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Adapted from the story "The Veiled Lady" by Agatha Christie

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THE PUZZLE BOX

MYSTERY. With no interesting cases of late, famed detective Hercule Poirot declares that the criminals of England have come to fear him: "When the cat is there, the little mice...they come no more to the cheese." However, Poirot's boredom is interrupted when he is approached by a veiled lady who requests his help to retrieve an indiscreet love letter. The love letter has fallen into the hands of a blackmailer who has threatened to show it to the lady's prospective husband unless she pays him a vast sum. The blackmailer keeps the letter enclosed in a puzzle box, which he claims is hidden where no one can find it. Since the veiled lady is unable to pay the ransom, Poirot and Hastings must assume the role of thieves and break into the blackmailer's house to locate the puzzle box and return the letter to its rightful owner.

Performance Time: Approximately 20-30 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 eccentric Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. "The Veiled Lady" was first published in *The Sketch* in October 1923 in the United Kingdom and in *The Blue Book Magazine* in the United States in 1925. 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, 1 F)

(With doubling: 3 M, 1 F)

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

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

LADY MILLICENT CASTLE VAUGHAN (aka Gertie): A member of a gang of jewel thieves well known to Scotland Yard who is impersonating Lady Millicent; wears expensive clothing, a veil of heavy Spanish lace, and scruffy shoes; female.

MR. LAVINGTON (aka Reed): A blackmailer attempting to extort money from Lady Millicent; Gertie's accomplice, a member of a gang of jewel thieves, who is attempting to double-cross his fellow gang members; described as "blustering and overbearing in manner and presents himself as the master of the situation at hand"; wears a hat; male.

INSPECTOR JAPP: Scotland Yard detective and an old friend of Poirot's; male.

OPTION FOR DOUBLING

INSPECTOR JAPP/MR. LAVINGTON (male)

SETTING

London, 1925.

SETS

Poirot's study. There are three armchairs, a coffee table, a window, and a fireplace.

Mr. Lavington's home. There is a study with an adjoining kitchen. There is a window at the back of the house large enough for Poirot and Hastings to enter through. In the kitchen is an oven and the room is cluttered with bread bins, saucepans, etc. There is a large coal bin/bunker with a shelf behind it and a log pile.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Scene 1: Poirot's study, morning.

Scene 2: Poirot's study, that afternoon.

Scene 3: Before the curtain, the next evening.

Scene 4: Mr. Lavington's home, midnight.

Scene 5: Poirot's study, 1 p.m.

PROPS

Coffee cup

Teacup

Newspaper

Black clothing for Hastings

Light colored suit, for Poirot

Knife

Saucepans

Logs

Log that has been sawn in half with a cavity hollowed out in
the center

Small wooden box (puzzle box)

Coal dust

Letter

4 Large glittering gems

2 Large pearls

SOUND EFFECT

Sound of footsteps

"WHEN THE CAT IS THERE,
THE LITTLE MICE...
THEY COME NO MORE
TO THE CHEESE!"

—HERCULE POIROT

SCENE 1

(AT RISE: *Hercule Poirot's study, morning. Poirot is seated, drinking coffee and reading a newspaper. Hastings is seated, drinking tea.*)

HASTINGS: *(To Poirot.)* I've noticed that for some time you have been growing increasingly dissatisfied and restless. You have had no interesting cases of late, nothing on which you can exercise your keen wit and remarkable powers of deduction.

(Impatiently, Poirot flings down the newspaper.)

POIROT: *(Like a cat sneezing.)* Tchah! They fear me, Hastings! The criminals of your England...they fear me! When the cat is there, the little mice...they come no more to the cheese!

HASTINGS: *(Laughs.)* I don't suppose the greater part of them even know of your existence. *(Poirot looks at Hastings reproachfully.)* You always imagine that the whole world is thinking and talking of Hercule Poirot. You have certainly made a name for yourself in London, but I can hardly believe that your existence strikes terror into the criminal world. What about that daylight robbery of jewels on Bond Street the other day?

