



**Heather Lynn**

Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie

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**BIG DOG PUBLISHING**

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## What Move Must the Cat Make Now?

**MURDER-MYSTERY.** Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie. Famed Belgian detective Hercule Poirot receives a letter from Miss Amelia Barrowby requesting his assistance with a delicate, private matter. However, before Poirot can meet with Miss Barrowby, she is found dead. Inspector Sims informs Poirot that Miss Barrowby died of strychnine poisoning, but here lies the conundrum: If everyone in the house ate the same meal, why is it that only Miss Barrowby was poisoned? Poirot deduces there's a mouse in the house, but what move must the cat make next? With Poirot's friend Captain Arthur Hastings away, Poirot must call on his persnickety personal secretary Miss Lemon to assist him with the case. Easy to stage.

**Performance Time:** Approximately 30 minutes.

**NOTE:** Combine with other Agatha Christie one-acts for a full evening of mysteries.

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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 eccentric Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. Poirot later became one of Christie's most famous characters. 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

(3 M, 5 F)

(With doubling: 3 M, 4 F)

**HERCULE POIROT:** Eccentric Belgian private detective famed for his ability to solve mysteries; dresses impeccably and has a trademark moustache of which he takes great pride; speaks with a French accent (opt.); male.

**MISS FELICITY LEMON:** Poirot's persnickety personal secretary; female.

**MRS. MARY DELAFONTAINE:** The niece of murder victim Miss Amelia Barrowby; an avid gardener who lived in the same house with her aunt; female.

**MR. HENRY DELAFONTAINE:** Mary's husband who looks to his wife to take the lead in any conversation; has grizzled hair; male.

**MAID:** The Delafontaines' maid; wears a cap and apron; female.

**KATRINA RIEGER:** The nurse/companion of murder victim Miss Amelia Barrowby, who had willed most of her fortune to the young woman; half-Russian; speaks with a Russian accent (opt.); female.

**INSPECTOR SIMS:** Local police inspector who is investigating the death of Miss Amelia Barrowby and provides Poirot with background on the case; burly with a hearty manner; male.

**MISS AMELIA BARROWBY:** Elderly murder victim; voiceover only; female. Note: May be prerecorded if desired.

## Option for Doubling

**MAID/MISS AMELIA BARROWBY** (female)

## Setting

London and Charman's Green, a village in Buckinghamshire, UK, 1925.

## Sets

**Note:** Sets may be as simple or elaborate as your budget allows.

**Hercule Poirot's study, London.** There is a desk and chair for Poirot and a smaller desk and chair for Miss Lemon. There is a typewriter and a phone on Miss Lemon's desk.

**Rosebank:** There is a **front garden** with neatly planted beds of rose trees, daffodils, tulips, and blue hyacinths. The last bed is partly edged with oyster shells. The **drawing room** has furniture with floral upholstery and rose-colored cushions. The walls are covered with oatmeal-colored wallpaper with a frieze around the top. China knickknacks are displayed throughout the room. Draperies adorn the windows and a French door leads to the outdoors.

**Police station.** There is a desk and two chairs.

## Synopsis of Scenes

**Scene 1:** Poirot's study, London.

**Scene 2:** Poirot's study, five days later.

**Scene 3:** Rosebank, the home of Miss Amelia Barrowby, the next day.

**Scene 4:** Police station, a short time later.

**Scene 5:** Police station, the following afternoon.

**Scene 6:** Poirot's study.

**Scene 7:** Police station, an hour later.

**Scene 8:** Blank stage, a short time later.

**Scene 9:** Rosebank, sunset.

## Props

Pen  
Pad of paper  
Letters  
Letter opener  
Envelope sealed with wax and marked "Private and Confidential"  
Pile of assorted mail  
Handbag, for Miss Lemon  
Newspaper  
Business card  
China figurine  
Slip of paper  
Note

## Special Effects

Telephone ringing  
Lighting (to create sunset)



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“There is a mouse in this house!  
What move must the cat make now?”

—Poirot

Scene 1

*(AT RISE: Hercule Poirot's study. Miss Lemon, Poirot's personal secretary, is seated at her desk, typing. Hercule Poirot at his desk arranging letters in a neat pile in front of him. He picks up the top letter, studies the address for a moment, neatly slits the back of the envelope with a letter opener, and extracts the contents. Inside is another envelope carefully sealed with wax and marked "Private and Confidential.")*

POIROT: *(Annoyed.)* Another envelope. One must have patience! *(Opens the second envelope with the letter opener and unfolds the letter. To himself.)* Private and confidential. Rosebank, Charman's Green. March 21<sup>st</sup>.

