

Gerard Croiset: Investigation of the Mozart of "Psychic Sleuths"—Part I

Critical examination of the evidence surrounding the cases of supposed crime-solving by the celebrated Dutch "clairvoyant" finds extraordinary differences between the claims and the facts.

Piet Hein Hoebens

First of two articles.

The Dutchman Gerard Croiset, who died unexpectedly in July 1980, was undoubtedly one of the psychic superstars of the twentieth century. His mentor, Professor Wilhelm Tenhaeff, has called him the clairvoyant equivalent of Mozart or Beethoven. Tenhaeff's German colleague, Professor Hans Bender, recently admitted that Croiset had been instrumental in transforming his belief in ESP into "an unshakable conviction." The obituaries published in the European press reflected the sensitive's unique reputation. According to the Amsterdam weekly *Elsevier*, the deceased had heralded a "new awareness of cosmic solidarity." The German parascientific monthly *Esotera* ran a cover story lamenting the death of "the clairvoyant who never disappointed." A professor from the papal university delivered the funeral oration.

Croiset's career in the supernatural has been distinguished indeed. According to his biographers, he has solved some of the century's most baffling crimes, traced countless lost objects, and located hundreds of missing persons. His paranormal healing powers are said to have been on the Caycean level. He "excelled" at precognition and is credited with having accurately foretold future events on numerous occasions. Most of his remarkable feats, it is said, were performed under scientific supervision, which supposedly would make Croiset one of the most thoroughly tested sensitives since Mrs. Piper.

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Gerard Croiset was respectable. Many educated Dutchmen who profess disbelief in ESP have managed to hold the simultaneous conviction that Croiset, for one, was genuine.

This miracle man is the subject of a full-length biography by the American journalist Jack Harrison Pollack, who claims to have spent five years checking and double-checking the psychic's record. Pollack's verdict: "Unbelievable, but true." Unbelievable, indeed. But true?

Psychic Detectives

The practical achievements of Gerard Croiset and other sensitives who claim to assist the police share most of the features of "spontaneous cases."* Such cases typically occur under uncontrolled conditions and are by their very nature unrepeatable. This means that the only evidence we have usually consists of whatever witnesses are able to remember or care to report. Before reaching a verdict, the critical investigator has to address two crucial questions:

1. Are the reports free of omissions, errors, and deliberate distortions?
2. Does whatever remains after the first question has been answered admit no more plausible an explanation than ESP?

The Sources

Studying Croiset has been the virtual monopoly of Wilhelm Heinrich Carl Tenhaeff, the Dutch parapsychologist who in 1953 was appointed to the first chair of psychical research ever to be established at a regular university (Utrecht). Tenhaeff's books and articles constitute the principal source of information on Croiset, whose case may be said to stand or fall with the reliability of his learned mentor. Unfortunately, little of Tenhaeff's work has been translated into English, which leaves Pollack's *Croiset the Clairvoyant* as the main reference in this language. Pollack is a journalist, not a scholar. Yet his biography may be regarded as an authoritative document, since it was written under the personal guidance of Tenhaeff himself. "He indefatigably double-checked the facts in my manuscript," Pollack states in his Acknowledgment.

In Tenhaeff's *Tijdschrift voor Parapsychologie* (the official journal of the Dutch Society for Psychical Research), the professor has proudly confirmed this. According to Tenhaeff, *Croiset the Clairvoyant* "was written on the basis of information which I supplied and also under my supervision."

*This article and the one to follow are exclusively concerned with Croiset's activities as a paranormal sleuth. In that role he became best known abroad. About the experiments with him I will have more to say later.



Croiset gained fame as a clairvoyant sleuth.

Police Records

According to Pollack, Croiset won plaudits not just from parapsychologists but from policemen all over the world for his achievements in psychic detection. "I checked documents in case after case in police records," the biographer assures us. I am not quite certain what he means. Most of the documents he refers to must have been in Dutch, and I doubt that he ever familiarized himself with the language. The only Dutch expression I found in the book is the equivalent of "thank you," and even that solitary example contains an error. Presumably, Pollack relied on summaries or translations of the relevant documentation, prepared for him by Tenhaeff and other acquaintances in the Netherlands. He must have felt it was quite safe to do so. After all, his material would be double-checked by a distinguished scholar, a professor at a state university, a pioneer whom the American psychiatrist-parapsychologist Dr. Berthold Eric Schwartz had compared to Copernicus, Freud, and Einstein.

