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Curtain: Poirot's Last Case

Written by Agatha Christie

Published by Harper

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Agatha Christie

Curtain: Poirot's Last Case

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An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2013

First published in Great Britain by
Collins 1975

Agatha Christie® Poirot® Curtain: Poirot's Last Case™
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www.agathachristie.com

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-00-752760-1

Set in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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CHAPTER 1

Who is there who has not felt a sudden startled pang at reliving an old experience, or feeling an old emotion?

'*I have done this before…*'

Why do those words always move one so profoundly?

That was the question I asked myself as I sat in the train watching the flat Essex landscape outside.

How long ago was it that I had taken this selfsame journey? Had felt (ridiculously) that the best of life was over for me! Wounded in that war that for me would always be *the* war—the war that was wiped out now by a second and a more desperate war.

It had seemed in 1916 to young Arthur Hastings that he was already old and mature. How little had I realized that, for me, life was only then beginning.

I had been journeying, though I did not know it, to meet the man whose influence over me was to shape and mould my life. Actually, I had been going to stay with my old friend, John Cavendish, whose mother, recently remarried,

had a country house named Styles. A pleasant renewing of old acquaintanceships, that was all I had thought it, not foreseeing that I was shortly to plunge into all the dark embroilments of a mysterious murder.

It was at Styles that I had met again that strange little man, Hercule Poirot, whom I had first come across in Belgium.

How well I remembered my amazement when I had seen the limping figure with the large moustache coming up the village street.

Hercule Poirot! Since those days he had been my dearest friend, his influence had moulded my life. In company with him, in the hunting down of yet another murderer, I had met my wife, the truest and sweetest companion any man could have had.

She lay now in Argentine soil, having died as she would have wished, with no long drawn out suffering, or feebleness of old age. But she had left a very lonely and unhappy man behind her.

Ah! If I could go back—live life all over again. If this could have been that day in 1916 when I first travelled to Styles… What changes had taken place since then! What gaps amongst the familiar faces! Styles itself had been sold by the Cavendishes. John Cavendish was dead, though his wife, Mary (that fascinating enigmatical creature), was still alive, living in Devonshire. Laurence was living with his wife and children in South Africa. Changes—changes everywhere.

But *one* thing, strangely enough, was the same. I was going to Styles to meet Hercule Poirot.

How stupefied I had been to receive his letter, with its heading Styles Court, Styles, Essex.

I had not seen my old friend for nearly a year. The last time I had seen him I had been shocked and saddened. He was now a very old man, and almost crippled with arthritis. He had gone to Egypt in the hopes of improving his health, but had returned, so his letter told me, rather worse than better. Nevertheless, he wrote cheerfully…

And does it not intrigue you, my friend, to see the address from which I write? It recalls old memories, does it not? Yes, I am here, at Styles. Figure to yourself, it is now what they call a guest house. Run by one of your so British old Colonels—very 'old school tie' and 'Poona'. It is his wife, bien entendu, *who makes it pay. She is a good manager, that one, but the tongue like vinegar, and the poor Colonel, he suffers much from it. If it were me I would take a hatchet to her!*

I saw their advertisement in the paper, and the fancy took me to go once again to the place which first was my home in this country. At my age one enjoys reliving the past.

Then figure to yourself, I find here a gentleman, a baronet who is a friend of the employer of your daughter. (That phrase it sounds a little like the French exercise, does it not?)

Immediately I conceive a plan. He wishes to induce the Franklins to come here for the summer. I in my turn

will persuade you and we shall be all together, en famille. *It will be most agreeable. Therefore, mon cher Hastings,* dépêchez-vous, *arrive with the utmost celerity. I have commanded for you a room with bath (it is modernized now, you comprehend, the dear old Styles) and disputed the price with Mrs Colonel Luttrell until I have made an arrangement* très bon marché.

The Franklins and your charming Judith have been here for some days. It is all arranged, so make no histories.

