

SUMMER READING I: CURTAIN

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my supplications!
In thy faithfulness answer me, in thy righteousness!
Enter not into judgment with thy servant;
For no man living is righteous before thee. Psalm 143:1-2

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother
shall be liable to judgment. Matthew 5:22.

Curtain, p. 216: "Now you must realize this, Hastings. Everyone
is a potential murderer - in everyone there arises from time to
time the wish to kill - though not the will to kill. How often
have you not felt or heard others say: 'She made me so furious
I felt I could have killed her!' 'I was so angry I could have
murdered him!' And all those statements are literally true."

I am not a regular reader of THE LADIES HOME JOURNAL. I decided some
time ago that it was not proper reading for a gentleman. But in the sum-
mer of 1975, while visiting my mother-in-law, I discovered that a pre-
viously unpublished work by Agatha Christie was being serialized by this
magazine. Written back in the 1940's the story known as Curtain described
Hercule Poirot's last case. However, after finishing the book, Agatha
Christie locked it away with instructions that it not be published until
after her death. In the meantime, Hercule Poirot lived on solving myster-
ies into the 1970's. Finally, in what turned out to be the last year of
her life, Ms. Christie released Curtain to the public. Even though I con-
sider THE LADIES HOME JOURNAL an R-rated magazine, and even though I oppose
condensed books on principle, I could not resist.

The following Christmas I was given a copy of the complete book by a
member of my family who did not know that I had read it in serial form. I
wanted to be true to the spirit of the gift, and so I put the book aside
for six months until I had forgotten the story. Then in the early summer
of 1976 I read Curtain again, and I was struck by its very serious ethical
and religious implications.

You don't believe me? Then wait and hear.

This is a shocking book. It is not shocking in the way that most
detective fiction of today is shocking. People do get killed in Agatha
Christie stories, but the description of these fatal events is always re-
strained. Ms. Christie does not indulge in orgies of violence and deprav-
ity. She creates for us a picture postcard England of quiet villages,
gracious old ladies and fuddy duddy vicars who run around trying to raise
money for roof repairs. Even though three or four people may drop dead
unaccountably in such a pleasant scene, life tends to go on its cheery way.

Yet underneath there is a hard, tough appraisal of human nature. Ms.
Christie knows that unlike the characters in most modern novels, most
people do not go around wallowing in muck all the time. She knows that
most people are fairly decent most of the time. Yet she finds these decent
people capable of dark things. Even her heroes and heroines are people
whose virtue is compounded of human frailty. Miss Marple is a prying old
snoop who is capable of taking malicious delight in the unsavory behavior

of her neighbors. It is these very qualities that help make her a brilliant amateur sleuth. Behind that slightly sinister fantasy world Agatha Christie creates for us is the mind of a tough, old Calvinist. The vision of human nature she holds up is much closer to that of the original Pilgrims than it is to that we are likely to run across in the Pilgrim churches of today.

If we didn't know these terrible truths about Ms. Christie before, we can hardly escape them in the book called Curtain. We have already heard Hercule Poirot tell his good friend Hastings that everyone is potentially a murderer. Of course, this is a basic assumption in a who-done-it style mystery. Everybody is suspect. But there are usually one or two nice people around who wouldn't do such a thing. The reader identifies with those nice people. He enjoys the thrill of learning about the bad guys because he finds security in the innocence of the good guys. But in Curtain everyone turns out to be capable of murder, including the good guys. And one feels that Ms. Christie is not just employing a conventional plot device when she says that everyone is a potential murderer. She really believes this.

She does allow that some people may be incapable of actually committing murder. But that is because they lack the courage. They are squeamish. If some people are psychologically unable to be murderers that is hardly to their credit. The reasons for this incapacity have to do with human weakness. On the other hand, people may commit murder out of rather noble sentiments.

If we don't believe this, all we have to do is examine the case of good old Captain Hastings. Captain Hastings is the Dr. Watson of the Hercule Poirot stories. He is an old-fashioned English gentleman, honest, upright, a man who plays by the rules and who usually expects the best of people. Poirot calls him "a beautiful soul".

But Hastings enters the scene of this story in a very delicate emotional state. He is grieving over the death of his wife, whom he first met at this same country house many years ago (you will recall, of course, The Mysterious Affair at Styles). He is still an attractive man and is pursued by one or two sinister ladies. But Hastings' main problem is his daughter, Judith. She is one of those modern young women. She is independent, rebellious, contemptuous of the old social mores, and quite beyond the capacity of any father to understand or communicate with. The reader may discover to his surprise how little difference there is between this modern young woman of 1946 and those of 1976.

