

*Agatha
Christie*



**POIROT'S
EARLY CASES**

Polrot's Early Cases

Agatha Christie is known throughout the world as the Queen of Crime. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English with another billion in 100 foreign countries. She is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. She is the author of 80 crime novels and short story collections, 19 plays, and six novels written under the name of Mary Westmacott.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was written towards the end of the First World War, in which she served as a VAD. In it she created Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian detective who was destined to become the most popular detective in crime fiction since Sherlock Holmes. It was eventually published by The Bodley Head in 1920.

In 1926, after averaging a book a year, Agatha Christie wrote her masterpiece. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was the first of her books to be published by Collins and marked the beginning of an author-publisher relationship which lasted for 50 years and well over 70 books. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was also the first of Agatha Christie's books to be dramatised – under the name *Alibi* – and to have a successful run in London's West End. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play of all, opened in 1952 and is the longest-running play in history.

Agatha Christie was made a Dame in 1971. She died in 1976, since when a number of books have been published posthumously: the bestselling novel *Sleeping Murder* appeared later that year, followed by her autobiography and the short story collections *Miss Marple's Final Cases*, *Problem at Pollensa Bay* and *While the Light Lasts*. In 1998 *Black Coffee* was the first of her plays to be novelised by another author, Charles Osborne.

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Poirot

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Come, Tell Me How You Live

Play Collections

The Mousetrap and Selected Plays
Witness for the Prosecution and
Selected Plays

Agatha Christie

**Poirot's Early
Cases**

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An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.harpercollins.co.uk

This Agatha Christie Signature Edition published 2002

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First published in Great Britain by
Collins 1974

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(a Chorion company). All rights reserved.
www.agathachristie.com

ISBN-13 978-0-00-712113-7

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

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

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The Affair at The Victory Ball

I

Pure chance led my friend Hercule Poirot, formerly chief of the Belgian force, to be connected with the Styles Case. His success brought him notoriety, and he decided to devote himself to the solving of problems in crime. Having been wounded on the Somme and invalided out of the Army, I finally took up my quarters with him in London. Since I have a first-hand knowledge of most of his cases, it has been suggested to me that I select some of the most interesting and place them on record. In doing so, I feel that I cannot do better than begin with that strange tangle which aroused such widespread public interest at the time. I refer to the affair at the Victory Ball.

Although perhaps it is not so fully demonstrative of Poirot's peculiar methods as some of the more obscure cases, its sensational features, the well-known people involved, and the tremendous publicity given it by the

Press, make it stand out as a *cause célèbre* and I have long felt that it is only fitting that Poirot's connection with the solution should be given to the world.

It was a fine morning in spring, and we were sitting in Poirot's rooms. My little friend, neat and dapper as ever, his egg-shaped head tilted on one side, was delicately applying a new pomade to his moustache. A certain harmless vanity was a characteristic of Poirot's and fell into line with his general love of order and method. The *Daily Newsmonger*, which I had been reading, had slipped to the floor, and I was deep in a brown study when Poirot's voice recalled me.

'Of what are you thinking so deeply, *mon ami*?'

'To tell you the truth,' I replied, 'I was puzzling over this unaccountable affair at the Victory Ball. The papers are full of it.' I tapped the sheet with my finger as I spoke.

'Yes?'

'The more one reads of it, the more shrouded in mystery the whole thing becomes!' I warmed to my subject. 'Who killed Lord Cronshaw? Was Coco Courtenay's death on the same night a mere coincidence? Was it an accident? Or did she deliberately take an overdose of cocaine?' I stopped, and then added dramatically: 'These are the questions I ask myself.'

Poirot, somewhat to my annoyance, did not play up. He was peering into the glass, and merely murmured:

‘Decidedly, this new pomade, it is a marvel for the moustaches!’ Catching my eye, however, he added hastily: ‘Quite so – and how do you reply to your questions?’

But before I could answer, the door opened, and our landlady announced Inspector Japp.

The Scotland Yard man was an old friend of ours and we greeted him warmly.

‘Ah, my good Japp,’ cried Poirot, ‘and what brings you to see us?’

‘Well, Monsieur Poirot,’ said Japp, seating himself and nodding to me, ‘I’m on a case that strikes me as being very much in your line, and I came along to know whether you’d care to have a finger in the pie?’

