

Featuring 3 Short Stories!

# Agatha Christie

## CLUES <sup>TO</sup> CHRISTIE

The Definitive Guide to  
Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot,  
Tommy & Tuppence  
and all of  
Agatha Christie's Mysteries

Featuring 3 Short Stories!

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WILLIAM MORROW

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# Agatha Christie: An Introduction

JOHN CURRAN

**W**ho is known as the Queen of Crime, the Mistress of Mystery, the Duchess of Death? Who is the world's most translated writer? Who is the biggest-selling writer in the world, with only Shakespeare and the Bible selling more copies? Who wrote the longest-running stage play—almost sixty years—in the history of the theater? The answer: Agatha Christie.

In a career spanning over fifty years, Agatha Christie transformed detective fiction both on the page and, later, on the stage. Through the creation of a gallery of immortal characters—Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, Tommy and Tuppence Beresford—she sold more books in more parts of the globe than any crime writer before or since. Almost forty years after her death, her entire output is still available in bookstores and seen in theaters around the world. How did she do it? A look at her life may provide some clues. . . .

## **Life**

The youngest of three children of an American father and English mother, Agatha Miller was born in Torquay, England, on September 15, 1890. Her family home, Ashfield, was a large, comfortable house and her childhood was a very happy one. Although she never went to school, the young Agatha devoured books, many of which—*The Three Musketeers*, *Vanity Fair*, *Bleak House*—are mentioned in her

*Autobiography* and can be seen to this day on the shelves of her last home, Greenway House.

Her father died unexpectedly when Agatha was eleven and it was subsequently discovered that his investments, the only source of income for the family, were not as gilt-edged as previously supposed. Some economies were necessary, but the young Agatha continued to enjoy a carefree existence, participating in full in the social life of turn-of-the-century Torquay, attending concerts and dances and amateur dramatics, roller-skating on the pier; and eventually travelling to Paris to study music. Luckily for the world of crime fiction, she was too nervous to perform professionally. She retained a love of music, especially the operas of Wagner, throughout her life. A trip to Egypt with her mother, in 1910, provided her with the background for her still-unpublished novel *Snow upon the Desert*. (Twenty years later, in *Death on the Nile*, novelist Salome Otterbourne describes her novel, *Snow on the Desert's Face: Powerful—suggestive. Snow—on the desert—melted in the first flaming breath of passion!*)

Although she received more than one offer of marriage, Agatha eventually settled on Archie Christie, a dashing member of the Royal Flying Corps. They married on Christmas Eve 1914 and, after a very brief honeymoon at The Grand Hotel in Torquay, Archie returned to his flying duties in World War I. Agatha also volunteered and, after a brief stint as a nurse, moved to the dispensary of the local hospital, eventually becoming a qualified dispenser. This gave her a professional knowledge of poisons, which she was to put to good use in her literary career.

As she explains in her *Autobiography*, during this time she read Sherlock Holmes and *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* by Gaston Leroux (later to achieve immortality as the author of *The Phantom of the Opera*) and Anna Katherine Green's *The Leavenworth Case*. In the course of a conversation with her sister Madge, she accepted a challenge to write her own detective story. Further encouraged by her mother, Agatha worked on her novel, eventually taking herself off to a hotel on Dartmoor for an undisturbed period of intense writing. Although she began *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1916, it was not published until the end of 1920 in the United States and in early 1921 in the United Kingdom. By then, she was the mother of her only child, Rosalind, born in 1919. Although already working on her third novel (*The Secret Adversary*, her second novel, had been nearly finished before *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was published), Agatha enjoyed homemaking in post-WWI London.

In 1921, Archie's boss, Major Belcher, asked him to participate in a business trip to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States, Belcher also arranged for Agatha to join the party and the trio set off on January 20, 1922. This exotic once-in-a-lifetime adventure cemented Agatha's love of travel; her letters and photos from every stage of the trip confirm this; it also provided her the background

for her fourth novel, *The Man in the Brown Suit*, much of which was written during the long sea journeys involved in such a trip. The couple arrived home in November 1922 and shortly afterward set up home in Sunningdale, Berkshire, in a house they called Styles, in honor of the success of Agatha's first novel. The dream of happy wife and mother and successful author was not to last.

