



**Heather Lynn**

Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie

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**BIG DOG PUBLISHING**

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*The Tragedy at Marsdon Manor*

**MURDER-MYSTERY.** Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie. On the grounds of Marsdon Manor, Mr. Maltravers is found dead with a small rifle by his side. Since there are no bullet holes in his body, the doctor rules the death as due to natural causes. Weeks earlier, Mr. Maltravers, on the brink of bankruptcy, had taken out a large life insurance policy, naming his widow as the beneficiary. Suspicious, the insurance company hires famed detective Hercule Poirot to investigate the mysterious death to find out if Mr. Maltravers committed suicide in a way that would make it look like a natural death in order to insure his wife's financial future. Just as Poirot thinks the case appears aboveboard, the ghost of Mr. Maltravers appears and the case takes a sudden turn.

**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 eccentric Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. "The Tragedy at Marsdon Manor" was first published in *The Sketch* in May 1923 in the United Kingdom and in the United States in *The Blue Book Magazine* in March 1924 as "The Marsdon Manor Tragedy." 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*.

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*Characters*

(5 M, 2 F, 1 flexible)

(With doubling: 5 M, 2 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.

**MRS. MALTRAVERS:** Young widow of Mr. Maltravers, the owner of Marsdon Manor; described as a "very beautiful and charming young woman"; wears black clothing and heavy eye shadow on her eyelids; female.

**DR. RALPH BERNARD:** Local doctor at Marsdon Leigh who examined the body of Mr. Maltravers and concluded that his death was due to natural causes; described as "an elderly man, high-shouldered and stooping, with a pleasant vagueness of manner"; male.

**CAPTAIN BLACK:** A soldier who has just returned from several years in East Africa; a friend of the Maltravers family who visited the them at Marsdon Manor the day before Mr. Maltravers is found dead; described as having a "deeply bronzed face that spoke of life in a tropic clime"; male.

**GARDENER:** The Maltravers' gardener who cares for the grounds at Marsdon Manor; flexible.

**PARLORMAID:** The Maltravers' parlormaid at Marsdon Manor; female.

**MR. EVERETT:** An actor Poirot hires to play the role of the ghost of Mr. Maltravers in a ruse to trick the murderer into confessing; male.

**INSPECTOR JAPP:** Scotland Yard detective; nonspeaking; male.

**NOTE:** The Gardener may play Inspector Japp, if desired.

## *Setting*

London and Marsdon Leigh, Essex, 1925.

## *Sets*

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

**Dr. Bernard's home/office.** There are three armchairs.

**Marsdon Manor, sitting room.** There are three armchairs and a side table.

**Marsdon Manor, exterior.** There is a backdrop of a manor house. There are leaves strewn about for the Gardener to rake.

**Marsdon Manor, side terrace.** There is a bench or a garden table with chairs and potted plants. A backdrop of the exterior of the manor may be used.

**Anchor Inn.** There is a small table with three chairs. A backdrop and/or additional set pieces may be used.

**Marsdon Manor, dining room/morning room.** The morning room connects to the dining room and has a small sitting area with a window. The dining room has a table with chairs. There is a functional door with a key in the lock.

*Synopsis of Scenes*

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

**Scene 2:** The home/office of Dr. Ralph Bernard, Marsdon Leigh, an hour later.

**Scene 3:** Marsdon Manor, sitting room.

**Scene 4:** Marsdon Manor, side terrace.

**Scene 5:** Anchor Inn, Marsdon Leigh, a short time later.

**Scene 6:** Marsdon Manor, sitting room, 7 p.m.

**Scene 7:** Marsdon Manor, dining room, a short time later.

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*Props*

Valise/small suitcase  
Small rifle (can be a BB gun or a toy rifle)  
Rake  
Leaves  
Coffee cup  
Teacup  
Notebook  
Pencil  
Pocket watch  
3 Soup bowls  
3 Soup spoons  
Flashlight  
Handcuffs

*Special Effects*

Sound of a door slamming shut  
Bell (to ring servants)  
Scream  
Sound of crockery breaking  
Three taps on a window  
Sound of strong wind gusts  
Sound of rustling that creates an eerie atmosphere  
Door swinging open  
Lights flickering  
Three loud raps  
Fake blood  
Gleaming, ghostly lighting  
Red paint  
Phosphorescent effect for the "ghost"



*“You know that they say in the village  
that this house is haunted?”*

*—Hercule Poirot*

*Scene 1*

*(AT RISE: Hercule Poirot's study. Poirot is strapping up a small valise. Arthur Hastings enters.)*

POIROT: It's about time, Hastings. I feared you would not have returned in time to accompany me.

HASTINGS: You are called away on a case, then?