The Boy on the Raft

It is time to take a closer look at one of Croiset's most impressive successes. It is the "Boy on Raft" case, and will be found on pages 106 and 107 of the

Bantam paperback edition of *Croiset the Clairvoyant*. This case has often been mentioned in the psi literature, and Tenhaeff himself has indicated more than once that it is one of the classics.

This is how Pollack reports it (*italics added*):

Ten-year-old Dirk Zwenne left his home in the dunes city of Velsen near the North Sea canal on Saturday, August 29, 1953, at about two P.M. to play. When the boy had not returned home by early evening, his parents began to grow uneasy. They telephoned the local police without success. When no trace of the missing boy had been found in two days, Dirk's uncle telephoned Croiset, whose phone number and address in Enschede, 115 miles away, had been given to him by a police superintendent. Among the clairvoyant's *immediate images* was that Dirk had drowned: "I see a *small harbor*, a *small raft* and a little sailboat. The boy was playing on the raft. He slipped and fell into the water. As he fell, his head struck the sailboat and he received *an injury on the left side of his head*. I am very sorry. There was a strong current in the harbor. *The boy's body will be found in a few days in another small harbor which is connected with the first harbor.*" Unhappily, five days after he had disappeared, the body of Dirk Zwenne was found in this second harbor. And, *just as Croiset had seen*, the boy had a wound on the left side of his head. The raft and small sailboat were recovered in the first harbor—again *just as the sensitive had described*. "It is very likely that everything had happened as the paragnost had seen it," summarized Professor Tenhaeff.

This seems a striking case indeed. Oddly enough, until now nobody seems to have thought of comparing this version with a letter that was published in *Tijdschrift voor Parapsychologie* in 1955 (vol. 23, no. 1/2). It was written by Mr. A. J. Allan, the uncle who had consulted Croiset. From this report (embedded in an article by Tenhaeff) we get an idea of what really happened. On Monday, August 31, Mr. Allan phoned the clairvoyant, who was at that time living in the eastern Dutch town of Enschede. He acted on the advice of Haarlem police superintendent Gorter, who happened to be the second secretary of the Dutch Society for Psychological Research (SPR) and an acquaintance of both Tenhaeff and Croiset.

The sensitive, after having made clear that he knew what the call was about, told the uncle: "You must look near a *gasholder*."

Allan: "A gasholder?"

Croiset: "Yes. It might be a tank or a boiler or something like that. I see a road and a small ditch. I also see a small bridge and a small water. Do I speak to the boy's father?"

Allan: "No, you are speaking to an uncle."

Croiset: "All right, I can speak freely. The child has drowned. He is dead. I also see a jetty and a rowing boat or something like that. That's where the body must be."

Allan: "Could it be the North Sea canal?"

Croiset: "No, that is too broad. I don't see so much water."

Allan: "Then where is it?"

Croiset: "I don't know Velsen, but you have to look near that gasholder or tank. It is to the right of it. *To know for sure I ought to come to Velsen.* Call me again if that's necessary."

End of conversation.

Holland being a country full of roads, ditches, small bridges, small waters, jetties, rowboats, and objects that could be described as gasholders, tanks, boilers, or "something like that," Croiset's impressions had hardly been specific. His description could apply to any number of locations.

According to Mr. Allan, the police, "after having considered several possibilities," decided that Croiset must have "seen" a small harbor near a water purification plant. This is a rather surprising interpretation, as that "harbor" (really a recess) is *part of the North Sea canal*. The psychic had been specific on only one point: the water was *not* the North Sea canal. To me, this strongly suggests that the police had reasons of their own to regard the small harbor as a likely place.

The police decided to drag the harbor the next day. On Tuesday, they heard that Dirk, shortly before disappearing, had told one of his friends about "having found a nice raft."

Croiset, who was phoned again later that day, *now started to receive impressions of a raft also*. Mr. Allan suggests that this was due to telepathy, but the skeptical reader may be able to think of a more naturalistic explanation.

Nothing was found in the small harbor, and the next day Allan asked Croiset to come to Velsen. The clairvoyant arrived that same evening, in the company of Tenhaeff.

The psychic was taken to the small harbor, and there he started to get "strong emotions." He stated that the boy had been playing with his raft, had lost his balance, and had bumped his head on a hard object. "According to him [Croiset] *this had been fatal*," Allan notes. Croiset predicted the body would *not be found before Monday, September 7, or Tuesday the 8th*, and would show an injury "*on the left side of the forehead*." The clairvoyant was then taken to a second small harbor that also forms part of the North Sea canal. *There, however, he felt "no emotions."*

The next morning, Thursday, September 3, the body of Dirk Zwenne was found in the canal near the entrance of the second harbor. The head showed bruises, *but not at the location Croiset had indicated*. Where and in what circumstances the boy had fallen into the water appears never to have been ascertained.

