

Welland Gouldsmith School, Patuli
Class VIII-English Literature
Online Work
CHAPTER : POIROT AT HIS BEST

Characters :

Hercule Poirot : A retired Belgian police officer turned world famous private detective

Captain Hastings: An ex military Captain who is Poirot's best friend and detective partner/ he is also the narrator of the story

Lady Millicent Castle Vaughan: She is the Duke of Southshire's new fiancée and seeks Poirot's help

Mr Lavington: The man blackmailing Lady Millicent

Inspector Japp: A police inspector through whom the truth is revealed

Gertie: The true identity of Lady Millicent

Synopsis:

"Poirot at His Best" is an extract from a short story written by the British crime novelist, Agatha Christie, titled, "The Veiled Lady". It was published in 1923 and is a wonderful detective story with a twist in the tale ending.

"Twist is the tale" is an idiom, which means that the ending of the story reveals something quite unexpected.

The story is set in London and it begins with Hastings stating that he has noticed Poirot growing dissatisfied and restless because they have not had any interesting cases to solve of late. Poirot then tosses away the newspaper he has been reading, searching for a crime to solve and exclaims that the criminals of England are frightened by his reputation. He thinks this is the reason why the number of crimes has reduced. Hastings laughs this off with a supposition that most criminals are probably unaware of Poirot's existence.

Poirot is so bored, in fact, that he even tells Hastings were it not for his moral values he may have found working against the law to be pleasing for a change. On hearing this Hastings picks up the Newspaper in search of a case and directs Poirot's attention to the case of an Englishman who has died mysteriously in Holland. This is a seemingly trivial detail that will turn out to be important by the end of the story.

Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of a mysterious, veiled woman who asks Poirot for help. She identifies herself as Lady Millicent Castle Vaughan. Poirot immediately recalls the announcement of her engagement to the Duke of Southshire.

Lady Millicent then tells Poirot of her trouble. A man by the name of Mr Lavington has in his possession an old love letter, written to a young soldier whom Lady Millicent was fond of when she was only sixteen. Mr Lavington has threatened to send the letter to the Duke of Southshire unless Lady Millicent pays him a sum of twenty thousand pounds! Poirot suggests that Lady Millicent should confess this to her future husband, the Duke, Lady Millicent disagrees saying the Duke is jealous and suspicious in nature and he might break off the engagement immediately. She hopes that Poirot would be able to talk Mr Lavington into taking a smaller sum of money as she could hardly even gather ten thousand pounds. Poirot does not think Lady Millicent should pay any money! He asks

Lady Millicent to send Mr Lavington to him and asks whether he would bring the letter. Poirot is dismayed to learn that Lady Millicent has visited Mr Lavington's house. She then recounts how, during her visit, Mr Lavington had folded her letter and placed it in a Chinese puzzle box and laughed horribly when Lady Millicent threatened to take the matter to the police.

Poirot takes on the case out of concern for Lady Millicent. He meets Mr Lavington that very afternoon. Lavington is indeed a nasty man, Poirot is unable to dissuade him to carry out the plan. Lavington states he is off to Paris on business and that he will expect a sum of eighteen thousand pounds when he returns that Tuesday evening. Unless the money is paid the letter will be sent to the Duke.

Much to our shock, in a very interesting account, we are told how the law defenders become law breakers! Poirot and Hastings steal the Chinese puzzle box from Mr Lavington's house. The following afternoon Hastings is surprised to find Poirot seated calmly with the open puzzle box beside him and the letter in hand! Poirot taps the letter and declares that Lady Millicent was right, the Duke would not have pardoned it.

Within a few minutes Lady Millicent arrives, she is delighted to see the letter and the box. Soon her attention turns more towards the box than the letter. There's a verbal tussle between her and Poirot with each one wanting the box as a keepsake of the solved case. Suddenly Lady Millicent stretches her hand out to grab the box, Poirot reaches it first. Now her soft musical voice turns sharp. Poirot reveals the hidden contents of the box- stolen jewels! Four large glittering stones and two big pearls! Inspector Japp steps into the room and he discloses the true identity of Lady Millicent as being "Gertie".

Poirot has solved the case! We come to know from Inspector Japp that Lady Millicent, or should I say Gertie, is part of a criminal gang. One of her accomplices, a gang member of hers, had pretended to be Mr Lavington, when in fact the real Mr Lavington, who was also part of the gang, had been killed mysteriously in Holland! The gang knew the jewels were in Mr Lavington's house in London. Two men had been sent to search for them but could not find them. Gertie assumed the fake identity of Lady Millicent and her blackmailer in order to gain Poirot's compassion and persuade him to find the box.

But it is not so easy to fool the Little Belgian detective who uses his "little grey cells" and powers of deductive reasoning to show us the importance of details and observation. The seemingly insignificant news of a mysterious death in Holland turns out to be important, the shoes Lady Millicent was wearing had already alerted Poirot about a misrepresentation on her part. We now know that the law defenders didn't steal, rather they helped the police to find priceless jewels, catch a gang of thieves and solve the mysterious death of the Englishman in Holland! Quite contrary to Hastings' belief, it turns out that London's criminals have indeed heard of Hercule Poirot and in this case they even tried to hire him!

Assignment:

Que 1. Find words/phrases from the chapter, to match the meanings given below:

- (a) A man who does not do things that are wrong or illegal
- (b) Not knowing about something; in a state of ignorance
- (c) Strange or difficult to explain
- (d) Very detailed, careful and thorough

Que 2. With reference to the chapter “Poirot at His Best”, answer the following questions:

Que (a) Give a character sketch of Lady Millicent.

Que (b) Which two deductions of Captain Hastings are proved wrong ?

Que 3. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

“Here’s an Englishman who died mysteriously in Holland”, I said.

“They always say that and later they find that his death is perfectly natural.”

“Well if you are determined to sulk!”

“Oh look!” said Poirot, who has rolled across to the window. Here in the street is what they called in novels a ‘heavily veiled’ lady. She mounts the steps, she Rings the bell, she comes to consult us.”

- (a) Whom does “I” refer to, in the aforementioned extract? What is his connection to the second speaker, “Poirot” ? Identify one word from the extract, which tells us that Poirot is unhappy.
- (b) What does “heavily veiled” mean? What reason does Poirot give for the woman to veil her face?
- (c) How is the death of the Englishman in Holland related to the case of the stolen jewels?
- (d) What has Poirot just said he regrets? How does he go against his morals to solve this case?