POIROT: A neat coup, though not in my line. [Pas de finesse, seulement de l'audace]! A man with a loaded cane smashes the plate-glass window of a jeweler's shop and grabs a number of precious stones. Worthy citizens immediately seize him. A policeman arrives. He is caught red-handed with the jewels on him. He is marched off to the police, and then it is discovered that the stones are fake. He has passed the real ones to an accomplice...one of the aforementioned "worthy citizens." He will go to prison, true. But when he comes out, there will be a nice little fortune awaiting him. Yes, not badly imagined. But I could do better than that.

Sometimes, Hastings, I regret that I am of such a moral disposition. To work against the law, it would be pleasing, for a change. [*or "No finesse, only audacity!"*]

HASTINGS: Cheer up, Poirot. You know you are unique in your profession.

POIROT: But what is there on hand in my line of work?

(Hastings picks up the newspaper.)

HASTINGS: *(Indicating newspaper.)* Here's an Englishman mysteriously murdered in Holland.

POIROT: They always say that, and later they find that he ate the tinned fish and that his death was perfectly natural.

HASTINGS: Well, if you're determined to grouse—!

(Poirot strolls over to the window and looks out.)

POIROT: [Tiens!] There in the street is what they call in novels a "heavily veiled lady." *(Excited.)* She mounts the steps...she rings the bell...she comes to consult us! Here is the possibility of something interesting. When one is as young and pretty as she, one does not veil the face except for a big affair! [*Or, "Look!"*]

(Lady Millicent Castle Vaughan enters. She is heavily veiled in Spanish lace. It is impossible to see her face through the lace. She raises her veil.)

LADY MILLICENT: *(In a soft, musical voice.)* Monsieur Poirot, I am in great trouble. I can hardly believe that you can help me, but I have heard such wonderful things about you that I come as a last hope to beg you to do the impossible.

POIROT: *(Smiles.)* The impossible...it pleases me always. Continue, I beg of you, mademoiselle. *(Lady Millicent hesitates.)* But you must be frank. You must not leave me in the dark on any point.

LADY MILLICENT: I will trust you. You have heard of Lady Millicent Castle Vaughan? You may have read of her engagement.

(Hastings looks up with keen interest.)

HASTINGS: Oh, yes! The announcement of Lady Millicent's engagement to the young Duke of Southshire appeared in the newspaper a few days ago. She is, I know, the fifth daughter of an impecunious Irish peer, and the Duke of Southshire was one of the best matches in England.

LADY MILLICENT: I am Lady Millicent. I should be one of the happiest girls alive. But, oh, Monsieur Poirot, I am in terrible trouble! There is a man, a horrible man—his name is Lavington—and he— *(Stops.)* I hardly know how to tell you. There was a letter I wrote—I was only sixteen at the time—and he...he...

POIROT: A letter that you wrote to this Mr. Lavington?

LADY MILLICENT: Oh, no! Not to him! To a young soldier. I was very fond of him. He was killed in the war.

POIROT: I understand.

LADY MILLICENT: It was a foolish letter, an indiscreet letter, but, indeed, Monsieur Poirot, nothing more. But there are phrases in it which...which might bear a different interpretation.

POIROT: I see. And this letter has come into the possession of Mr. Lavington?

LADY MILLICENT: Yes, and he threatens that unless I pay him an enormous sum of money—a sum that is quite impossible for me to raise—he will send the letter to the Duke.

HASTINGS: The dirty swine! *(Poirot shoots him a hard look.)* I beg your pardon, Lady Millicent.

POIROT: *(To Lady Millicent.)* Would it not be wiser to confess all to your future husband?

LADY MILLICENT: I dare not, Monsieur Poirot. The Duke is a rather peculiar character, jealous and suspicious and prone to believe the worst. I might as well break off my engagement at once.

POIROT: Dear, dear. And what do you want me to do, milady?

LADY MILLICENT: I thought perhaps that I might ask Mr. Lavington to call upon you. I would tell him that you were empowered by me to discuss the matter. Perhaps you could reduce his demands.

POIROT: What sum does he mention?