POIROT: Yes, though I am bound to admit that on the face of it, the affair does not seem promising. The Northern Union Insurance Company has asked me to investigate the death of a Mr. Maltravers, who a few weeks ago insured his life with them for the large sum of 50,000 pounds.

HASTINGS: *(Interested.)* And?

POIROT: There was, of course, the usual suicide clause in the policy. In the event of his committing suicide within a year, the premiums would be forfeited. Mr. Maltravers was duly examined by the company's own doctor, and although he was a man slightly past the prime of life, he was reported to be in quite sound health. However, the day before yesterday, the body of Mr. Maltravers was found on the grounds of his house in Essex, Marsdon Manor, and the cause of his death is described as some kind of internal hemorrhage. That in itself would be nothing remarkable, but sinister rumors as to Mr. Maltravers's financial position have been in the air of late, and the Northern Union has ascertained beyond any possible doubt that the deceased gentleman stood upon the verge of bankruptcy.

HASTINGS: Yes, that alters matters considerably.

POIROT: Mr. Maltravers had a beautiful young wife, and it is suggested that he got together all the ready money he could for the purpose of paying the premiums on a life insurance policy for his wife's benefit and then committed suicide.

HASTINGS: *(Nods.)* Such a thing is not uncommon.

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POIROT: (*Pessimistic.*) In any case, my friend Alfred Wright, who is a director of the Northern Union Insurance Company, has asked me to investigate the facts of the case, but, as I told him, I am not very hopeful of success.

HASTINGS: Why so pessimistic so early on?

POIROT: If the cause of death had been heart failure, I would have been more confident. "Heart failure" may always be translated as the inability of the local doctor to discover what his patient really did die of, but a hemorrhage seems fairly definite. Still, we can but make some necessary inquiries.

HASTINGS: What is our plan of campaign?

POIROT: First, I will call upon the doctor. I have ascertained that there is only one doctor in Marsdon Leigh, Dr. Ralph Bernard. Five minutes to pack your bag, Hastings, and we are off to Marsdon Leigh.

(*Blackout.*)

*Scene 2*

(AT RISE: Marsdon Leigh, an hour later. The home/office of Dr. Ralph Bernard. Poirot and Hastings are seated with Dr. Bernard. Poirot has just finished summarizing the purpose of his visit.)

POIROT: (To Dr. Bernard.) Insurance companies are bound to investigate fully in a case of this kind.

DR. BERNARD: (Vaguely.) Of course, of course. I suppose, as he was such a rich man, his life was insured for a large sum?

POIROT: You consider him a rich man, Doctor?

DR. BERNARD: (Surprised.) Was he not? He kept two cars, you know, and Marsdon Manor is a pretty big place to keep up, although I believe he bought it very cheap.

POIROT: (Watching Dr. Bernard closely.) I understand that he had considerable financial losses of late.

DR. BERNARD: (Shakes his head sadly.) Is that so? Indeed. It is fortunate for his wife then that there is this life insurance policy. A very beautiful and charming young woman, but terribly unstrung by this sad catastrophe. A mass of nerves, poor thing. I have tried to spare her all I can, but, of course, the shock was bound to be considerable.

POIROT: You had been treating Mr. Maltravers recently?

DR. BERNARD: My dear sir, I never treated him.

POIROT: But you examined the body?

DR. BERNARD: Certainly. I was fetched by one of the gardeners.

POIROT: And the cause of death was clear?

DR. BERNARD: Absolutely. There was blood on his lips, but most of the bleeding must have been internal.

POIROT: Was he still lying where he had been found?

DR. BERNARD: Yes, the body had not been touched. He was lying at the edge of a small plantation. He had evidently been out shooting crows...a small rifle lay beside him. The

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hemorrhage must have occurred quite suddenly. Gastric ulcer, without a doubt.

POIROT: No question of his having been shot, eh?

DR. BERNARD: My dear sir!

POIROT: (*Humbly.*) Pardon me. But in the case of a recent murder, the doctor first gave a verdict of heart failure...altering it only when the local constable pointed out that there was a bullet hole through the victim's head.

DR. BERNARD: (*Dryly.*) You will not find any bullet wounds on the body of Mr. Maltravers. Now, gentlemen, if there is nothing further...

*(Dr. Bernard starts to escort Hastings and Poirot off.)*

POIROT: Good day, and many thanks to you, Doctor, for so kindly answering our questions. By the way, you saw no need for an autopsy?

DR. BERNARD: (*Apoplectic.*) Certainly not! The cause of death is clear, and in my profession, we see no need to distress unduly the relatives of a dead patient.

*(Poirot and Hastings exit with Dr. Bernard. The sound of a door slamming shut is heard offstage. Lights down on the scene. Spotlight up on Hastings and Poirot, who are standing off to one side.)*

POIROT: And what do you think of Dr. Bernard, Hastings?