Now please compare this long and tedious story with Pollack's "summary" and be surprised at the magical metamorphosis an entirely unspectacular event has undergone in the process of summarizing. Croiset's impressions had been vague and for the most part wide of the mark, and yet this case is cited as a classic instance of successful psychic detection.

How could this fantastic distortion ever have survived the checking and double-checking by an experienced American journalist and a distinguished university professor? The answer to this question may contain the key to much of the Croiset mystery. For it was Tenhaeff himself who concocted the fake version. Having published Allan's account in his *Tijdschrift*, destined for the home market, the professor prepared a special version for export.

All Pollack had to do was to paraphrase the version Tenhaeff had already published in German (*Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1958) and in English (*Proceedings of the Parapsychological Institute of the State University of Utrecht*, no. 1, December 1960). This latter version reads as follows:

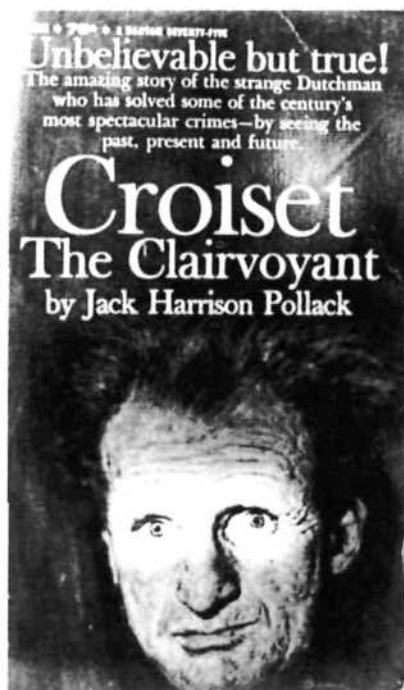
When no trace of the child had been found by 31st August an uncle of the missing child rang up Mr. Alpha [Croiset's code name], whose name and address he had obtained from a police superintendent. According to the paragnost the child had drowned. Among the "pictures" which presented themselves to Mr. Alpha were a few *which concerned a small harbour*. In this small harbour he "saw" *a small raft and a little sailing boat*. According to the paragnost the child had been playing on the raft. He supposed him while at play to have slipped and to have fallen into the water. In doing so he appeared to have incurred *a wound on the left side of the head* where he struck the sailing boat as he fell. *In consequence of a current in the harbour, so the paragnost said, the body would be found in another small harbour which was connected with the first. On 3rd September, just as the paragnost had "seen," the body of Dirk Zwenne was in fact found in the second harbor with a wound on the left side of his head.* [Italics added.]

On all essential points, this version is identical to Pollack's. In this form, the "Boy on Raft" case has become the "believer's favorite." It was featured in the cover story devoted to Croiset in the September 1979 *Holland Herald* (an English-language magazine mainly concerned with "selling" the Netherlands) and found its way into Ryzl's *Parapsychology: A Scientific Approach* and numerous other publications. It is clear that in this case, Professor Tenhaeff "cooked the books." His probable reasons for doing so will be discussed later.

Pollack as a Witness

Jack Harrison Pollack can hardly be blamed for the serious errors in his report of the "Boy on Raft" case. A journalist may be forgiven for accepting a university professor's word, but he must be held responsible for his reports of what he claims he personally witnessed.

In *This Week* of February 19, 1961 (a slightly elaborated version will be found on pp. 25-26 of the paperback edition of the biography), Pollack recalled being present when, on May 21, 1960, Croiset was phoned by a



Pollack's book on Croiset.

De Telegraaf, Amsterdam



Professor W. H. C. Tenhaeff considered Croiset genuine.

De Telegraaf, Amsterdam

neighbor of an Eindhoven family whose four-year-old son had been missing for 24 hours. According to the article, the police "*had no clues.*"

"The outlook isn't good," Croiset is quoted as saying. "Search the area immediately. But I'm afraid in about three days the child's body will be found in the canal close to the bridge."

Pollack continues: "Three days later, I checked up. The police of Eindhoven had just found the child's body next to one of the piers of the bridge over the canal—exactly as Croiset had predicted."

Something seems to have gone wrong when Pollack checked up. In 1981, I made inquiries with the Eindhoven police. Mr. W. Jongsma of the Information Office kindly offered to check the original police report. These are the real facts: The victim, three-year-old Anthonius Thonen, while playing with a friend, fell into the Dommel River on May 20. The accident was witnessed by the other boy, who told Anthonius's mother about it when she came looking for him. Mrs. Thonen saw something floating on the water. Presumably, this was the body. It had disappeared when the police arrived. On May 23 (two days after the telephone conversation), Anthonius's remains were found in the river, near the Gessel playground.

