his name and gave it as Poirier, Pontarlier and Parotti.

³ First published as 'The Clue of the Chocolate Box' in *The Sketch*, 23 May 1923.

⁴ Some prefer to believe that a triple bluff was played in *The Big Four* and that Achille really did exist, despite Poirot's assurances that 'Brother Achille has gone home again – to the land of myths.'

⁵ This quotation is from 'Christmas Adventure', the first version of 'The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding'.

⁶ In one of his last cases, *Hallowe'en Party*, Poirot expressed a slight change of mind: 'There were times when he almost regretted that he had not taken to the study of theology, instead of going into the police force in his early days. The number of angels who could dance on the point of a needle; it would be interesting to feel that that mattered and to argue passionately on the point with one's colleagues.'

⁷ Also published under the titles 'The Clue of the Chocolate Box' and 'The Time Hercule Poirot Failed'. There is some confusion as to when this case actually occurred. In *Cards on the Table*, set in 1937, Poirot spoke of it as having happened 'twenty-eight years ago', which places it in 1909, but in *Peril at End House* he referred to it as 'a bad failure in Belgium in 1893'.

2 THE ENGLISH DEBUT

'He stepped forward, beaming'.

—'The Affair at the Victory Ball'

Towards five o'clock on the afternoon of 17 July 1916, an incongruous figure advanced steadily upon the post office of the village of Styles St Mary:

... an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg ... His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible.

It was Poirot, limping gallantly and no doubt bored to tears. On that fateful afternoon, however, deliverance from *ennui* was at hand, for out of the post office, and straight into Poirot, there catapulted a large boyish man. As Hastings was later to write:

I drew aside and apologized, when suddenly, with a loud exclamation, he clasped me in his arms and kissed me warmly. '*Mon ami* Hastings!' he cried. 'It is indeed *mon ami* Hastings!'

The surprise and excitement of Captain Arthur Hastings at this chance meeting equalled Poirot's. Had he not, just a few days before, described this very gnome to Mary Cavendish?

'I came across a man in Belgium once, a very famous detective, and he quite inflamed me. He was a marvellous little fellow. He used to say that all good detective work was a mere matter of method ... He was a funny little man, a great dandy, but wonderfully clever.'

After further exclamations and explanations, and after promising to visit Poirot at the refugees' cottage, Hastings returned to Styles, where he had recently arrived to stay with the Cavendishes during the last of his convalescence from a war injury. But what a momentous encounter occurred on that warm sleepy day! No doubt the post office of Styles St Mary now bears a plaque commemorating the genesis of Poirot's English career? For early the next morning the household at Styles was awakened by agonized sounds coming from Mrs Inglethorp's bedroom. Someone had poisoned her with strychnine.

'I am going to ask you something,' said Hastings to his old friend, John Cavendish, within an hour of his stepmother's death. 'You remember my speaking of my friend Poirot? The Belgian who is here? He has been a most famous detective ... I want you to let me call him in – to investigate this matter.' So began an illustrious association that was to span almost sixty years, and so began that celebrated landmark of detective fiction, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

Styles!

'We will proceed to the château,' said Poirot, when summoned, 'and study matters on the spot.' How many millions have since gazed upon the historic plan of the eleven bedrooms and the one bathroom of Styles Court drawn by Arthur Hastings in 1916?¹

It was a household at war. Petrol was rationed. Supper was at half-past seven ('We have given up late dinner for some time now'). Every scrap of paper was saved and sent away in sacks. Only three gardeners were left (one of them 'a new-fashioned woman gardener in breeches and such-like'). John Cavendish helped with the farms and drilled with the volunteers. Mary Cavendish was up and dressed in her white land smock every morning at five. Cynthia Murdoch worked in the dispensary of the nearby Red Cross Hospital. The formidable Mrs Inglethorp continually presided at patriotic events. A German spy (soon to be unmasked) dropped by from time to time. And, nearby, Leastways Cottage sheltered seven refugees, 'them Belgies'.

'WEALTHY LADY POISONED', trumpeted the newspapers, and Styles was under siege. At the inquest held a few days later at the Stylites Arms, Poirot recognized an old colleague and nudged Hastings. 'Do you know who that little man is?' he asked, indicating someone 'sharp, dark, ferret-faced' near the door. Hastings shook his head. 'That is Inspector James Japp of Scotland Yard,' replied Poirot. 'Jimmy Japp.'

Thus, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, published in 1920, are to be found the archetypal ingredients of many a future adventure – a wilful murder committed amid pleasant surroundings, and a solution at length achieved by a small foreign man with an egg-shaped head. Helping and hindering will be the bluff and energetic Inspector James Japp of Scotland Yard and, faithfully recording it all for posterity, the devoted Arthur Hastings, ever bewildered, ever admiring. It was to prove a great run. 'Ah!' Hastings was to write many, many years later, 'if this could have been that day in 1916 when I first travelled to Styles ...'

The Styles mystery and the subsequent murder trial at the Old Bailey occupied everyone concerned for several months. Wrote Hastings:

September found us all in London. Mary took a house in Kensington, Poirot being included in the family party.