The first blow was the death, in 1926, of Agatha's beloved mother, and the consequent dismantling of Agatha's idyllic childhood home. Worse was to follow when, shortly after, Archie asked for a divorce in order to marry his sometime golf partner, Nancy Neele. Within a short time, two of the people Agatha most adored in the world had deserted her, and this combination of emotional shocks precipitated her famous disappearance in December 1926. Although for the rest of her life she never discussed this, there seems little doubt that a breakdown of some sort, coupled with a desire for some time to herself, was the sole motivation behind the bizarre episode, although the newspapers of the time and books and documentaries ever since would lead us to believe otherwise. Agatha was identified in a hotel in Harrogate ten days after leaving home; she immediately retired to Abney Hall, the home of her sister Madge and brother-in-law James Watts, to recover from the ordeal. Her lifelong aversion to the press, and publicity of almost any kind, probably stems from this unhappy experience.

Agatha produced an episodic novel, *The Big Four*, in 1927, with the help of Campbell Christie, her brother-in-law. She used these previously published short-story adventures featuring Hercule Poirot to keep her publishers Collins and her public happy until a new Poirot case, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, appeared in 1928. Agatha wrote most of this novel while in the Canary Islands, with Rosalind and her faithful secretary, Carlo, during 1927.

In 1930, Collins inaugurated the Crime Club; Agatha Christie would be a prolific contributor to this imprint for the rest of her life. The first Christie title to feature the now-famous hooded gunman logo on its cover was also Miss Marple's first book-length case, *The Murder at the Vicarage*. Thus began Agatha Christie's golden age, in terms of both productivity and ingenuity. For almost the next twenty years she published two novels a year, at least; 1934 saw the publication of five. Most of her classic titles appeared during this period, including *Lord Edgware Dies*, *The A.B.C. Murders*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, *And Then There Were None*, *The Body in the Library*, *The Labors of Hercules*, and *Crooked House*. Dominating the world of detective fiction with enviable ease, she became a favorite not only of magazine editors, but critics, as well as her insatiable public.

In 1930, Agatha married archaeologist Max Mallowan, a man fourteen years her

junior, whom she had met while visiting her friends the Woolleys on a dig in southeastern Iraq. Although on the face of it an unlikely alliance, they remained happily married for the next fifty years; for most of that time Agatha accompanied Max every year on his digs, where she lived in a tent, happily cleaning, cataloguing, and photographing the finds. Always one to put an experience to good literary use, she adopted the background for some of her best books—*Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), *Death on the Nile* (1937), and *Appointment with Death* (1938)—as well as the memoir *Come Tell Me How You Live*. To produce her novels while on a dig, all she needed was a typewriter and a steady table.

Agatha bought Winterbrook House in Wallingford, Oxfordshire, in 1934; this she always considered to be Max's house. In 1938, she bought Greenway House, a Georgian mansion on thirty acres of woodland garden with stunning views over the river Dart which lay just outside her birthplace, Torquay. She had known of this house since childhood and, when it came on the market she viewed it and fell under its spell. It became her holiday home for the rest of her life. Here she entertained family and friends, played tennis and swam in the river, enjoyed afternoon tea on the lawn and sumptuous dinners in the dining room, played the piano in the drawing room, and read her work-in-progress to her family to get their reactions. The US Navy requisitioned the house in 1942, and she was forced to store the furniture and abandon Greenway for the remainder of the war. When she regained possession, life resumed its contented pattern: enjoying long, lazy weeks in the summer, with shorter breaks throughout the year; entertaining her friends and family; her gardener winning prizes at the flower show; her butler serving the delicious produce from her garden; and making occasional forays to London to enjoy the theater and opera.

In 1956, in recognition of her unique contribution to literature and drama, Agatha Christie received a C.B.E. (Commander of the British Empire) from Queen Elizabeth. In 1961, she was declared by UNESCO the world's most translated writer. She published her eightieth title, *Passenger to Frankfurt*, in 1970. The following year she was created a Dame of the British Empire. The stage adaption of her short story, "Three Blind Mice," called *The Mousetrap*, which opened in 1952, continued to break every known theatrical record. Through all this, Agatha Christie continued to produce her annual novel to the delight of millions of readers the world over. In 1974, the phenomenally successful film version of one of her greatest titles, *Murder on the Orient Express*, was released to worldwide acclaim. Agatha's last public appearance was its London premiere that November.