Now Judith apparently becomes infatuated with a character who is the perfect stereotype of what an English gentleman calls a "cad" and a "rotter." Hastings is led falsely to believe that Judith is about to run away with this character and thus, as the saying used to go, to "ruin her life." Judith herself is partly responsible for this mistaken belief. But the villain also plays a hand. For the villain in this story is a person who manages by insinuation and deception to persuade other people to commit murder. He plays upon Hastings' emotions and misconceptions until Hastings - the good, decent Hastings, that "beautiful soul" - comes to the conclusion that in order to save his daughter he must exterminate the cad. Only the timely intervention of Hercule Poirot saves Hastings from actually committing murder.

One reason that this book is so shocking then is that it argues that even the good-hearted people might commit murder. Another reason why it is shocking lies in the fact that repeatedly the question is raised as to whether murder might at times not be justifiable.

Once again the who-done-it plot calls for this question being discussed by the characters. Such discussion opens them all to suspicion. Egged on by the villain, Judith, the modern young woman, declares:

"Unfit lives, useless lives - they should be got out of the way. There's so much mess about. Only people who can make a decent contribution to the community ought to be allowed to live. The others ought to be put painlessly away."

Well, that goes rather far, farther, indeed, than Judith probably meant to go. But after all, what is murder anyway? There are labored, legal definitions. But I think we may define murder very simply as that killing of human beings that is not socially acceptable. In every society of any size that has ever existed some killing under certain conditions is not called murder because it is deemed socially acceptable. Killing in war is not called murder, not even when it is done by the enemy. Killing in defense of one's own life is not called murder. A pacifist might declare that all killing is murder. Yet I suspect there are a few pacifists around who favor euthanasia.

When is killing murder and when is it not? Or to put it another way, might there not be situations in which what is legally called murder is morally right? Ms. Christie raises this unpleasant question. And once again one feels she raises it not simply for purposes of plot. It seems to be a question she herself is asking.

For you see, what is most shocking about this book is that Hercule Poirot himself becomes a murderer. Always the great Belgian detective had pursued murderers relentlessly regardless of their motives. Always he had declared, "I do not approve of murder." His kind friend Hastings remarks, "That understatement, made so primly, had always tickled my fancy."

But in a manuscript he leaves for Hastings with his lawyer, Poirot confesses:

"Yes, my friend, it is odd - and laughable - and terrible! I, who do not approve of murder - I, who value human life - have ended my career by committing murder."

Hercule Poirot decides that the only course left open to him is to bump off the villain. There is no other way, no legal way that he can stop this sinister character.

At this point the reader may decide that this is a dangerously immoral book. At the very least, he may feel disappointed in Hercule Poirot. But a profound moral lesson does emerge, a very biblical, very Christian lesson.

As I said, Ms. Christie's heroes are people whose faults of character become useful. Poirot has a passion for neatness and precision that is almost pathological. Most of the time that trait is useful. But in the

end it almost proves his undoing. When he eliminates the villain in a faked suicide he shoots the villain precisely in the middle of the forehead. That is not where most people shoot themselves.

Poirot is a vain man with a powerful belief both in his own sense of what is right and in his powers of reason. This vanity leads to an aggressive self-confidence that is usually useful in tracking down murderers. There's never any Hamlet-like self-questioning and dilly-dallying in Hercule Poirot. He goes right after his prey without misgivings. But in this final act he realizes that life is more complicated than he thought and that like other men he is captive to the sin of pride. He acknowledges: "I have been too self-righteous, too conscious of rectitude - that this terrible dilemma had to come to me." A little later he writes:

"Eh bien, I have no more now to say. I do not know, Hastings, if what I have done is justified or not justified. No - I do not know. I do not believe that a man should take the law into his own hands..... But on the other hand, I am the law! 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 state of emergency martial law is proclaimed. By taking /X's/ life I have saved other lives - innocent lives. But still I do not know... It is perhaps right that I should not know. I have always been so sure - too sure.

"But now I am very humble and I say like a little child, 'I do not know.'"

So in the end Hercule Poirot is trapped by the same fate as the other characters in this book who become victims in the act of becoming murderers. He ends up a tragic figure. Yet he achieves enlightenment and humility.

And even though we may disapprove of what he did, we may learn from him to recognize that we do not live in a mystery story world where guilt and innocence are neatly kept apart. We, too, cannot always be sure. Though that never exempts us from trying to do the right thing, we may come to understand why it is that in the real world we can only pray as the psalmist prayed:

"Enter not into judgment with thy servant:

For in thy sight no man living shall be justified."

Psalm 143:2 (King James version)