HASTINGS: Rather an old ass.

POIROT: Exactly. Your judgments of character are always profound, my friend!

*(Poirot chuckles. Hastings looks annoyed. Blackout.)*

*Scene 3*

(AT RISE: Marsdon Manor, sitting room. Poirot and Hastings are seated, awaiting the arrival of Mrs. Maltravers. Mrs. Maltravers enters, her eyes red from weeping.)

MRS. MALTRIVERS: (*Falters.*) Monsieur Poirot?

POIROT: Madame! (*Springs gallantly to his feet and hastens toward her.*) I cannot tell you how I regret disturbing you in this way. But what can I do? [*Les affaires*]...they know no mercy. [*or "These business affairs"*]

(*Mrs. Maltravers permits Poirot to lead her to a chair.*)

MRS. MALTRIVERS: It is something about my husband's insurance, isn't it? But must I be bothered now...so soon?

POIROT: Courage, my dear madame. Courage! You see, your late husband insured his life for rather a large sum, and in such a case, the insurance company always has to satisfy itself as to a few details. They have empowered me to act for them. You can be rest assured that I will do all in my power to render the matter not too unpleasant for you. Will you recount to me briefly the sad events of Wednesday?

MRS. MALTRIVERS: I was changing for tea when my maid came up. One of the gardeners had just run to the house. (*Her voice trails away.*) He had found...

(*Poirot presses her hand sympathetically.*)

POIROT: I comprehend. Enough. You had seen your husband earlier in the afternoon?

MRS. MALTRIVERS: Not since lunch. I had walked down to the village for some stamps, and I believe he was out pattering round the grounds.

POIROT: Shooting crows, eh?

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MRS. MALTRAVERS: Yes, he usually took his little rook rifle with him, and I heard one or two shots in the distance.

POIROT: Where is this little rifle now?

MRS. MALTRAVERS: In the hall, I think.

POIROT: May I see it?

MRS. MALTRAVERS: Certainly.

*(Mrs. Maltravers exits and re-enters with a small rifle. She hands the rifle to Poirot.)*

POIROT: *(Examining the rifle.)* Two shots fired, I see. *(Lays the rifle on a nearby table.)* And now, madame, if I might see... *(Pauses delicately.)*

MRS. MALTRAVERS: *(Murmurs.)* The servant shall take you.

*(Mrs. Maltravers rings a bell and the Parlormaid enters and escorts Poirot off. Hastings remains with Mrs. Maltravers and there is a long, awkward pause as they await Poirot's return. Poirot re-enters.)*

POIROT: I thank you for all your courtesy, madame. I do not think you need be troubled any further with this matter. By the way, do you know anything of your husband's financial position?

MRS. MALTRAVERS: *(Shakes her head no.)* Nothing whatsoever. I am very ignorant about business things.

POIROT: I see. Then you can give us no clue as to why he suddenly decided to insure his life? He had not done so previously, I understand.

MRS. MALTRAVERS: Well, we had only been married a little over a year. But as to why he insured his life...it was because he had absolutely made up his mind that he would not live long. He had a strong premonition of his own death. I gather that he had had one hemorrhage already and that he knew that another one would prove fatal. I tried to

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dispel these gloomy fears of his, but without avail. Alas, he was only too right!

*(Tears in her eyes, Mrs. Maltravers bids Poirot and Hastings a dignified farewell. Poirot and Hastings exit. Lights down on the scene. Lights up, outside Marsdon Manor. Hastings and Poirot have just left from their meeting with Mrs. Maltravers and are discussing the case. A Gardener is off to one side, raking leaves.)*

POIROT: *(To Hastings.)* [Eh bien], that is that! Back to London, my friend. There appears to be no mouse in this mouse hole. And yet... *[or "Well"]*

HASTINGS: Yet what?

POIROT: A slight discrepancy, that is all. You noticed it?

HASTINGS: Well...

POIROT: You did not. Still, life is full of discrepancies, and assuredly the man cannot have taken his own life...there is no poison that would fill his mouth with blood. No, no, I must resign myself to the fact that all here is clear and aboveboard. *(Captain Black enters. To Hastings, aside.)* But who is this?

*(Captain Black passes by Poirot and Hastings and then exits. Poirot rushes over to the Gardener.)*

POIROT: *(To Gardener.)* Tell me, I pray you, who was that gentleman? Do you know him?

GARDENER: I don't remember his name, sir, though I did hear it. He was staying down here last week for a night. Tuesday, it was.

POIROT: *(To Hastings.)* Quick, [mon ami], let us follow him! *[or "my friend"]*

**[END OF FREEVIEW]**