*(As Poirot reads the letter silently, the voiceover is heard.)*

MISS AMELIA BARROWBY: *(Voiceover.)* "Dear Monsieur Poirot: I have been recommended to you by an old and valued friend of mine who knows the worry and distress I have been in lately. Not that this friend knows the actual circumstances...those I have kept entirely to myself, the matter being strictly private. My friend assures me that you are discretion itself and that there will be no fear of my being involved in a police matter that, if my suspicions should prove correct, I should very much dislike. But it is, of course, possible that I am entirely mistaken. I do not feel myself clearheaded enough nowadays—suffering as I do from insomnia, the result of a severe illness last winter—to investigate things for myself. I have neither the means nor the ability. On the other hand, I must reiterate once more that this is a very delicate family matter and that for many reasons I may want the whole thing hushed up. If I am once assured of the facts, I can deal with the matter myself and would prefer to do so. I hope that I have made myself clear on this point. If you will undertake this investigation,

perhaps you will respond to the above address. Yours very truly, Amelia Barrowby."

*(Poirot approaches Miss Lemon, who is seated at her desk, awaiting her instructions for the day.)*

POIROT: *(To Miss Lemon.)* Have the goodness, mademoiselle, to write refusals couched in correct terms to all of these.

*(Poirot hands her the morning correspondence. Miss Lemon scans the letters, scribbling notes on each of them. Having done this, she nods and looks up for further instructions. Poirot hands her Miss Amelia Barrowby's letter. Miss Lemon extracts it from its double envelope and reads it to herself.)*

MISS LEMON: *(Looking up, inquiringly.)* Yes, Monsieur Poirot?

POIROT: What is your opinion of that letter, Miss Lemon?

*(With a slight frown, Miss Lemon puts her pencil down and scans the letter again.)*

MISS LEMON: *(Annoyed.)* The contents of a letter mean nothing from the point of view of composing an adequate reply.

POIROT: Very occasionally, I appeal to your human—as opposed to your official—capacities.

MISS LEMON: *(Annoyed.)* I am perfectly capable of intelligence on purely human matters, as you well know.

POIROT: *(Impatient.)* Well?

MISS LEMON: Old lady got the wind up pretty badly.

POIROT: *(Confused.)* The wind rises in her, you think?

MISS LEMON: *(Annoyed.)* You have been in Great Britain long enough to understand its slang terms. *(Indicating the letter.)* Very hush-hush...and it tells you nothing at all.

POIROT: Yes, I observed that. Tell her I will do myself the honor to call upon her at any time she suggests, unless she prefers to consult me here. Do not type the letter. Write it by hand.

MISS LEMON: Yes, Monsieur Poirot.

POIROT: (*Handing her more correspondence.*) These are bills.

*(Miss Lemon sorts the bills quickly.)*

MISS LEMON: I'll pay all but these two.

POIROT: Why? There are no errors in them.

MISS LEMON: They are firms you've only just begun to deal with. It looks bad to pay too promptly when you've just opened an account...looks as though you may want some credit later on.

POIROT: Ah! I bow to your superior knowledge of the British merchant.

MISS LEMON: (*Grimly.*) There's nothing much I don't know about them.

*(Lights fade as Poirot returns to his desk and Miss Lemon resumes her work.)*

Scene 2

*(AT RISE: Poirot's study, five days later. Poirot enters and approaches Miss Lemon, who is seated at her desk.)*

POIROT: *(To Miss Lemon.)* Any word from Miss Amelia Barrowby? It's been five days.

MISS LEMON: The letter to Miss Amelia Barrowby was duly written and sent, but there has been no reply.

POIROT: Perhaps the old lady unraveled the mystery herself. Yet, I am surprised that in that case, she didn't write me to say that my services are no longer required.

*(Miss Lemon casually sorts through a pile of mail. Suddenly, she spies a letter that interests her greatly. She opens it and quickly scans it.)*

MISS LEMON: No wonder there's been no answer. She's dead!

*(Miss Lemon hands the letter to Poirot, who reads it.)*

POIROT: *(Softly.)* Ah. Dead.

*(Miss Lemon opens her handbag and pulls out a newspaper.)*

MISS LEMON: Perhaps it is in the newspaper.

*(Miss Lemon hands Poirot the newspaper. Poirot scans it.)*

POIROT: Ah, here it is. *(Reads the obituary.)* "On March 26<sup>th</sup>, Amelia Jan Barrowby, in her 73<sup>rd</sup> year, died suddenly at Rosebank, Charman's Green. No flowers, by request." *(Murmurs.)* "Suddenly." *(Briskly.)* If you will be so obliging as to take a letter, Miss Lemon?

*(Note: Miss Lemon writes down the following as Poirot dictates.)*

POIROT: *(Dictating.)* "Dear Miss Barrowby, I have received no reply from you, but as I shall be in the neighborhood of Charman's Green on Friday, I will call upon you on that day and discuss more fully the matter mentioned to me in your letter. Yours, etc." Type this letter, please, and if it is posted at once, it should get to Charman's Green tonight.

