



Heather Lynn

Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie

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BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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The Cornish Mystery

MURDER-MYSTERY. Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie. Mrs. Pengelley confides to detective Hercule Poirot that she fears her husband is trying to poison her. Mrs. Pengelley has no proof that she is being poisoned, only that she becomes ill after eating and that a previously full bottle of weed killer is now half empty. Poirot agrees to take Mrs. Pengelley's case and travels to her home the next day only to discover that she was found dead just 30 minutes prior to his arrival. Poirot blames himself for arriving too late to save Mrs. Pengelley and vows to bring her killer to justice.

Performance Time: Approximately 30-45 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 Cornish Mystery" was first published in 1923 in *The Sketch* in the United Kingdom and in *The Blue Book Magazine* in the United States. 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, 3 F)

HERCULE POIROT: Famed Belgian detective; speaks with a French accent (opt.); male.

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

MRS. PENGELLEY: Married to Edward Pengelley, who she believes is poisoning her; in love with Jacob Radnor and estranged to her niece Freda Stanton; plain-looking, woman with gray hair; wears a braided coat and skirt, gold jewelry, an unbecoming hat, and a feathered stole; female.

MISS FREDA STANTON: The niece of Edward Pengelley; engaged to Jacob Radnor and estranged from her aunt Mrs. Pengelley; female.

JACOB RADNOR: Young man who entertained a flirtatious relationship with Mrs. Pengelley but is now engaged to Freda Stanton; male.

JESSE: Mrs. Pengelley's maid; female.

DR. ADAMS: Local doctor who has diagnosed Mrs. Pengelley with acute gastritis; male.

Setting

London and Polgarwith, a small town in Cornwall.

Sets

NOTE: Set pieces from Poirot's study may be used for Dr. Adams's drawing room and Miss Stanton's flat. Just change the arrangement of furniture and use different decorative pillows, etc.

Poirot's study. There is a fireplace, two armchairs, a coffee table, a window with blinds, and a wastepaper basket.

Exterior of the Pengelley's house. A backdrop of an old-fashioned cottage with a garden in front.

Dr. Adams's drawing room. There are three chairs. Other set pieces may be used, if desired.

Miss Freda Stanton's flat. There are three chairs. Other set pieces may be used, if desired.

Train. Two seats and a backdrop of the interior of a train car may be used.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Hercule Poirot's study.

Scene 2: The Pengelleys' house, the next day.

Scene 3: Dr. Adams's home, later.

Scene 4: Miss Freda Stanton's flat, the next morning.

Scene 5: Train.

Scene 6: Hercule Poirot's study.

Props

Feather boa/stole
2 Feathers
Pencil and notebook, for Poirot
Wastepaper basket
Small pocket comb and mirror
Sheet of paper covered with writing

Sound Effects

Doorbell

Busy hum of indistinct voices

Sound of a train leaving the station

*“I have boasted of my ‘little grey cells’
and now I have lost a human life...
a life that came to me to be saved.”*

—Hercule Poirot

Scene 1

(AT RISE: *Hercule Poirot's study. Lights are down on study. Light up on Arthur Hastings, who is standing off to one side.*)

HASTINGS: *(To audience.)* Many unlikely people came to consult Poirot... *(Mrs. Pengelley enters and stands just inside the door.)* ...but to my mind, the woman standing nervously just inside the door, fingering her feather neckpiece, is the most unlikely of all. She is so extraordinarily commonplace. In a country town, you pass a hundred Mrs. Pengelleys in the street every day...

(Poirot is seated. Hastings joins Poirot and sits. Poirot sees Mrs. Pengelley, who looks nervous. Poirot approaches and pleasantly greets her.)

POIROT: *(To Mrs. Pengelley.)* Madame! Take a chair, I beg of you. *(Introducing.)* My colleague, Captain Hastings.

(Mrs. Pengelley reluctantly sits.)

MRS. PENGELLEY: You are Monsieur Poirot, the detective?

POIROT: At your service, madame. *(Mrs. Pengelley sighs, twists her fingers, squirms in her chair, and looks even more nervous and embarrassed.)* Is there something I can do for you, madame?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Well, I thought...that is, you see—

POIROT: *(Gently.)* Proceed, madame. I beg of you, proceed.