A bientôt,

Yours always, Hercule Poirot

The prospect was alluring, and I fell in with my old friend's wishes without demur. I had no ties and no settled home. Of my children, one boy was in the Navy, the other married and running the ranch in the Argentine. My daughter Grace was married to a soldier and was at present in India. My remaining child, Judith, was the one whom secretly I had always loved best, although I had never for one moment understood her. A queer, dark, secretive child, with a passion for keeping her own counsel, which had sometimes affronted and distressed me. My wife had been more understanding. It was, she assured me, no lack of trust or confidence on Judith's part, but a kind of fierce compulsion. But she, like myself, was sometimes worried about the child. Judith's feelings, she said, were too intense, too concentrated, and her instinctive reserve deprived her of any safety valve. She had queer fits of brooding silence and a fierce, almost bitter power of partisanship. Her brains were the best of the

family and we gladly fell in with her wish for a university education. She had taken her B.Sc. about a year ago, and had then taken the post of secretary to a doctor who was engaged in research work connected with tropical disease. His wife was somewhat of an invalid.

I had occasionally had qualms as to whether Judith's absorption in her work, and devotion to her employer, were not signs that she might be losing her heart, but the business-like footing of their relationship assured me.

Judith was, I believed, fond of me, but she was very undemonstrative by nature, and she was often scornful and impatient of what she called my sentimental and outworn ideas. I was, frankly, a little nervous of my daughter!

At this point my meditations were interrupted by the train drawing up at the station of Styles St Mary. That at least had not changed. Time had passed it by. It was still perched up in the midst of fields, with apparently no reason for existence.

As my taxi passed through the village, though, I realized the passage of years. Styles St Mary was altered out of all recognition. Petrol stations, a cinema, two more inns and rows of council houses.

Presently we turned in at the gate of Styles. Here we seemed to recede again from modern times. The park was much as I remembered it, but the drive was badly kept and much overgrown with weeds growing up over the gravel. We turned a corner and came in view of the house. It was unaltered from the outside and badly needed a coat of paint.

As on my arrival all those years ago, there was a woman's figure stooping over one of the garden beds. My heart

missed a beat. Then the figure straightened up and came towards me, and I laughed at myself. No greater contrast to the robust Evelyn Howard could have been imagined.

This was a frail elderly lady, with an abundance of curly white hair, pink cheeks, and a pair of cold pale blue eyes that were widely at variance with the easy geniality of her manner, which was frankly a shade too gushing for my taste.

'It'll be Captain Hastings now, won't it?' she demanded. 'And me with my hands all over dirt and not able to shake hands. We're delighted to see you here—the amount we've heard about you! I must introduce myself. I'm Mrs Luttrell. My husband and I bought this place in a fit of madness and have been trying to make a paying concern of it. I never thought the day would come when I'd be a hotel keeper! But I'll warn you, Captain Hastings, I'm a very business-like woman. I pile up the extras all I know how.'

We both laughed as though at an excellent joke, but it occurred to me that what Mrs Luttrell had just said was in all probability the literal truth. Behind the veneer of her charming old lady manner, I caught a glimpse of flint-like hardness.

Although Mrs Luttrell occasionally affected a faint brogue, she had no Irish blood. It was a mere affectation.

I enquired after my friend.

'Ah, poor little M. Poirot. The way he's been looking forward to your coming. It would melt a heart of stone. Terribly sorry I am for him, suffering the way he does.'

We were walking towards the house and she was peeling off her gardening gloves.

'And your pretty daughter, too,' she went on. 'What a lovely girl she is. We all admire her tremendously. But I'm old-fashioned, you know, and it seems to me a shame and a sin that a girl like that, that ought to be going to parties and dancing with young men, should spend her time cutting up rabbits and bending over a microscope all day. Leave that sort of thing to the frumps, I say.'

'Where is Judith?' I asked. 'Is she somewhere about?'

Mrs Luttrell made what children call 'a face'.

'Ah, the poor girl. She's cooped up in that studio place down at the bottom of the garden. Dr Franklin rents it from me and he's had it all fitted up. Hutches of guinea pigs he's got there, the poor creatures, and mice and rabbits. I'm not sure that I like all this science, Captain Hastings. Ah, here's my husband.'