The following year, Sir William Collins, correctly assuming that the now-frail Dame Agatha would be unable to provide a new book, persuaded her to release *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, which had been written thirty-five years earlier during her

time in London during the Blitz. It had been stored ever since in a bank vault. Heralded by a front-page obituary in the *New York Times*, Hercule Poirot, to the chagrin of his legions of fans, had died, but not before solving his most ingenious and shocking case. It was set in Styles Court, the scene of his first triumph over fifty years earlier. Three months later, on January 12, 1976, his creator joined her most famous character; and the world mourned.

In the course of a fifty-year career Agatha Christie created many memorable characters, but the most popular were the following.

### **Hercule Poirot**

When she created Hercule Poirot in 1916, Agatha Christie made only one serious mistake— she made him a retired member of the Belgian police force. This meant that when he died almost sixty years later in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (1975), even a conservative estimate must have put his age at 120. Little did she realize, when she wrote in chapter two of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, “As I came out again, I cannoned into a little man who was just entering. I drew aside and apologised, 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,’ ” that Hercule Poirot would be with her for the rest of her life. He would become one of the most famous Belgians in history, and the second most famous detective (after Sherlock Holmes) in the world; he would appear in thirty-three novels and over fifty short stories and spawn almost one hundred movies and TV films; or that he would appear on stamps in Nicaragua and Dominica. Captain Hastings, Poirot’s faithful partner in crime for many of his early cases, narrated their first adventure together, then met his wife in the course of *The Murder on the Links*, eventually departing to live in Argentina after *Dumb Witness* (1937), and returning only for *Curtain*.

Poirot owes his nationality to the presence of Belgian refugees in Torquay during World War I. Christie also endowed him with an overweening vanity and a neurotic precision, as well as magnificent moustaches and his famous little grey cells. If she could have known at the time how he would come to dominate her life, she might well have amended some of these characteristics. But he, and she, embarked on a career of singular success with little idea that almost a century later the investigations of the little Belgian would still be read in every language in the world.

While he waited for his first full-length case to follow *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Poirot solved a series of short investigations in *The Sketch* magazine throughout 1923 and much of 1924. In 1926, he appeared in what was to become his

most famous (some might say infamous) case, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). In many ways a typical detective story of the time—small village, wealthy landowner found dead in his study, a mysterious butler, a house full of suspects, an incompetent police investigation, all explained satisfactorily in the last chapter—this novel transformed the careers of Christie and Poirot beyond recognition. Considered by many to be the most brilliant detective novel ever written and decried by others as a shameless cheat, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* has divided opinion ever since its first appearance in May 1926. Its stunning last-chapter revelation was a unique and daring masterstroke which shot Christie straight into the upper echelon of crime writing, where she remained for the rest of her life.

For the next fifty years, Poirot solved cases throughout England, in France in *The Murder on the Links* (1923), in Yugoslavia in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), in Iraq in *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), in Egypt in *Death on the Nile* (1937), and, in the course of *The Labors of Hercules* (1947), in Ireland, Switzerland, Italy, and Austria. The little Belgian is the most famous export of that country and, thanks to a brilliant television portrayal by David Suchet, is now firmly fixed in the public consciousness and affection for all time.

### **Miss Marple**

Jane Marple made an inauspicious debut in the short story “The Tuesday Night Club,” published in December 1927. There, she is described as dressed completely in black and having “faded blue eyes, benignant and kindly” and she is knitting “something white and soft and fleecy.” Despite being overlooked by the armchair detectives gathered together in her house in St. Mary Mead to discuss unsolved mysteries, she is shown to be the most acute and observant of them all. Her unorthodox style of detection is based on her village parallels, small and seemingly insignificant events familiar to her from a lifetime of village living, which she adopts as a basis for comparison when faced with more sinister events.