*(Miss Lemon nods. Blackout.)*

Scene 3

(AT RISE: Charman's Green. Rosebank, the home of Miss Barrowby, the next day. Hercule Poirot approaches the front door, pauses, and looks approvingly at the neatly planted beds of rose trees, daffodils, tulips, and blue hyacinths. The last bed is partly edged with oyster shells.)

POIROT: (To himself.) How does it go...the English rhyme the children sing? (Remembers.) Ah, yes.

(Recites.) "Mistress Mary, quite contrary,  
How does your garden grow?  
With cockle-shells, and silver bells.  
And pretty maids all in a row."

(Looking down at the bed edged with shells. Indicating shells.) Not a row, perhaps... (Looks up. The front door opens and a Maid appears. She sees Poirot, a heavily mustached foreign gentleman talking aloud to himself in the front garden and gives him a dubious look.) ...but here is at least one pretty maid to make the little rhyme come right. (Raising his hat with courtesy.) Pardon, but does a Miss Amelia Barrowby live here?

MAID: (Gasps.) Oh, sir, didn't you know? She's dead. Ever so sudden it was. Tuesday night.

POIROT: You amaze me. I had an appointment with the lady today. Perhaps, I can see the other lady who lives here?

MAID: (Hesitates.) The mistress? Well, you could see her, perhaps, but I don't know whether she'll be seeing anyone or not.

POIROT: (With authority.) She will see me.

(Poirot hands the Maid his business card. The Maid escorts Poirot into the sitting room. Card in hand, Maid exits to summon her mistress. Poirot looks around the room. Suddenly, Poirot feels that someone is watching him. He wheels around and sees Katrina

*standing in the entrance of the French door. Katrina enters and Poirot bows.)*

KATRINA: *(Abruptly bursts out.)* Why have you come? *(Poirot does not reply. He merely raises his eyebrows.)* You are not a lawyer, no?

POIROT: Why should I be a lawyer, mademoiselle?

KATRINA: *(Sullenly.)* I thought you might be. I thought you had come perhaps to say that she did not know what she was doing. But that is not right. She wanted me to have the money, and I shall have it! If it is necessary, I shall have a lawyer of my own. The money is mine. She wrote it down, and so it shall be.

*(Mary Delafontaine enters.)*

MARY: *(With authority, contempt.)* Katrina! *(Katrina shrinks back, mutters something, and exits through the French doors.)* Monsieur Poirot? *(Poirot nods.)* I wrote to you. You didn't receive my letter?

POIROT: *(Lying.)* Alas, I have been away from London.

MARY: Oh, I see. That explains it. I must introduce myself. My name is Delafontaine. *(Henry quietly enters. Introducing.)* This is my husband. Miss Barrowby was my aunt.

POIROT: I regret that I intrude in the midst of your bereavement.

MARY: I quite realize that it is not your fault. My aunt died on Tuesday evening. It was quite unexpected.

HENRY: *(To Poirot, looking in the direction of the French door.)* Most unexpected. Great blow.

POIROT: I apologize. And I take my leave. *(Takes a step toward the door.)*

HENRY: You, er, had an appointment with Aunt Amelia, you say?

POIROT: [Parfaitement]. ["precisely."]



MARY: Perhaps you will tell us about it. If there is anything we can do—

POIROT: It was of a private nature. I am a detective.

*(Henry knocks over a china figurine he was handling.)*

MARY: *(Puzzled.)* A detective? And you had an appointment with Auntie? But how extraordinary! *(Pause.)* Can't you tell us a little more, Monsieur Poirot? It...it seems quite fantastic.

*(Pause. Poirot is silent.)*

POIROT: *(Choosing his words carefully.)* It is difficult for me, madame, to know what to do.

HENRY: Look here, she didn't mention Russians, did she?

POIROT: Russians?

HENRY: Yes, you know, Bolshies, Reds, that sort of thing.

MARY: Don't be absurd, Henry.

HENRY: Sorry, sorry. I just wondered.

MARY: If you can tell us anything, Monsieur Poirot, I should be glad if you would do so. I can assure you that I have a...a reason for asking.

HENRY: *(Alarmed.)* Be careful, old girl. You know there may be nothing to it.

*(Mary gives Henry a hard look to silence him.)*

MARY: Well, Monsieur Poirot?

*(Slowly, gravely, Poirot shakes his head no.)*

POIROT: *(With regret.)* At present, madame, I fear I must say nothing. *(Bows, picks up his hat, and heads to the door. Mary follows. Outside, Poirot pauses and turns to her.)* You are fond of your garden, I think, madame?

MARY: Yes, I spend a lot of time gardening.

POIROT: I give you my compliments. *(Bows and starts to exit but turns and glances back. He spies a face watching him from the window, and sees a man pacing up and down in the street opposite him. Nods. To himself.)* There is a mouse in this house! What move must the cat make now?

**[END OF FREEVIEW]**