
Opening Extract from...

Five Little Pigs

Written by Agatha Christie

Published by Harper

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HARPER

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

This paperback edition 2013

First published in Great Britain by
Collins 1943

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

ISBN 978-0-00-752751-9

Set in Sabon by FMG using Atomik ePublisher from Easypress
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

INTRODUCTION

Carla Lemarchant

Hercule Poirot looked with interest and appreciation at the young woman who was being ushered into the room.

There had been nothing distinctive in the letter she had written. It had been a mere request for an appointment, with no hint of what lay behind that request. It had been brief and business-like. Only the firmness of the handwriting had indicated that Carla Lemarchant was a young woman.

And now here she was in the flesh—a tall, slender young woman in the early twenties. The kind of young woman that one definitely looked at twice. Her clothes were good, an expensive well-cut coat and skirt and luxurious furs. Her head was well poised on her shoulders, she had a square brow, a sensitively cut nose and a determined chin. She looked very much alive. It was her aliveness, more than her beauty, which struck the predominant note.

Before her entrance, Hercule Poirot had been feeling old—now he felt rejuvenated—alive—keen!

As he came forward to greet her, he was aware of her

dark grey eyes studying him attentively. She was very earnest in that scrutiny.

She sat down and accepted the cigarette that he offered her. After it was lit she sat for a minute or two smoking, still looking at him with that earnest, thoughtful gaze.

Poirot said gently:

'Yes, it has to be decided, does it not?'

She started. 'I beg your pardon?'

Her voice was attractive, with a faint, agreeable huskiness in it.

'You are making up your mind, are you not, whether I am a mere mountebank, or the man you need?'

She smiled. She said:

'Well, yes—something of that kind. You see, M. Poirot, you—you don't look exactly the way I pictured you.'

'And I am old, am I not? Older than you imagined?'

'Yes, that too.' She hesitated. 'I'm being frank, you see. I want—I've got to have—the best.'

'Rest assured,' said Hercule Poirot. 'I *am* the best!'

Carla said: 'You're not modest… All the same, I'm inclined to take you at your word.'

Poirot said placidly:

'One does not, you know, employ merely the muscles. I do not need to bend and measure the footprints and pick up the cigarette ends and examine the bent blades of grass. It is enough for me to sit back in my chair and *think*. It is this'—he tapped his egg-shaped head—'*this* that functions!'

'I know,' said Carla Lemarchant. 'That's why I've come to you. I want you, you see, to do something fantastic!'

'That,' said Hercule Poirot, 'promises well!'

He looked at her in encouragement.

Carla Lemarchant drew a deep breath.

'My name,' she said, 'isn't Carla. It's Caroline. The same as my mother's. I was called after her.' She paused. 'And though I've always gone by the name of Lemarchant—ever since I can remember almost—that isn't my real name. My real name is Crale.'

Hercule Poirot's forehead creased a moment perplexedly. He murmured: 'Crale—I seem to remember…'

She said:

'My father was a painter—rather a well-known painter. Some people say he was a great painter. *I* think he was.'

Hercule Poirot said: 'Amyas Crale?'

'Yes.' She paused, then she went on: 'And my mother, Caroline Crale, was tried for murdering him!'

'Aha,' said Hercule Poirot. 'I remember now—but only vaguely. I was abroad at the time. It was a long time ago.'

'Sixteen years,' said the girl.

Her face was very white now and her eyes two burning lights.

She said:

'Do you understand? *She was tried and convicted*… She wasn't hanged because they felt that there were extenuating circumstances—so the sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. But she died only a year after the trial. You see? It's all over—done—finished with…'

Poirot said quietly: 'And so?'

The girl called Carla Lemarchant pressed her hands

together. She spoke slowly and haltingly but with an odd, pointed emphasis.

She said:

'You've got to understand—exactly—where I come in. I was five years old at the time it—happened. Too young to know anything about it. I remember my mother and my father, of course, and I remember leaving home suddenly—being taken to the country. I remember the pigs and a nice fat farmer's wife—and everybody being very kind—and I remember, quite clearly, the funny way they used to look at me—everybody—a sort of furtive look. I knew, of course, children do, that there was something wrong—but I didn't know what.

'And then I went on a ship—it was exciting—it went on for days, and then I was in Canada and Uncle Simon met me, and I lived in Montreal with him and with Aunt Louise, and when I asked about Mummy and Daddy they said they'd be coming soon. And then—and then I think I forgot—only I sort of knew that they were dead without remembering anyone actually telling me so. Because by that time, you see, I didn't think about them any more. I was very happy, you know. Uncle Simon and Aunt Louise were sweet to me, and I went to school and had a lot of friends, and I'd quite forgotten that I'd ever had another name, not Lemarchant. Aunt Louise, you see, told me that that was my name in Canada and that seemed quite sensible to me at the time—it was just my Canadian name—but as I say I forgot in the end that I'd ever had any other.'

She flung up her defiant chin. She said:

'Look at me. You'd say—wouldn't you? if you met me: "There goes a girl who's got nothing to worry about!" I'm well off, I've got splendid health, I'm sufficiently good to look at, I can enjoy life. At twenty, there wasn't a girl anywhere I'd have changed places with.