LADY MILLICENT: Twenty thousand pounds...an impossibility. I doubt if I could raise a thousand, even.

POIROT: You might perhaps borrow the money on the prospect of your approaching marriage, but I doubt if you could get hold of half that sum. Besides...[eh bien], it is repugnant to me that you should pay! No, the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot shall defeat your enemies! Send me this Mr. Lavington. Is he likely to bring the letter with him? [*or "well,"*]

LADY MILLICENT: (*Shakes her head no.*) I do not think so. He is very cautious.

POIROT: I suppose there is no doubt that he really has it?

LADY MILLICENT: He showed it to me when I went to his house.

POIROT: You went to his house? That was very imprudent, milady.

LADY MILLICENT: Was it? I was so desperate. I hoped my humble request might move him.

POIROT: Ooh-la-la! The Lavingtons of this world are not moved by humble requests! He would welcome them as showing how much importance you attached to the document. Where does he live, this fine gentleman?

LADY MILLICENT: At Buona Vista, Wimbledon. I went there after dark... (*Poirot groans.*) ...I declared that I would inform the police in the end, but he only laughed in a horrid,

sneering manner. He said, "By all means, my dear Lady Millicent, do so if you wish. Yes, it is hardly an affair for the police. But I think you will be wiser than that. See, here is your letter...in this little puzzle box!" He held the box so that I could see it. I tried to snatch it from him, but he was too quick for me. With a horrid smile, he folded up the letter and placed it in the little wooden puzzle box. He said, "It will be quite safe here, I assure you, and the box itself lives in such a clever place that you will never find it." My eyes turned to the small wall safe, and he shook his head and laughed. He said, "I have a better safe than that." Oh, he was odious! Monsieur Poirot, do you think you can help me?

POIROT: Have faith in Papa Poirot. I will find a way.

(Poirot gallantly ushers Lady Millicent off and re-enters.)

HASTINGS: Your reassurances are all very well, but it seems to me that we have a tough nut to crack.

POIROT: *(Nods, ruefully.)* Yes, the solution does not leap to the eye. He has the upper hand, this Monsieur Lavington. At the moment, I do not see how we are to circumvent him.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 2

(AT RISE: Poirot's study, that afternoon. Poirot, Hastings, and Mr. Lavington are seated, discussing the matter at hand.)

MR. LAVINGTON: Well, gentlemen... *(Removes his hat.)*
...we don't seem to be getting much further. The case stands like this: I'll let Lady Millicent off cheap, as she is such a charming young lady. *(Leers odiously.)* We'll say eighteen thousand. I'm off to Paris today...a little piece of business to attend to over there. I shall be back on Tuesday. Unless the money is paid by Tuesday evening, the letter goes to the Duke. Don't tell me Lady Millicent can't raise the money. Some of her gentlemen friends would be only too willing to oblige such a pretty woman with a loan...if she goes the right way about it... *(With a scornful laugh, exits.)*

HASTINGS: *(To Poirot.)* Lady Millicent had spoken truly when she described him as an odious man. I felt a tingling in the end of my boot, so keen was I to kick him down the stairs. My God! Something has got to be done! *(Poirot is silent.)* You are hardly appearing at your best. You look discouraged and crestfallen. You seem to be taking this lying down, Poirot!

POIROT: You have an excellent heart, my friend, but your grey cells are in a deplorable condition. I have no wish to impress Mr. Lavington with my capabilities. The more timorous he thinks me, the better.

HASTINGS: Why?

POIROT: It is rather apropos that I uttered a wish to work against the law just before Lady Millicent arrived...

HASTINGS: *(Realizes, gasps.)* You are going to burgle his house while he is away?

POIROT: Sometimes, Hastings, your mental processes are amazingly quick.

HASTINGS: Suppose he takes the letter with him?

POIROT: (*Shakes his head.*) That is very unlikely. Evidently, he has a hiding place in his house that he fancies to be impregnable.

HASTINGS: When do we, er, do the deed?

POIROT: Tomorrow night. We will leave here at about eleven o'clock.

[END OF FREEVIEW]