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The Mystery at Hunter's Lodge

MURDER-MYSTERY. Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie. Roger Haverling calls on famed detective Hercule Poirot to investigate the murder of his wealthy uncle, who has been murdered at an isolated hunting lodge on the Derbyshire moors. Indisposed with a bad case of influenza, Poirot agrees to send his colleague Arthur Hastings to investigate but only if Hastings implicitly follows all instructions Poirot wires him. Excited for the opportunity to investigate the case solo and hoping to solve it without Poirot, Hastings travels to Hunter's Lodge. There, he meets up with Inspector Japp, who has been sent from Scotland Yard and is already one step ahead of him. Suspects include a mysterious black-bearded American and a missing housekeeper. In the end, the wicked may flourish like a green bay tree, but as Poirot says, "at a price, always at a price." Easy to stage with simple set pieces.

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes.



Agatha Christie, circa 1925

About the Story

Agatha Christie was born in southwest England to a wealthy family. Growing up, Christie enjoyed reading mystery novels by Wilkie Collins and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Many of Christie's short stories were first published in periodicals and feature the famed Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. Poirot later became one of Christie's most famous characters. "The Mystery of Hunter's Lodge" was first published in *The Sketch* in May 1923 in the United Kingdom. The story was published in the United States in *The Blue Book Magazine* in June 1924 as "The Hunter's Lodge Case." In 1924, the story appeared as part of the anthology *Poirot Investigates*. The author of 66 detective novels and 15 short story collections, Christie is best known for her bestselling novel *And Then There Were None* and her play *The Mousetrap*.

Characters

(4 M, 2 F)

HERCULE POIROT: Famed Belgian detective; wears a garish dressing gown, robe, and a woolen shawl around his head/neck; has a moustache and speaks with a French accent (opt.); male.

CAPTAIN ARTHUR HASTINGS: Poirot's friend who assists him on cases; male.

INSPECTOR JAMES HAROLD JAPP: Detective from Scotland Yard who often finds himself one step behind Poirot; male.

MRS. ZOE HAVERING/MRS. MIDDLETON: Roger Havering's charismatic wife, an actress who used to perform at the Frivolity Theatre; wears a flame-colored jacket and a hat of flame-colored leather; as Mrs. Middleton, she wears a black housekeeping uniform; female.

MR. ROGER HAVERING: Calls on Poirot to investigate the murder of his wealthy uncle, Harrington Pace, who has been murdered; known to have a shady past and stands to inherit his uncle's fortune; male.

LANDLADY: Poirot's landlady; female.

Setting

Poirot's study in London and an isolated hunting lodge on the Derbyshire moors outside the village of Elmer's Dale, 1925.

Sets

Note: The sets may be as simple or elaborate as your budget allows. Simple set pieces may be used for easy scene changes.

Poirot's study. There is a fireplace, an armchair, a settee with several pillows, and a coffee table. A neatly graduated row of assorted medicine bottles adorn the mantelpiece of the fireplace. There a bookcase with assorted books including a "Who's Who" directory.

First-class train carriage. A backdrop of a train carriage may be used, if desired. There are two seats.

Hunter's Lodge hallway/foyer. A backdrop of a foyer/hallway may be used with a few simple set pieces.

Hunter's Lodge gunroom. There is a settee and/or armchairs. The room is decorated with assorted animal trophies, etc. On the wall is place where two revolvers had been mounted. There is a large bloodstain on a rug the where victim had fallen.

Room at an inn, Elmer's Dale. There is a small desk, chair, and cot (opt.).

Synopsis of Scenes

- Scene 1:** Poirot's study, London.
- Scene 2:** First-class train carriage.
- Scene 3:** Lodge foyer/hallway, dimly lit.
- Scene 4:** Lodge foyer/hallway, dimly lit.
- Scene 5:** Lodge gunroom.
- Scene 6:** Hastings's room at an inn in Elmer's Dale.
- Scene 7:** Lodge foyer/hallway.
- Scene 8:** Poirot's study.

Props

Woolen shawl, for Poirot
Glass medicine bottles (assorted)
2 Teacups
Newspaper
"Who's Who" directory
Telegram
Small camera
Plate with breakfast items on it (e.g. bread, jam, etc.)