Although her detective career is less extensive than Poirot, covering twelve novels and twenty short stories, Miss Marple’s status as the most famous female detective in literature is assured. There was a twelve-year gap, from 1930 to 1942, between her first and second book-length investigations, *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *The Body in the Library*. Her greatest case, *A Murder Is Announced*, was Agatha Christie’s fiftieth title and the occasion of a celebratory party at the Savoy Hotel in London in June 1950. Miss Marple travelled to the West Indies for her only foreign case, *A Caribbean Mystery*, in 1964, and to London to solve a murder *At Bertram’s Hotel*

(1965).

Unlike Poirot, the last glimpse we have of the elderly sleuth is of her alive and well, sitting on the terrace of Torquay's Imperial Hotel at the conclusion of *Sleeping Murder*, explaining, for the last time, the intricacies of murder.

### **Tommy and Tuppence**

Tommy and Tuppence Beresford are the only Christie characters to age gradually, as they did between their first appearance in 1922, in Christie's second published novel, to their last adventure in 1973. Beginning as bright young things in the aftermath of World War I, they track down *The Secret Adversary* (1922) before marrying and opening a detective agency in the short story collection *Partners in Crime* (1929), in which they investigate crimes in the manner of famous detectives such as Sherlock Holmes and Father Brown. Their final investigation, "The Man Who Was No. 16," is, in a nice example of self-parody, solved in the style of that famous Belgian sleuth, Monsieur Hercule Poirot!

By the time of the WWII thriller, *N or M?* (1941), Tommy and Tuppence are the parents of twins (and also adopt a baby at the end of that novel), and as *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968) opens they are a middle-aged couple reminiscing about their adventurous youth and investigating a sinister retirement home. Finally, we meet them as a retired couple moving into a new house with a mysterious past in *Postern of Fate* (1973), the last novel Christie wrote.

### **Stand-alone titles**

Although she achieved her greatest fame as the creator of Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, some of Agatha Christie's best books are to be found among her stand-alone titles. These included traditional whodunits, domestic and international thrillers, and a few unclassifiable items. Through her life she experimented with the crime novel and, as Ellery Queen once wrote of her, "the only thing you can expect from Agatha Christie is the unexpected."

Without doubt her most famous title, and the bestselling crime novel of all time, is *And Then There Were None* (1939). Part detective story and part thriller, this novel first appeared in print in the *Saturday Evening Post* beginning at the end of May 1939. It received rapturous reviews on both sides of the Atlantic when it was published in book form at the end of that year. The much-copied plot concerns the fate of ten characters

invited to an island off the coast of southern England, where, over the course of a weekend, they are all systematically killed in line with the macabre nursery rhyme that hangs in each of their bedrooms. The Christie twist is that the killer is one of the ten. It has been brought to the screen countless times, the best version being the famous 1945 Rene Clair film.

Years before the historical murder mystery became popular, Christie published *Death Comes as the End* (1945), a domestic murder mystery set in Egypt in 2000 B.C. This fascinating novel of mass murder in a family consumed with greed and jealousy, living on the banks of the Nile, was written at the suggestion of an archaeologist friend of her husband Max Mallowan. In 1949, she published *Crooked House*, very much a typical Christie—large family living in a rambling house with a poisoner at work—until the last chapter, which propounded such a shocking solution that her publishers asked her to change it; she refused and it remains one the Christie classics. Two of her strongest and most unexpected titles appeared in the last chapter of her writing life: *The Pale Horse* (1961) concerns a murder-to-order venture with suggestions of black magic, while *Endless Night* (1967), with its stunning surprise in the last chapter, is often considered her last great novel.

Thrillers, both international—*The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), *They Came to Baghdad* (1951), *Destination Unknown* (1954), *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970)—and domestic—*The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929), *The Boomerang Clue* (1934)—appeared periodically throughout her writing life and Christie considered these a holiday from the clues-and-alibis plotting of her detective fiction. With an emphasis on physical rather than cerebral activity, these thrillers all show the Christie magic at work. Stolen jewels, missing state papers, unidentified spies, and criminal masterminds jostle for attention in plots involving organized anarchy and international terrorism. Almost all of these titles feature young women—Lady Eileen (Bundle) Brent, Lady Frances (Frankie) Derwent, Anne Beddingfeld, Victoria Jones—who are in the mold of Tuppence Beresford: brave, resourceful, enterprising, and incurably inquisitive.