Colonel Luttrell had just come round the corner of the house. He was a very tall, attenuated old man, with a cadaverous face, mild blue eyes and a habit of irresolutely tugging at his little white moustache.

He had a vague, rather nervous manner.

'Ah, George, here's Captain Hastings arrived.'

Colonel Luttrell shook hands. 'You came by the five—er—forty, eh?'

'What else should he have come by?' said Mrs Luttrell sharply. 'And what does it matter anyway? Take him up and show him his room, George. And then maybe he'd like to go straight to M. Poirot—or would you rather have tea first?'

I assured her that I did not want tea and would prefer to go and greet my friend.

Colonel Luttrell said, 'Right. Come along. I expect—er—they'll have taken your things up already—eh, Daisy?'

Mrs Luttrell said tartly, 'That's your business, George. I've been gardening. I can't see to everything.'

'No, no, of course not. I—I'll see to it, my dear.'

I followed him up the front steps. In the doorway we encountered a grey-haired man, slightly built, who was hurrying out with a pair of field-glasses. He limped, and had a boyish eager face. He said, stammering slightly: 'There's a pair of n-nesting blackcaps down by the sycamore.'

As we went into the hall, Luttrell said, 'That's Norton. Nice fellow. Crazy about birds.'

In the hall itself, a very big man was standing by the table. He had obviously just finished telephoning. Looking up he said, 'I'd like to hang, draw and quarter all contractors and builders. Never get anything done right, curse 'em.'

His wrath was so comical and so rueful, that we both laughed. I felt very attracted at once towards the man. He was very good-looking, though a man well over fifty, with a deeply tanned face. He looked as though he had led an out-of-doors life, and he looked, too, the type of man that is becoming more and more rare, an Englishman of the old school, straightforward, fond of out-of-doors life, and the kind of man who can command.

I was hardly surprised when Colonel Luttrell introduced him as Sir William Boyd Carrington. He had been, I knew, Governor of a province in India, where he had been a signal success. He was also renowned as a first-class shot and big game hunter. The sort of man, I reflected sadly,

that we no longer seemed to breed in these degenerate days.

'Aha,' he said. 'I'm glad to meet in the flesh that famous personage *mon ami Hastings*.' He laughed. 'The dear old Belgian fellow talks about you a lot, you know. And then, of course, we've got your daughter here. She's a fine girl.'

'I don't suppose Judith talks about me much,' I said, smiling.

'No, no, far too modern. These girls nowadays always seem embarrassed at having to admit to a father or mother at all.'

'Parents,' I said, 'are practically a disgrace.'

He laughed. 'Oh, well—I don't suffer that way. I've no children, worse luck. Your Judith is a very good-looking wench, but terribly high-brow. I find it rather alarming.' He picked up the telephone receiver again. 'Hope you don't mind, Luttrell, if I start damning your exchange to hell. I'm not a patient man.'

'Do 'em good,' said Luttrell.

He led the way upstairs and I followed him. He took me along the left wing of the house to a door at the end, and I realized that Poirot had chosen for me the room I had occupied before.

There were changes here. As I walked along the corridor some of the doors were open and I saw that the old-fashioned large bedrooms had been partitioned off so as to make several smaller ones.

My own room, which had not been large, was unaltered save for the installation of hot and cold water, and part of it had been partitioned off to make a small bathroom. It was

furnished in a cheap modern style which rather disappointed me. I should have preferred a style more nearly approximating to the architecture of the house itself.

My luggage was in my room and the Colonel explained that Poirot's room was exactly opposite. He was about to take me there when a sharp cry of 'George' echoed up from the hall below.

Colonel Luttrell started like a nervous horse. His hand went to his lips.

'I—I—sure you're all right? Ring for what you want—'

'*George*.'

'Coming, my dear, coming.'

He hurried off down the corridor. I stood for a moment looking after him. Then, with my heart beating slightly faster, I crossed the corridor and rapped on the door of Poirot's room.