Sound Effect

Sound of steps descending stairs
Sound of steps ascending stairs

“Once more I shall be myself again,
the great Hercule Poirot,
the terror of evildoers!”

Scene 1

(AT RISE: *Hercule Poirot's study, London. Suffering from influenza, Poirot is lying back on a settee, propped up by pillows. His head is partially covered with a woolen shawl and he is sipping on a cup of herbal tea. A neatly graduated row of medicine bottles adorn the mantelpiece. Captain Arthur Hastings is seated in an armchair drinking tea.*)

POIROT: *(To Hastings, proclaims.)* After all, it is possible that I shall not die this time! *(Takes a sip of herbal tea and grimaces.)*

HASTINGS: I myself was the first sufferer of this influenza, and I am now well. Your remark is showing a bit too much optimism as you have, in turn, gone downhill.

POIROT: *(Ignores him.)* Yes, yes! Once more shall I be myself again, the great Hercule Poirot, the terror of evildoers! *(Picks up the newspaper.)* Look, [mon ami], I have a little paragraph to myself in the society gossip section. *(Scans newspaper section.)* But, yes! Here it is! *(Reads.)* "Go it, criminals! Go all out! And believe me, girls, he's some Hercules! Hercule Poirot, our own society detective, can't get a grip on you. 'Cause why? 'Cause he's got la grippe himself!"

HASTINGS: *(Laughs.)* Good for you, Poirot. You are becoming quite a public character. And, fortunately, you haven't missed any cases of particular interest during this time.

POIROT: That is true. The few cases I have had to decline did not fill me with any regret. *(Takes another sip of herbal tea and grimaces.)* This is a particularly noxious herbal tea you have prepared!

HASTINGS: *(Annoyed.)* But I prepared it according to your directions.

(Landlady appears in the doorway.)

LANDLADY: *(Calls.)* There's a gentleman downstairs. Says he must see Monsieur Poirot or you, Captain Hastings. Seeing as he was in a great to-do—and with all that, quite the gentleman—I brought up his card.

(Landlady hands Hastings the card.)

HASTINGS: *(Reads.)* Mr. Roger Havering.

(Poirot gestures with his head toward the bookcase. Obediently, Hastings pulls the "Who's Who" directory and hands it to Poirot. Poirot rapidly scans the pages.)

POIROT: *(Reads.)* "Second son of fifth Baron Windsor. Married 1913 to Zoe, fourth daughter of William Crabb."

HASTINGS: Hmm, I rather fancy that's the girl who used to act at the Frivolity Theatre, only she called herself Zoe Carrisbrook. I remember, she married some young man about town just before the War.

POIROT: Would it interest you, Hastings, to go down and hear what our visitor's particular little trouble is? Give him all my excuses.

(Lights down on the scene. Spotlight up on Mr. Roger Havering, who is standing off to one side. Hastings enters and approaches.)

MR. HAVERING: *(Agitated.)* Captain Hastings? I understand you are Monsieur Poirot's assistant?

HASTINGS: Actually, I am more of an equal partner on cases.

MR. HAVERING: It is imperative that he should come with me to Derbyshire today.

HASTINGS: I'm afraid that's impossible. Poirot is ill in bed...influenza.

MR. HAVERING: *(Downtrodden.)* Dear me, that is a great blow to me.

HASTINGS: The matter on which you want to consult him is serious?

MR. HAVERING: Goodness, yes! My uncle, the best friend I have in the world, was foully murdered last night!

HASTINGS: Here in London?

MR. HAVERING: No, in Derbyshire. I was in the City and received a telegram from my wife this morning. Immediately upon its receipt, I determined to come round and beg Monsieur Poirot to undertake the case.

HASTINGS: *(Gets an idea.)* If you will excuse me a minute.

(Spotlight down on Hastings and Mr. Havering. Lights up on Poirot's study. Hastings has just finished updating Poirot.)

HASTINGS: Now that I have acquainted you with the situation...

POIROT: I see. I see. You want to go yourself, is it not so?

HASTINGS: You took the words out of my mouth.