Poirot had a good opinion of Japp’s abilities, though deploring his lamentable lack of method, but I, for my part, considered that the detective’s highest talent lay in the gentle art of seeking favours under the guise of conferring them!

‘It’s the Victory Ball,’ said Japp persuasively. ‘Come, now, you’d like to have a hand in that.’

Poirot smiled at me.

‘My friend Hastings would, at all events. He was just holding forth on the subject, *n’est-ce pas, mon ami?*’

‘Well, sir,’ said Japp condescendingly, ‘you shall be in it too. I can tell you, it’s something of a feather in

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your cap to have inside knowledge of a case like this. Well, here's to business. You know the main facts of the case, I suppose, Monsieur Poirot?’

‘From the papers only – and the imagination of the journalist is sometimes misleading. Recount the whole story to me.’

Japp crossed his legs comfortably and began.

‘As all the world and his wife knows, on Tuesday last a grand Victory Ball was held. Every twopenny-halfpenny hop calls itself that nowadays, but this was the real thing, held at the Colossus Hall, and all London at it – including your Lord Cronshaw and his party.’

‘His *dossier*?’ interrupted Poirot. ‘I should say his bioscope – no, how do you call it – biograph?’

‘Viscount Cronshaw was fifth viscount, twenty-five years of age, rich, unmarried, and very fond of the theatrical world. There were rumours of his being engaged to Miss Courtenay of the Albany Theatre, who was known to her friends as “Coco” and who was, by all accounts, a very fascinating young lady.’

‘Good. *Continuez!*’

‘Lord Cronshaw’s party consisted of six people: he himself, his uncle, the Honourable Eustace Beltane, a pretty American widow, Mrs Mallaby, a young actor, Chris Davidson, his wife, and last but not least, Miss Coco Courtenay. It was a fancy dress ball, as you

know, and the Cronshaw party represented the old Italian Comedy – whatever that may be.’

‘The *Commedia dell’ Arte*,’ murmured Poirot. ‘I know.’

‘Anyway, the costumes were copied from a set of china figures forming part of Eustace Beltane’s collection. Lord Cronshaw was Harlequin; Beltane was Punchinello; Mrs Mallaby matched him as Pulcinella; the Davidsons were Pierrot and Pierette; and Miss Courtenay, of course, was Columbine. Now, quite early in the evening it was apparent that there was something wrong. Lord Cronshaw was moody and strange in his manner. When the party met together for supper in a small private room engaged by the host, everyone noticed that he and Miss Courtenay were no longer on speaking terms. She had obviously been crying, and seemed on the verge of hysterics. The meal was an uncomfortable one, and as they all left the supper-room, she turned to Chris Davidson and requested him audibly to take her home, as she was “sick of the ball”. The young actor hesitated, glancing at Lord Cronshaw, and finally drew them both back to the supper-room.

‘But all his efforts to secure a reconciliation were unavailing, and he accordingly got a taxi and escorted the now weeping Miss Courtenay back to her flat. Although obviously very much upset, she did not confide in him, merely reiterating again and again that

she would "make old Cronch sorry for this!" That is the only hint we have that her death might not have been accidental, and it's precious little to go upon. By the time Davidson had quieted her down somewhat, it was too late to return to the Colossus Hall, and Davidson accordingly went straight home to his flat in Chelsea, where his wife arrived shortly afterwards, bearing the news of the terrible tragedy that had occurred after his departure.

Lord Cronshaw, it seems, became more and more moody as the ball went on. He kept away from his party, and they hardly saw him during the rest of the evening. It was about one-thirty a.m., just before the grand cotillion when everyone was to unmask, that Captain Digby, a brother officer who knew his disguise, noticed him standing in a box gazing down on the scene.

"Hullo, Cronch!" he called. "Come down and be sociable! What are you moping about up there for like a boiled owl? Come along; there's a good old rag coming on now."

"Right!" responded Cronshaw. "Wait for me, or I'll never find you in the crowd."

He turned and left the box as he spoke. Captain Digby, who had Mrs Davidson with him, waited. The minutes passed, but Lord Cronshaw did not appear. Finally Digby grew impatient.

“Does the fellow think we’re going to wait all night for him?” he exclaimed.