Dotted throughout her classic period Christie also wrote, with enviable ease, non-Poirot and non-Marple whodunits. *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931) begins with a séance accurately foretelling a murder; *Murder Is Easy* (1939) is regular Christie territory—a country village with a suspiciously high number of unexplained deaths; *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945) features subtle characterization with the personal reminiscences of the suspects involved in a poisoning drama at a fashionable nightclub. One of her most intriguing titles is *Towards Zero* (1944), where we are introduced to a collection of characters months before the approaching zero hour of the inevitable murder. *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958) is both a deeply felt exploration of the consequences of a possible

miscarriage of justice and a clever whodunit.

Christie also wrote a number of short stories that achieved fame in their own right, including “Witness for the Prosecution.” First published in 1925 under the title “Traitor Hands,” almost thirty years later it became not just Christie’s best stage play, but also one of the best courtroom dramas ever. “Philomel Cottage,” also a short story from the 1920s, became the stage play and film *Love from a Stranger*. And, of course, before its incarnation as a play, *The Mousetrap* had been a short story, “Three Blind Mice.”

### **Christie the Dramatist**

Agatha Christie is still the only crime novelist to achieve equal fame as a crime dramatist. The first stage play based on her writing was *Alibi*, an adaptation, but not by the author herself, of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which opened in London in 1928. That year she also adapted her 1925 novel, *The Secret of Chimneys*, as a three-act play but failed to have it staged. She then wrote an original script, *Black Coffee* (1930), in which Poirot is summoned to find a missing document vital to the country’s security, but finds himself investigating a murder at the home of Sir Claud Amory. A further adaptation of *Peril at End House* followed in 1940, but Christie was disappointed with adaptations of her stories by other hands. So she adapted her own novel *And Then There Were None* in 1943 and it had a successful run of almost a year in London’s West End, despite the destruction of its theatrical home during the height of the Blitz, and a transfer to another.

Spurred on by this success, she adapted *Appointment with Death* and *Murder on the Nile* in 1945 and 1946. Miss Marple made her stage debut in 1949 in *Murder at the Vicarage*. The 1950s was Christie’s golden age of theater. Beginning with *The Hollow* (1951), and followed by *Witness for the Prosecution* (1953), *Spider’s Web* (1954), *Towards Zero* (1956), *Verdict* (1958), and *The Unexpected Guest* (1958), this impressive roster of dramas contributed to her unique theatrical success. To this day, she is the only female playwright to have had three plays running simultaneously in the West End.

In 1952, the most famous stage play in the world, *The Mousetrap*, began its inexorable advance to the status of national institution. Originally written as a radio play to celebrate the eightieth birthday of Queen Mary, it was subsequently adapted as a novella and, finally, as the stage play that is now older than most of the UK population. This theatrical landmark celebrates its sixtieth birthday in 2012.

In 1962, another experiment, *Rule of Three*, debuted on the London stage. Although

not well received by the critics, it remains fascinating to fans as each of the three one-act plays, totally different in style and plot, display aspects of Christie not hitherto seen on the stage. *The Rats* is a claustrophobic will-they-get-away-with-it? play; *Afternoon at the Seaside* is a very funny sketch involving missing jewelry with a surprise revelation in the last moments; and *The Patient* is an ingenious whodunit with an artfully concealed central clue. As late as 1972, Christie's love of the theater is evident in *Fiddlers Five*, or, as it later became, *Fiddlers Three*. Although it did not receive a West End production and, compared to her earlier theatrical hits, is, despite its many clever ideas, disappointing, it is clear that her love of playwriting remained with Christie until the end of her life.