POIROT: Well...why not? You should know my methods by now. All I ask is that you should report to me fully every day and follow implicitly any instructions I may wire you.

(Hastings smiles. Blackout.)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: A first-class train carriage, an hour later. Hastings is sitting opposite Mr. Havering.)

MR. HAVERING: To begin with, Captain Hastings, you must understand that Hunter's Lodge, where we are going and where the tragedy took place, is only a modest hunting lodge in the heart of the Derbyshire moors. Our real home is near Newmarket, and we usually rent a flat in the City for the season.

HASTINGS: Who resides at the lodge?

MR. HAVERING: Hunter's Lodge is looked after by a housekeeper, who is quite capable of doing all we need when we run down for an occasional weekend. Of course, during the shooting season, we bring with us some of our servants from Newmarket. My uncle, Mr. Harrington Pace—as you may know, my mother was a Miss Pace of New York—has, for the last three years, made his home with us. He never got on well with my father or my elder brother, and I suspect that my being somewhat of a prodigal son myself rather increased his affection toward me. Of course, I am a poor man and my uncle was a rich one—in other words, he paid the piper! But, though exacting in many ways, he was not really hard to get on with, and we all three lived very harmoniously together.

HASTINGS: If you will recount to me what happened...from the beginning.

MR. HAVERING: Two days ago, my uncle—rather wearied with some recent gaieties of ours in town—suggested that we should run down to Derbyshire for a day or two. My wife telegraphed Mrs. Middleton, the housekeeper, and we went down that same afternoon. Yesterday evening, I was forced to return to the City, but my wife and my uncle remained. This morning I received this telegram.

(Mr. Havering hands the telegram to Hastings.)

HASTINGS: *(Reads.)* "Come at once. Uncle Harrington murdered last night. Bring good detective if you can, but do come—Zoe." As yet, you know no further details?

MR. HAVERING: No, I suppose it will be in the evening papers. Without doubt, the police are there now.

(Blackout.)

Scene 3

(AT RISE: *Hunter's Lodge, an isolated hunting lodge on the Derbyshire moors outside of the village of Elmer's Dale, 3 p.m. Mr. Havering and Hastings enter the lodge hallway/foyer.*)

HASTINGS: (*Shivers.*) A lonely place.

MR. HAVERING: (*Nods.*) I will try to sell it. I could never live here again.

(*Inspector Japp enters.*)

HASTINGS: (*Surprised.*) Inspector Japp!

(*Inspector Japp nods and grins at Hastings in a friendly fashion.*)

JAPP: Mr. Havering? (*Mr. Havering nods.*) I've been sent down from Scotland Yard to take charge of this case, and I'd like a word with you, if I may, sir.

MR. HAVERING: My wife—

JAPP: I've seen your good lady, sir, and the housekeeper. I won't keep you a moment. I'm anxious to get back to the village now that I've seen all there is to see here.

MR. HAVERING: I know nothing as yet as to what—

JAPP: (*Soothingly.*) Exactly. But there are just one or two little points I'd like your opinion about all the same. (*Dismissive.*) Captain Hastings, here, he knows me, and he'll tell Mrs. Havering you're coming. What have you done with the little man, by the way, Captain Hastings?

HASTINGS: He's ill in bed with influenza.

JAPP: Is he now? I'm sorry to hear that. Rather the case of the cart without the horse, your being here without him, isn't it? (*Chuckles.*)

HASTINGS: (*Insulted.*) I will forgive your rather ill-timed jest. (*Exits. Blackout.*)

Scene 4

(AT RISE: Lodge foyer/hallway, dimly lit. Hastings is waiting. Mrs. Middleton, the housekeeper, enters.)

HASTINGS: *(To Mrs. Middleton.)* Mr. Havering will be here in a moment. He has been detained by the inspector. I have come down with Mr. Havering from London to look into the case. Perhaps you can tell me briefly what occurred last night.

MRS. MIDDLETON: It was after dinner last night, sir, that the man came. He asked to see Mr. Pace, sir, and I thought it was an American gentleman friend of Mr. Pace's. I showed him into the gunroom and then went to tell Mr. Pace.

HASTINGS: What is his name?