‘At that moment Mrs Mallaby joined them, and they explained the situation.

“Say, now,” cried the pretty widow vivaciously, “he’s like a bear with a sore head tonight. Let’s go right away and rout him out.”

‘The search commenced, but met with no success until it occurred to Mrs Mallaby that he might possibly be found in the room where they had supped an hour earlier. They made their way there. What a sight met their eyes! There was Harlequin, sure enough, but stretched on the ground with a table-knife in his heart!’

Japp stopped, and Poirot nodded, and said with the relish of the specialist: ‘*Une belle affaire!* And there was no clue as to the perpetrator of the deed? But how should there be!’

‘Well,’ continued the inspector, ‘you know the rest. The tragedy was a double one. Next day there were headlines in all the papers, and a brief statement to the effect that Miss Courtenay, the popular actress, had been discovered dead in her bed, and that her death was due to an overdose of cocaine. Now, was it accident or suicide? Her maid, who was called upon to give evidence, admitted that Miss Courtenay was a confirmed taker of the drug, and a verdict of accidental death was returned. Nevertheless we can’t leave the

possibility of suicide out of account. Her death is particularly unfortunate, since it leaves us no clue now to the cause of the quarrel the preceding night. By the way, a small enamel box was found on the dead man. It had *Coco* written across it in diamonds, and was half full of cocaine. It was identified by Miss Courtenay's maid as belonging to her mistress, who nearly always carried it about with her, since it contained her supply of the drug to which she was fast becoming a slave.'

'Was Lord Cronshaw himself addicted to the drug?'

'Very far from it. He held unusually strong views on the subject of dope.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

'But since the box was in his possession, he knew that Miss Courtenay took it. Suggestive, that, is it not, my good Japp?'

'Ah!' said Japp rather vaguely.

I smiled.

'Well,' said Japp, 'that's the case. What do you think of it?'

'You found no clue of any kind that has not been reported?'

'Yes, there was this.' Japp took a small object from his pocket and handed it over to Poirot. It was a small pompon of emerald green silk, with some ragged threads hanging from it, as though it had been wrenched violently away.

'We found it in the dead man's hand, which was tightly clenched over it,' explained the inspector.

Poirot handed it back without any comment and asked: 'Had Lord Cronshaw any enemies?'

'None that anyone knows of. He seemed a popular young fellow.'

'Who benefits by his death?'

'His uncle, the Honourable Eustace Beltane, comes into the title and estates. There are one or two suspicious facts against him. Several people declare that they heard a violent altercation going on in the little supper-room, and that Eustace Beltane was one of the disputants. You see, the table-knife being snatched up off the table would fit in with the murder being done in the heat of a quarrel.'

'What does Mr Beltane say about the matter?'

'Declares one of the waiters was the worse for liquor, and that he was giving him a dressing down. Also that it was nearer to one than half past. You see, Captain Digby's evidence fixes the time pretty accurately. Only about ten minutes elapsed between his speaking to Cronshaw and the finding of the body.'

'And in any case I suppose Mr Beltane, as Punchinello, was wearing a hump and a ruffle?'

'I don't know the exact details of the costumes,' said Japp, looking curiously at Poirot. 'And anyway, I don't quite see what that has got to do with it?'

‘No?’ There was a hint of mockery in Poirot’s smile. He continued quietly, his eyes shining with the green light I had learned to recognize so well: ‘There was a curtain in this little supper-room, was there not?’

‘Yes, but –’

‘With a space behind it sufficient to conceal a man?’

‘Yes – in fact, there’s a small recess, but how you knew about it – you haven’t been to the place, have you, Monsieur Poirot?’

‘No, my good Japp, I supplied the curtain from my brain. Without it, the drama is not reasonable. And always one must be reasonable. But tell me, did they not send for a doctor?’

‘At once, of course. But there was nothing to be done. Death must have been instantaneous.’

Poirot nodded rather impatiently.

‘Yes, yes, I understand. This doctor, now, he gave evidence at the inquest?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did he say nothing of any unusual symptom – was there nothing about the appearance of the body which struck him as being abnormal?’

Japp stared hard at the little man.

‘Yes, Monsieur Poirot. I don’t know what you’re getting at, but he did mention that there was a tension and stiffness about the limbs which he was quite at a loss to account for.’