(Encouraged, Mrs. Pengelley composes herself.)

MRS. PENGELLEY: It's this way, Monsieur Poirot...I don't want to have anything to do with the police. No, I wouldn't go to the police for anything! But all the same, I'm sorely

troubled about something. And yet I don't know if I ought— *(Abruptly stops.)*

POIROT: Me, I have nothing to do with the police. My investigations are strictly private.

MRS. PENGELLEY: Private...that's what I want. I don't want any talk or fuss, or things in the papers. Wicked it is, the way they write things, until the family can never hold up their heads again. And it isn't as though I am even sure. It's just a dreadful idea that's come to me, and put it out of my head I can't. *(Takes a deep breath.)* And all the time I may be wickedly wronging poor Edward. It's a terrible thought for any wife to have. But you do read of such dreadful things nowadays.

POIROT: Permit me...it is of your husband you speak?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Yes.

POIROT: And you suspect him of...what?

MRS. PENGELLEY: I don't like even to say it, Monsieur Poirot, but you do read of such things happening...and the poor souls suspecting nothing.

POIROT: Speak without fear, madame. Think what joy will be yours if we are able to prove your suspicions unfounded.

MRS. PENGELLEY: That's true. Anything's better than this uncertainty. *(Pause.)* Oh, Monsieur Poirot, I'm dreadfully afraid I'm being poisoned.

POIROT: What makes you think so?

MRS. PENGELLEY: I suffer great pain and sickness after I eat.

POIROT: *(Thoughtfully.)* Pain and sickness after food? You have a doctor attending you, madame? What does he say?

MRS. PENGELLEY: He says it's acute gastritis, Monsieur Poirot. But I can see that he's puzzled and uneasy, and he's always altering the medicine but nothing does any good.

POIROT: You have spoken of your...fears to him?

MRS. PENGELLEY: No, indeed, Monsieur Poirot. It might get around town. And perhaps it is gastritis. All the same, it's very odd that whenever Edward is away for the weekend, I'm quite all right again. Even Freda, my niece,

notices that, Monsieur Poirot. And then there's that bottle of weed killer—never used, the gardener says—yet it's half empty.

(Mrs. Pengelley looks appealingly at Poirot to help her. Poirot smiles reassuringly and reaches for his pencil and notebook.)

POIROT: Now then, madame, you and your husband reside where?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Polgarwith, a small market town in Cornwall.

POIROT: You have lived there long?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Fourteen years.

POIROT: And your household consists of you and your husband? *(Mrs. Pengelley nods.)* Any children?

MRS. PENGELLEY: No.

POIROT: But a niece, I think you said?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Yes, Freda Stanton, the child of my husband's only sister. She has lived with us for the last eight years. That is, until a week ago.

POIROT: Oh? And what happened a week ago?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Things hadn't been very pleasant for some time. I don't know what came over Freda. She was so rude and impertinent and her temper something shocking. And in the end, she flared up one day and out she walked and took a flat in town. I've not seen her since. Better leave her to come to her senses, so Mr. Radnor says.

POIROT: Who is Mr. Radnor?

MRS. PENGELLEY: *(Embarrassed, uncomfortable.)* Oh, he's...he's just a *friend*. Very pleasant young fellow.

POIROT: Anything going on between him and your niece?

MRS. PENGELLEY: *(Emphatically.)* Nothing whatsoever.

(Poirot shifts his position in his chair.)

POIROT: You and your husband are, I presume, in comfortable financial circumstances?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Yes, we're very nicely well-off.

POIROT: The money...is it yours or your husband's?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Oh, it's all Edward's. I've nothing of my own.

POIROT: You see, madame, to be businesslike, we must be brutal. We must seek a motive. Your husband, he would not poison you just for fun. Do you know of any reason why he should wish you out of the way?

MRS. PENGELLEY: (*Angrily.*) There's a yellow-haired hussy who works for him! My husband's a dentist, Monsieur Poirot, and he had to have a smart girl, as he said, to make his appointments and mix his fillings for him. I've heard that there have been goings-on...though, of course, he swears there's nothing to it.