MRS. MIDDLETON: He wouldn't give any name, which, of course, was a bit odd, now I come to think of it. I told Mr. Pace, and he seemed puzzled, but he said to the mistress, "Excuse me, Zoe, while I just see what this fellow wants." He went off to the gunroom, and I went back to the kitchen. But after a while, I heard loud voices, as if they were quarrelling, and I came out into the hall.

HASTINGS: What happened then?

MRS. MIDDLETON: At the same time, the mistress came out too, and just then, there was a shot and then a dreadful silence. We both ran to the gunroom door, but it was locked and we had to go round to the window. The window was open, and there inside was Mr. Pace, shot and bleeding.

HASTINGS: What became of the black-bearded American?

MRS. MIDDLETON: He must have gotten away through the window, sir, before we got there.

HASTINGS: What then?

MRS. MIDDLETON: Mrs. Havering sent me to fetch the police. Five miles to walk it was. They came back with me, and the constable he stayed all night, and this morning, the inspector from Scotland Yard arrived.

HASTINGS: What was this man like who came to see Mr. Pace?

MRS. MIDDLETON: *(Reflects.)* He had a black beard, sir, and was middle-aged, and had on a light overcoat. Beyond the fact that he spoke like an American, I didn't notice much about him.

HASTINGS: I see. Now I wonder if I can see Mrs. Havering.

MRS. MIDDLETON: She's upstairs, sir. Shall I tell her?

HASTINGS: If you please. Tell her that Mr. Havering is outside with Inspector Japp and that the gentleman he has brought back with him from London is anxious to speak to her as soon as possible.

MRS. MIDDLETON: Very good, sir.

(Mrs. Middleton exits. The sound of footsteps ascending the stairs is heard. Long pause as Hastings waits for Mrs. Havering. The sound of footsteps descending the stairs is heard. Mrs. Havering enters and approaches Hastings.)

HASTINGS: Mrs. Havering? *(Mrs. Havering nods.)* I have come down with Mr. Havering from London. My name is Captain Arthur Hastings.

MRS. HAVERING: Of course, I have often heard of you and your colleague, Monsieur Poirot. You have done some wonderful things together, haven't you? It was very clever of my husband to get you so promptly. Now, you will ask me questions? That is the easiest way, isn't it, of getting to know all you want to about this dreadful affair?

HASTINGS: Yes. Just a few questions. Now, what time was it that this man arrived?

MRS. HAVERING: It must have been just before nine o'clock. We had finished dinner and were having our coffee.

HASTINGS: Your husband had already left for London?

MRS. HAVERING: Yes, he went up by the 6:15 train.

HASTINGS: Did he go by car to the station or did he walk?

MRS. HAVERING: Our car isn't down here. A car came out from the garage in Elmer's Dale to fetch him in time for the train.

HASTINGS: Was Mr. Pace quite his usual self?

MRS. HAVERING: Absolutely. Most normal in every way.

HASTINGS: Now, can you describe this visitor at all?

MRS. HAVERING: I'm afraid not. I didn't see him. Mrs. Middleton showed him straight into the gunroom and then came to tell my uncle.

HASTINGS: What did your uncle say?

MRS. HAVERING: He seemed rather annoyed, but went off at once. It was about five minutes later that I heard the sound of raised voices. I ran out into the hall and almost collided with Mrs. Middleton. Then we heard the shot. The gunroom door was locked on the inside, so we had to go round the house to the window. Of course, that took some time, and the murderer was able to get well away. My poor uncle... *(Voice falters.)* ...had been shot through the head. I saw at once that he was dead. I sent Mrs. Middleton for the police. I was careful to touch nothing in the room and to leave it exactly as I found it.

HASTINGS: *(Nods.)* Now, as to the weapon?

MRS. HAVERING: Well, I can make a guess at it, Captain Hastings. A pair of revolvers of my husband's were mounted upon the wall. One of them is missing. I pointed this out to the police, and they took the other one away with them. When they extract the bullet, I suppose they will know for certain.

HASTINGS: May I inspect the scene of the crime...the gunroom?

MRS. HAVERING: Certainly. The police have finished with it, and the body has been removed.

[END OF FREEVIEW]