The police report does not mention Croiset. Neither does it mention a

bridge. (There are so many bridges over the Dommel that there is always one nearby.)

The authorities from the very beginning knew that the boy had drowned in the river. Pollack's claim that the police "had no clues" is utterly misleading. No one needed a clairvoyant to say that "the outlook isn't good" or that the area should be searched immediately. Yet, by overlooking some crucial facts, Pollack is able to present this case as "an amazing demonstration."

Search for a Child

Pollack's book and numerous other English-language publications convey the impression that psychics are employed as a matter of course in Dutch police investigations. Some journalists seem to think that a special hot-line connects Tenhaeff's office with police headquarters in every major town. Perhaps the language barrier may have been responsible for this exaggeration. In fact, Dutch police authorities tend to be skeptical of clairvoyants. Their typical reply to questions about Croiset is something to the effect that ESP may exist but Croiset was never of any use to them. However, there are a few exceptions.

Notable among the exceptions is a report by Inspector G. D. H. van Woudenberg, published in *Algemeen Politieblad* (no. 13, 1964, pp. 297-300). Van Woudenberg, at that time serving with the Voorburg police, relates an apparent success Croiset achieved in searching for the body of six-year-old Wim Slee. The child was reported missing on April 11, 1963. A thorough search was organized the same day. A police dog led the way to a certain spot on the bank of a canal locally known as De Vliet. There were good reasons to assume the dog was right, as it was known that Wim often went there to play. No body was found, however. The next day the case was mentioned in the press and on radio and television. A number of psychics volunteered with perfectly worthless information. In the meantime, an uncle had rung Croiset's phone number, to be told that the psychic had gone abroad. The uncle did not get through to Croiset until the 16th. The clairvoyant then told him that the boy had drowned in De Vliet. The body would surface in a couple of days near a bridge, a sluice, "or something like that," to the left of the spot where the accident had happened. Croiset asked to be called back in case the child had not been found by Friday the 19th.

That Friday, with still no trace of Wim Slee, Croiset came to Voorburg. He had with him a sketch of the location where the boy had fallen into the water. He invited the police to get into his car and then drove to De Vliet. He stopped near the spot indicated by the dog and stated that he now experienced "strong emotions." Van Woudenberg noted "striking similarities" between the sketch and the actual location. Croiset said the child had drowned there but would surface on Tuesday morning near a

bridge some 800 yards downstream. This was to the right of the indicated spot (as seen from Voorburg), but the clairvoyant explained that "to the right" really is the same as "to the left" if you look at it from the other side. Near the bridge, van Woudenberg continues, "we saw there were points [on the sketch] that corresponded with what the uncle had been told earlier that week."

As it happened, Wim Slee's body was found the following Tuesday near the bridge. Presumably, the remains had been tangled up in refuse on the bottom of the canal.

Unless we want to make unfounded conjectures about a possible lapse of memory on van Woudenberg's part, the verdict must be: a hit. Yet I wonder if ESP is the only plausible explanation. Croiset gave his first "impressions" on the 16th, five days after Wim Slee had been reported missing. The case had received considerable media coverage. The police suspected that the boy had drowned in De Vliet and the dog had even indicated a likely spot. However, Croiset's initial "images" were vague, and he did not specify what bridge, sluice, or "something like that" he meant.

His description (as reported by van Woudenberg) would fit a good many bridgelike structures. He stated that the body had floated "to the left" but did not say from what vantage point. Moreover, from his request to be called back in case the body was still missing on Friday the 19th, we may surmise that he expected that the boy would have been found by that date. Friday the 19th would have been eight days after Wim Slee disappeared, and van Woudenberg tells us that "most bodies come to the surface in a maximum of nine days."

Croiset scored a hit only when he tried again. The accuracy of the sketch he showed on the 19th is not surprising. He had simply drawn the area where, according to the police dog, the child had fallen into the water. The possibility that he had obtained his information by normal means should not be ruled out. Van Woudenberg (personal communication) thinks this hypothesis somewhat unlikely, as the sketch contained a few details of the location not visible from the public road. I venture to suggest that the inspector *may* have underestimated the resourcefulness of a highly experienced psychic.

What remains is that Croiset, in his second series of "impressions," received eight days after the accident, correctly predicted both the date and the spot where the body would be found. Striking enough, but I doubt whether the odds against such a hit arising from chance alone are really astronomical.