POIROT: This bottle of weed killer, madame...who ordered it?

MRS. PENGELLEY: My husband, about a year ago.

POIROT: Now, your niece...has she any money of her own?

MRS. PENGELLEY: About 50 pounds a year, I should say. She'd be glad enough to come back and keep house for Edward if I left him.

POIROT: You have contemplated leaving him, then?

MRS. PENGELLEY: I don't intend to let him have it all his own way. Women aren't the downtrodden servants to their husbands that they were in the old days, Monsieur Poirot.

POIROT: I congratulate you on your independent spirit, madame, but let us be practical. You return to Polgarwith today?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Yes, I came up this morning, and the train goes back at five this afternoon.

POIROT: [Bien]! I have nothing of great urgency on hand. I can devote myself to your little affair. Tomorrow, I shall be in Polgarwith. As a cover, shall we say that Hastings, here, is a distant relative of yours...the son of your second cousin?

(Mrs. Pengelley nods.) Me, I am his eccentric foreign friend.
[Or, "Good!"]

HASTINGS: (Smiles.) Yes, my eccentric friend...

POIROT: (Ignores Hastings. To Mrs. Pengelley.) In the meantime, eat only what is prepared by your own hands or under your eye. You have a maid whom you trust?

MRS. PENGELLEY: Jessie is a very good girl, I am sure.

POIROT: Till tomorrow then, madame, and be of good courage. (Poirot escorts Mrs. Pengelley off and then returns to his chair. Poirot spies two feathers on the floor that Mrs. Pengelley had wrenched off her stole/boa with agitated fingers. He carefully picks up the feathers and tosses them in the wastepaper basket.) What do you make of the case, Hastings?

HASTINGS: A nasty business, I should say.

POIROT: Yes, if what the lady suspects is true. But is it? Woe to any husband who orders a bottle of weed killer nowadays. If his wife suffers from gastritis and is inclined to be of a hysterical temperament, the "fat is in the fire."

HASTINGS: You think that is all there is to it?

POIROT: Ah, I do not know, Hastings. But the case interests me. It interests me enormously. For, you see, it has positively no new features. Hence the hysterical theory, and yet Mrs. Pengelley did not strike me as being a hysterical woman. Yes, if I mistake not, we have here a very poignant human drama. Tell me, Hastings, what do you consider Mrs. Pengelley's feelings toward her husband to be?

HASTINGS: Loyalty struggling with fear?

POIROT: Yet, ordinarily, a woman will accuse anyone in the world, but not her husband. She will stick to her belief in him through thick and thin.

HASTINGS: The "other woman" complicates the matter.

POIROT: Yes, affection may turn to hate under the stimulus of jealousy. But hate would take her to the police, not to me. She would want an outcry...a scandal. No, no, let us exercise our little grey cells. Why did she come to me? To have her suspicions proven wrong, or to have them proven

right? (*Before Hastings can answer.*) Ah, we have here something I do not understand...an unknown factor. Is she a superb actress, our Mrs. Pengelley? (*Before Hastings can answer.*) No, she was genuine. I would swear that she was genuine, and therefore I am interested. Look up the train schedule to Polgarwith, Hastings.

(*Blackout.*)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: The Pengelleys' house, the next day. The exterior of the Pengelleys' house is seen. It is an old-fashioned cottage with a garden in front. Light up on Hastings, who is standing off to one side.)

HASTINGS: *(To audience.)* The best train of the day was the 1:50 from Paddington, which reached Polgarwith just after seven o'clock. The journey was uneventful, and I had to rouse myself from a pleasant nap to alight upon the platform of the bleak little station. We took our bags to the Duchy Hotel, and after a light meal, Poirot suggested that we pay an after dinner call on my so-called "cousin"...

(Light down on Hastings. Lights up on scene. Poirot enters. Hastings joins him and they approach the house.)

HASTINGS: *(To Poirot.)* It seems impossible to associate thoughts of violence... *(Indicating home.)* ...with this Old World charm.