### Other Works

Interspersed with her detective fiction, Christie also experimented with noncrime material, showing an aspect of her imagination not obvious from her crime fiction alone. In 1924, she published *Road of Dreams*, a poetry collection, and six years later published *Giant's Bread*, the first of six Mary Westmacott novels to appear over the next thirty years. Best described as bittersweet love stories, these titles show glimpses of the real Agatha Christie and mirror many situations in her own life. *Giant's Bread* centers on the composer Vernon Deyre and reveals Christie's lifelong love of music; two years later, *Unfinished Portrait* contains, consciously or otherwise, many elements from Christie's own life, including a marriage, idyllic at the start but later ruined by infidelity, culminating in divorce; an unhappy wife who takes up writing; and a subsequent mother/daughter relationship. A similar theme is also explored, even more devastatingly, in the 1952 novel, *A Daughter's a Daughter*. In her *Autobiography*, Christie describes how she wrote *Absent in the Spring* (1934) over a single weekend; in it, Joan Scudamore, trapped by bad weather in a remote area of Turkey, spends four days examining her life and conscience before resolving to transform herself. The Westmacott pseudonym remained a secret for many years and Christie was always very pleased that the books were accepted for publication and reviewed on their merits alone, not because they were written by a famous crime writer. The final Westmacott, *The Burden* (1956), explores the love between two sisters.

In 1946, she published *Come Tell Me How You Live*, a rambling memoir of day-to-day life on an archaeological dig written to answer the innumerable questions of friends and acquaintances. Although her publishers would have preferred a whodunit, her love of this life shines through every page of the book. In 1937, she wrote *Akhmaton*, a play based on the life of the doomed Egyptian king. Although it has never

received a professional performance, the script was published in 1973 and proved to be a well-researched and poignant play; although essentially a noncrime title, it does feature a poisoning and the unmasking of a killer in the final scene. *Star Over Bethlehem* (1965) is, as the name suggests, a religious-themed collection of very short stories and poems.

Finally, the year after her death, *An Autobiography* was published. Christie had worked on this for over fifteen years, beginning in Baghdad in 1950 where, she explains in the foreword, she was suddenly overtaken by the urge to write down the story of her life. After her death, it fell to her daughter and an editor at Collins to reduce the vast amount of material to a manageable size, and the book was published in October 1977 to international acclaim. As easily readable as all of her writing, *An Autobiography* is a fascinating look at the woman who wrote the world's bestselling books, but there is little in the way of solid information about the creation of any particular title. She does give an account of the creation of Hercule Poirot and a less detailed one for Miss Marple, but the genesis of most of her books remains as mysteriously elusive as the books themselves.

## **The Legacy**

Almost forty years after her death, Agatha Christie's name is still synonymous with the very best detective fiction. She refined an already existing template, and for over a half-century, she expanded and experimented with it to produce a body of work that continues to transcend every known border of age, sex, race, background, and level of education. Her entire output is still available in every language and she is read avidly from Melbourne to Moscow, from Iceland to India. She is enjoyed by teenagers and pensioners; she is studied by academics and linguists and social historians. Her work provides a regular source for film and TV adapters, for computer game developers, for animators, and graphic-novel artists. Quite simply, in the field of detective fiction no other writer ever did it as often, as well, or for as long. Agatha Christie remains unique and, thus far, immortal.

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## **The Hercule Poirot Mysteries**

*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*

*The Murder on the Links*

*Poirot Investigates*

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

*The Big Four*

*The Mystery of the Blue Train*

*Peril at End House*

*Lord Edgware Dies*

*Murder on the Orient Express*

*Three Act Tragedy*

*Death in the Clouds*

*The A.B.C. Murders*

*Murder in Mesopotamia*

*Cards on the Table*

*Murder in the Mews*

*Dumb Witness*

*Death on the Nile*

*Appointment with Death*

*Hercule Poirot's Christmas*

*Sad Cypress*

*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*

*Evil Under the Sun*

*Five Little Pigs*

*The Hollow*

*The Labors of Hercules*

*Taken at the Flood*  
*The Under Dog and Other Stories*  
*Mrs. McGinty's Dead*  
*After the Funeral*  
*Hickory Dickory Dock*  
*Dead Man's Folly*  
*Cat Among the Pigeons*  
*The Clocks*  
*Third Girl*  
*Hallowe'en Party*  
*Elephants Can Remember*  
*Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*

**“Why not make my detective a Belgian? . . . I could see him as a tidy little man, always arranging things, liking things in pairs, liking things square instead of round. And he should be brainy—he should have little grey cells of the mind.”**

—AGATHA CHRISTIE, from *An Autobiography*

## The Affair at the Victory Ball

From *The Under Dog and Other Stories*

**P**ure 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 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?”