I myself had been given a job at the War Office, so was able to see them continually.

It was probably while staying with the Cavendishes that Poirot, no longer limping, began looking for a more permanent home. A later story, 'The Lemesurier Inheritance', indicates that at about this time Poirot was asked to undertake a small matter for the War Office. Perhaps he took this as a sign? Why return to the rural obscurity of Styles St Mary? As he later told Mr Satterthwaite, the Styles Affair had given him fresh confidence:

'I found that I was not yet finished. No, indeed, my powers were stronger than ever. Then began my second career – that of a private inquiry agent in England.'

Poirot's new enterprise was no doubt launched by the ordering of appropriate business cards and a search for suitable quarters. And, for guidance through the thickets of English customs and manners, who could be better than Arthur Hastings, now invalided out of the army and assigned a London job at recruiting? Firmly bonded to Poirot by the Styles Affair, and still hoping to become a detective himself, Hastings stuck to Poirot like glue.

In time Poirot would become the most fashionable detective in London and would live in considerable style, but at the outset he took modest rooms, often shared by Hastings, and endured certain privations:

Poirot had just finished carefully straightening the cups and saucers which our landlady was in the habit of throwing, rather than placing, on the table. He had also breathed heavily on the metal teapot, and polished it with a silk handkerchief.

In these surroundings Poirot commenced his practice as a private detective, and Hastings began to look forward to each evening's account of the cases on hand. Several bread-and-butter years passed pleasantly enough and then, at last, Poirot received a commission of major consequence. As Hastings described it, he had just settled down one evening to listen to developments in the current investigation, a charlady's missing husband ('A difficult affair, needing the tact'), when:

... the landlady thrust her head round the door and informed him there were two gentlemen below who wanted to see him.

'They won't give their names, Sir, but they say as it's very important.'

'Let them mount,' said Poirot ...

In a few minutes the two visitors were ushered in, and my heart gave a leap as in the foremost I recognized no less a personage than Lord Estair, Leader of the House of Commons; whilst his companion, Mr Bernard Dodge, was also a member of the War Cabinet, and, as I knew, a close personal friend of the Prime Minister.

Clients worthy of Poirot's mettle at last! And what a case they brought to his sitting-room – the disappearance of the Prime Minister on the eve of the approaching Allied Conference at Versailles. Said a grave Lord Estair:

'We sought you out on the express recommendation and wish of a very great man of your own country.'

'Comment? My old friend the *Préfet* – ?'

Lord Estair shook his head.

'One higher than the *Préfet*. One whose word was once law in Belgium – and shall be again! That England has sworn!'

Poirot's hand flew swiftly to a dramatic salute.

'Amen to that!'

In the melodramatic episode that followed, 'The Kidnapped Prime Minister', which, one wonders, was sweeter for Poirot – foiling a desperate set of German agents, or succeeding where the French police and Detective Inspector Japp had failed? Wrote Hastings of this affair, his eye already on posterity:

'I feel it is only just that England should know the debt it owes to my quaint little friend, whose marvellous brain so ably averted a great catastrophe.'

Whether the charlady's husband was ever found is not recorded.

Soon after this *coup* there occurred a case that Hastings grandly and prematurely called 'the ultimate problem brought to Poirot to solve'. This harked back to 1916 when Hastings had renewed his acquaintance with Captain Vincent Lemesurier, a fellow officer from an old Northumberland family. Remembering her husband's account of his introduction to Poirot two years before, Mrs Lemesurier, a troubled and determined mother, sought his assistance in exorcizing the family's medieval curse. Were all first-born Lemesurier sons doomed to die before inheriting the estate? In the short story, 'The Lemesurier Inheritance', Poirot, at work like 'an intelligent terrier', proved that they need not.

In the spring of 1919, as England celebrated the end of the Great War, young Viscount Cronshaw was stabbed to death at a grand victory ball. 'Every twopenny-halfpenny hop calls itself that nowadays, but this was the real thing, held at the Colossus Hall, and all London at it,' reported Japp, dropping by Poirot's rooms to invite him to lend a hand in tracking the Viscount's murderer – or, as Hastings observed, 'seeking favours under the guise of conferring them!' Poirot had 'a good opinion of Japp's abilities, though deploring his lamentable lack of method' and, probably realizing how much Japp must have smarted over the case of the kidnapped prime minister, he consented to join in the hunt. In 'The Affair at the Victory Ball' he cracked open a sensational cocaine case involving such Bright Young Things as Miss Coco Courtenay and the Honourable Eustace Beltane. '*Une belle affaire!*' Poirot later pronounced it, celebrating at a '*recherche* little supper'.

With these four cases – the unmasking of a country house murderer, the rescue of a prime minister, the laying of a family ghost, and the solving of a Mayfair stabbing – Poirot's credentials as a private detective of brilliance and discretion were assured. Furthermore, he had found a new home and a new purpose. For the next half century his energies would be almost entirely devoted to the remarkable crimes of the bloodthirsty English.

NOTES

1 Even though Hastings was rapidly falling in love with Cynthia Murdoch, he misspelled her name on the plan.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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