(Hastings and Poirot approach the front door. Poirot rings the doorbell and knocks. No one answers the door. Poirot rings the doorbell again. Pause. Jesse, a disheveled-looking maid, opens the door. Her eyes are red, and she is sniffing violently.)

POIROT: *(To Jesse.)* We wish to see Mrs. Pengelley. May we enter?

(Pause. Jesse just stares at Poirot.)

JESSE: Haven't you heard, then? *(Poirot shakes his head.)* She's dead. Died this evening...about half an hour ago.

(Pause. Poirot and Hastings are stunned at the news.)

HASTINGS: What did she die of?

JESSE: *(Quickly glances over her shoulder.)* If it wasn't that somebody ought to be in the house with the missus, I'd pack my box and go tonight. But I'll not leave her dead with no one to watch over her. It's not my place to say anything, and I'm not going to say anything...but everybody knows. It's all over town. And if Mr. Radnor don't write to the Home Secretary, someone else will. The doctor may say what he likes. Didn't I see the master with my own eyes a-lifting down the weed killer from the shelf this very evening? And didn't he jump when he turned round and saw me watching him? And the missus's gruel there on the table...all ready to take to her? Not another bit of food passes my lips while I am in this house! Not if I dies for it!

POIROT: Where does the doctor live who attended your mistress?

JESSE: Dr. Adams, round the corner on High Street. The second house.

(Poirot turns away. He is very pale. Poirot and Hastings start to exit.)

HASTINGS: *(To Poirot.)* For a girl who was not going to say anything, that girl said a lot.

POIROT: *(Striking his clenched hand into his palm.)* An imbecile, a criminal imbecile, that is what I have been, Hastings! I have boasted of my "little grey cells," and now I have lost a human life...a life that came to me to be saved. Never did I dream that anything would happen so soon. May God forgive me, but I never thought anything would happen. Her story seemed to me artificial. Let us go to the doctor's. Let us see what he can tell us.

(Poirot and Hastings exit. Blackout.)

Scene 3

(AT RISE: Dr. Adams's home, drawing room. Hastings, Poirot, and Dr. Adams are seated. Poirot has just finished updating Dr. Adams on the case.)

DR. ADAMS: (*His face red with anger.*) Nonsense! Nonsense, every word of it! Wasn't I in attendance on the case? Gastritis! Gastritis pure and simple! This town's a hotbed of gossip...a lot of scandal-mongering old women get together and invent goodness knows what. They read these scurrilous rags of newspapers, and nothing will suit them but that someone in their town shall get poisoned too. They see a bottle of weed killer on a shelf...and presto! Away goes their imagination! I know Edward Pengelley...he wouldn't poison his grandmother's dog. And why should he poison his wife? Tell me that.

POIROT: There is one thing, [Monsieur le Docteur], that perhaps you do not know. I received a visit from Mrs. Pengelley just yesterday, and she told me in confidence that she suspected her husband was poisoning her. [*or "Doctor"*]

DR. ADAMS: (*Astonished.*) Bless my soul! The poor woman must have been mad! Why didn't she speak to me? That was the proper thing to do.

POIROT: And have her fears ridiculed?

DR. ADAMS: (*Insulted.*) Not at all, not at all. I hope I've got an open mind.

POIROT: (*Smiles.*) We have taken too much of your time. We must be on our way.

(*Lights down on the scene. Light up on Poirot and Hastings, who are standing off to one side.*)

POIROT: *(To Hastings, laughs.)* He is as obstinate as a pig, that one! He said it is gastritis; therefore, it is gastritis! All the same, he has my mind uneasy.

HASTINGS: What's our next step?

POIROT: A return to the inn, and a night of horror sleeping upon one of your English provincial beds, [mon ami]. It is a thing to pity...the cheap English bed. [*or "my friend"*]

HASTINGS: And tomorrow?

POIROT: We must return to town and await developments.

HASTINGS: Suppose there are no new developments?

POIROT: There will be! I promise you that! Our old doctor cannot stop several hundred tongues from wagging. And they will wag, I can tell you that!

[END OF FREEVIEW]