Van Woudenberg (personal communication) is still impressed by Croiset's success, although he does not think it falls into the "conclusive evidence" category. "The weakest part of the case," he told me in February 1981, "is that it seems to be pretty unique. It happened 17 years ago and continues to be cited as possibly the best case that ever happened in

Holland. One cannot help wondering why there seem to be so few comparable successes.”

Failures

As an isolated case, Croiset’s achievement in Voorburg is fairly impressive. However, we must guard against a common fallacy in assessing such apparently compelling “proofs.” The chance hypothesis can only be ruled out if we know the hit/miss ratio in the psychic’s total score. On this point, no statistics are available, but there are a number of reliable indications.

In his English-language *Proceedings* (1960) and in a number of other publications, Tenhaeff has admitted that the number of successful consultations (successful from a practical point of view) is limited. The bulk of the material in his *Beschouwingen over het gebruik van paragnosten* (1957), his major Dutch work on psychic detection, concerns cases where the psychics supposedly demonstrated ESP without actually solving any crime or finding any missing person. There are very few prize cases, and these are cited time and again. Some of these “successes,” as I have shown, are striking only when the facts have carefully been doctored. In his book *Ontmoetingen met Paragnosten* (“Encounters with Psychics,” 1979) Tenhaeff quotes Croiset as stating that he was consulted by relatives of missing persons on an average of 10 to 12 times a week. That is something like 500 times a year, and Croiset has been in the business since the forties!

All this strongly suggests that thousands of Croiset’s attempts have ended in failures—even if we generously use standards that allow, for example, the “Boy on Raft” case to be judged a success. Given so many misses, an occasional lucky hit is hardly surprising. The miracle van Woudenberg thought he witnessed may simply have been one of those successful guesses we can expect once in a while if the number of trials is sufficiently large. Tenhaeff is remarkably reticent about the many failures, except when he feels able to explain them in terms of misdirected ESP. The complete disasters that cannot be rescued even by parapsychological special pleading are conveniently ignored. Examples, however, are numerous.

In May 1956 the public prosecutor in Amsterdam revealed that three psychics had earlier that year attempted to shed light on the disappearance of a 31-year-old inhabitant of Rossum. Croiset had stated that the man was alive and staying in Germany. Shortly thereafter, the body was found in a canal in the municipality of Ootmarsum, Holland.

In 1969, Croiset went to Viareggio, in Italy, to look for 13-year-old Ermanno Lavorini. He “saw” that the boy had fallen into the water while playing. In fact, Ermanno had been killed by a friend during a quarrel. The body was found in the dunes.

In 1966, Croiset journeyed to Adelaide, Australia, to search for three missing children. A local “committee” paid the expenses. The clairvoyant was sure the children were buried under a new warehouse. He

advised demolition. The "committee" collected 40,000 Australian dollars to have the building pulled down. The soil under the concrete floor was removed to a depth of four yards. No bodies were found. Croiset urged them to dig one more yard, "and the children will be found." He was wrong. This costly mistake did not affect his reputation. Three years later the Amsterdam paper *Het Vrije Volk*, quoting an AP Telex, claimed that the Australian authorities had "refused permission to search on the spot."

In June 1973, Croiset was consulted by the relatives of a murdered Chinese from The Hague. The clairvoyant indicated that a Mr. Senf knew more about the crime. The relatives then abducted Senf and tortured him for three hours to get a "confession." Senf, however, had nothing to confess. He happened to be innocent. The following week, Croiset visited Senf, who was in the hospital recovering from his ordeal. He brought flowers and assured Senf that he now was quite convinced of his innocence.

In the police journal *Algemeen Politieblad* of January 9, 1960, Utrecht Superintendent Th. van Roosmalen published a catalogue of psychic blunders. In December 1957, he revealed, the 14-year-old son of the E. family disappeared from his parental home in the Utrecht River district. The house was near one of several canals in that part of town. After a couple of days, the parents contacted Croiset. The psychic came and led Mr. and Mrs. E. to the quay, where he stopped and pointed. "This is where your son got into the water and drowned," he said. "I am desolate that I have to be the first to offer you my sympathy for having suffered such a grievous bereavement." The police learned from neighbors that the parents next day had contacted an undertaker to arrange for the funeral. A few days later the boy was found, alive and well and hiding in a haystack.

In the light of such occurrences—and I could quote many more—*Esotera's* description of Croiset as "the psychic who never disappointed" seems to contain an element of poetic license.

Note: While this article was in press, we were informed that Professor Tenhaeff died on July 9, 1981. Professor Tenhaeff had received prior notice of the results of Mr. Hoebens's investigations but declined several invitations to offer specific counterarguments. —Ed.

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