'But already, you know, I'd begun to ask questions. About my own mother and father. Who they were and what they did? I'd have been bound to find out in the end—

'As it was, they told me the truth. When I was twenty-one. They had to then, because for one thing I came into my own money. And then, you see, there was the letter. The letter my mother left for me when she died.'

Her expression changed, dimmed. Her eyes were no longer two burning points, they were dark dim pools. She said:

'That's when I learnt the truth. That my mother had been convicted of murder. It was—rather horrible.'

She paused.

'There's something else I must tell you. I was engaged to be married. They said we must wait—that we couldn't be married until I was twenty-one. When I knew, I understood why.'

Poirot stirred and spoke for the first time. He said:

'And what was your fiancé's reaction?'

'John? John didn't care. He said it made no difference—not to him. He and I were John and Carla—and the past didn't matter.'

She leaned forward.

'We're still engaged. But all the same, you know, it *does*

matter. It matters to me. And it matters to John too… It isn't the past that matters to us—it's the future.' She clenched her hands. 'We want children, you see. We both want children. And we don't want to watch our children growing up and be afraid.'

Poirot said:

'Do you not realize that amongst everyone's ancestors there has been violence and evil?'

'You don't understand. That's so, of course. But then, one doesn't usually know about it. We do. It's very near to us. And—sometimes—I've seen John just look at me. Such a quick glance—just a flash. Supposing we were married and we'd quarrelled—and I saw him look at me and—and *wonder*?'

Hercule Poirot said: 'How was your father killed?'

Carla's voice came clear and firm.

'He was poisoned.'

Hercule Poirot said: 'I see.'

There was a silence.

Then the girl said in a calm, matter-of-fact voice:

'Thank goodness you're sensible. You see that it does matter—and what it involves. You don't try and patch it up and trot out consoling phrases.'

'I understand very well,' said Poirot. 'What I do *not* understand is what you want of *me*.'

Carla Lemarchant said simply:

'I want to marry John! And I mean to marry John! And I want to have at least two girls and two boys. And you're going to make that possible!'

'You mean—you want me to talk to your fiancé? Ah no, it is idiocy what I say there! It is something quite different that you are suggesting. Tell me what is in your mind.'

'Listen, M. Poirot. Get this—and get it clearly. I'm hiring you to investigate a case of murder.'

'Do you mean—?'

'Yes, I do mean. A case of murder is a case of murder whether it happened yesterday or sixteen years ago.'

'But my dear young lady—'

'Wait, M. Poirot. You haven't got it all yet. There's a very important point.'

'Yes?'

'My mother was innocent,' said Carla Lemarchant.

Hercule Poirot rubbed his nose. He murmured:

'Well, naturally—I comprehend that—'

'It isn't sentiment. There's her letter. She left it for me before she died. It was to be given to me when I was twenty-one. She left it for that one reason—that I should be quite sure. That's all that was in it. That she hadn't done it—that she was innocent—that I could be sure of that always.'

Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully at the young vital face staring so earnestly at him. He said slowly:

'*Tout de même*—'

Carla smiled.

'No, mother wasn't like that! You're thinking that it might be a lie—a sentimental lie?' She leaned forward earnestly. 'Listen, M. Poirot, there are some things that children know quite well. I can remember my mother—a patchy remembrance, of course, but I remember quite well the *sort* of

person she was. She didn't tell lies—kind lies. If a thing was going to hurt she always told you so. Dentists, or thorns in your finger—all that sort of thing. Truth was a—a natural impulse to her. I wasn't, I don't think, especially fond of her—but I trusted her. I *still* trust her! If she says she didn't kill my father then she didn't kill him! She wasn't the sort of person who would solemnly write down a lie when she knew she was dying.'

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Hercule Poirot bowed his head.

Carla went on.

'That's why it's all right for *me* marrying John. *I* know it's all right. *But he doesn't*. He feels that naturally I would think my mother was innocent. It's got to be cleared up, M. Poirot. And *you're* going to do it!'

Hercule Poirot said slowly:

'Granted that what you say is true, mademoiselle, sixteen years have gone by!'

Carla Lemarchant said: 'Oh! of course it's going to be *difficult*! Nobody but *you* could do it!'

Hercule Poirot's eyes twinkled slightly. He said:

'You give me the best butter—*hein?*'

Carla said:

'I've heard about you. The things you've done. The *way* you have done them. It's psychology that interests you, isn't it? Well, that doesn't change with time. The tangible things are gone—the cigarette-end and the footprints and the bent blades of grass. You can't look for those any more. But you can go over all the facts of the case, and perhaps talk

to the people who were there at the time—they're all alive still—and then—and then, as you said just now, you can lie back in your chair and *think*. *And you'll know what really happened*…'

Hercule Poirot rose to his feet. One hand caressed his moustache. He said:

'Mademoiselle, I am honoured! I will justify your faith in me. I will investigate your case of murder. I will search back into the events of sixteen years ago and I will find out the truth.'

Carla got up. Her eyes were shining. But she only said:

'Good.'

Hercule Poirot shook an eloquent forefinger.

'One little moment. I have said I will find out the truth. I do not, you understand, have the bias. I do not accept your assurance of your mother's innocence. If she was guilty—*eh bien*, what then?'

Carla's proud head went back. She said:

'I'm her daughter. I want the *truth*!'

Hercule Poirot said:

'*En avant*, then. Though it is not that, that I should say. On the contrary. *En arrière*…'