



Heather Lynn

Adapted from the story by Agatha Christie

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P.O. Box 1401

Rapid City, SD 57709

The Case of the Egyptian Curse

MURDER-MYSTERY. Adapted from the story by Agatha Christie. The famous Egyptologist Sir John Willard has died unexpectedly in Egypt while excavating the tomb of the pharaoh Men-her-Ra. When other members of the expedition mysteriously die in quick succession, rumors spread that an Egyptian curse is to blame for the deaths. Lady Willard, whose son has traveled to Egypt to continue his father's work, fears that he may be the next to die and seeks the help of famed detective Hercule Poirot. Assuring Lady Willard that he will do all that is humanly possible to protect her son from the mummy's curse, Poirot and Hastings set sail for Egypt. After battling seasickness, Poirot finally arrives in Egypt, where he compulsively brushes dust and sand from his apparel and discovers that the abominable heat causes his beloved mustache to go limp.

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes.

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



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. Christie's short story "The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb" was first published in *The Sketch* in 1923 in the United Kingdom and in *The Blue Book Magazine* in 1924 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

(6 M, 1 F, 1 flexible)

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.

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

LADY WILLARD: Wife of the late Sir John Willard, an eminent English archaeologist who unexpectedly died at the excavation of the tomb of the Egyptian King Men-her-Ra; an ancient Egyptian curse is rumored to be the cause of his death; wears mourning attire; female.

SIR GUY: Impulsive son of the eminent English archaeologist Sir John Willard who is in Egypt at the excavation of the tomb of Men-her-Ra; described as "not nearly so sunburned as the others, and that fact, coupled with a certain haggardness round the eyes, made him look older than his twenty-two years"; male.

DR. TOSSWILL: An archaeologist from the British Museum who is assisting with the excavation of the tomb of Men-ha-Ra in Egypt; described as "a sunburnt man with a grey beard, in white clothes and wearing a helmet"; male.

DR. AMES: A medical doctor at the excavation of the tomb of Men-her-Ra in Egypt; described as "a capable looking man of thirty odd, with a touch of graying hair at the temples"; male.

MR. HARPER: Assistant to the late American financier Mr. Bleibner who is in Egypt at the excavation of the tomb of Men-her-Ra; wears horn-rimmed spectacles; male.

HASSAN: Assistant to the late English archaeologist Sir John Willard; flexible.

Setting

London and Egypt, 1925.

Sets

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

Lady Willard's home. There are three armchairs. Other set pieces and a backdrop may be used if desired.

Egypt, site of excavations. There is a large white tent with a flap that lifts and a backdrop of pyramids in the distance. Three chairs are outside the entrance of the tent.

Egypt, interior of Poirot's tent. There is a settee. Other set pieces may be used if desired.

Egypt, interior of a mess tent. There are small tables with chairs for dining. The tables are set with dinnerware.

NOTE: The same white tent may be used with different set pieces.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Lady Willard's home, Kensington Square.

Scene 2: Poirot's study, days later.

Scene 3: Egypt, a week later.

Scene 4: Egypt, site of the excavations.

Scene 5: Egypt, site of the excavations, a short time later.

Scene 6: Egypt, interior of Poirot's tent, early evening.

Scene 7: Egypt, interior of a mess tent, later that evening after dinner.

Scene 8: Egypt, interior of Poirot's tent, a short time later.

Props

Coffee cup

Teacup

Clothing brush

Ancient, tattered book entitled, "The Magic of the Egyptians and Chaldean." (Small book that can fit in Poirot's pocket.)

Handkerchief, for Mr. Harper

Tea tray

2 Teacups of chamomile tea

Pajamas, for Dr. Ames

Assorted dinnerware

Special Effects

Dust

Sand

Shadowy figure of Anubis

“All around me I feel an atmosphere of evil,
subtle and menacing.
A horrible thought has flashed before me:
Supposing I am next?”

—Arthur Hastings

Scene 1

(AT RISE: Spotlight up on Hastings, who is standing off to one side. The rest of the stage is dark.)

HASTINGS: (To audience.) I have always considered that one of the most thrilling and dramatic of the many adventures I have shared with Poirot was that of our investigation into the strange series of deaths that followed upon the discovery and opening of the tomb of King Men-her-Ra. After the discovery of the tomb of King Tut by Lord Carnarvon, Sir John Willard and Mr. Bleibner of New York were pursuing their excavations not far from Cairo in the vicinity of the Pyramids of Giza and came unexpectedly on a series of funeral chambers. Their discovery aroused great interest. The tomb appeared to be that of King Men-her-Ra, one of those shadowy kings of the Eighth Dynasty when the Old Kingdom was falling into decay. Little was known about this period, and the discoveries were fully reported in the newspapers. (Slight pause.) However, an event soon occurred that took a profound hold on the public mind. Sir John Willard died quite suddenly of heart failure. The more sensational newspapers immediately took the opportunity to revive all the old superstitious stories of an Egyptian mummy's curse. The unlucky mummy at the British Museum was dragged out with zeal. The museum quietly denied the all superstitious Egyptian tales but nevertheless enjoyed all the fervor. (Slight pause.) Then, a fortnight later, Mr. Bleibner died of acute blood poisoning. And a few days afterward, a nephew of his shot himself in New York. The curse of Men-her-Ra was the talk of the day, and the magic power of dead and ancient Egypt was exalted to a fetish point. (Slight pause.) It was then that Poirot received a brief note from Lady Willard, widow of the dead archaeologist,

asking him to go and see her at her house in Kensington Square. I accompanied him...

(Spotlight down. Lights up on the scene at Lady Willard's home, Kensington Square. Poirot and Hastings enter. Lady Willard rises to greet them.)

LADY WILLARD: It is kind of you to have come so promptly, Monsieur Poirot.

POIROT: I am at your service, Lady Willard. You wished to consult me?

LADY WILLARD: Please take a seat. *(They all sit.)* You are, I am aware, a detective, but it is not only as a detective that I wish to consult you. You are a man of original views. I know you have imagination...experience of the world. Tell me, Monsieur Poirot, what are your views on the supernatural?

(Poirot hesitates.)

POIROT: Let us not misunderstand each other, Lady Willard. It is not a general question that you are asking me. It has a personal application, has it not? You are referring obliquely to the death of your late husband?

LADY WILLARD: That is so.

POIROT: You want me to investigate the circumstances of his death?

LADY WILLARD: I want you to ascertain for me exactly how much is newspaper chatter and how much may be said to be founded on fact. Three deaths, Monsieur Poirot...each one explicable taken by itself, but taken together, surely an almost unbelievable coincidence and all within a month of the opening of the tomb! It may be mere superstition. It may be some potent curse from the past that operates in ways undreamed of by modern science. The fact

remains...three deaths! And I am afraid, Monsieur Poirot, horribly afraid that it may not yet be the end.

POIROT: For whom do you fear?

LADY WILLARD: For my son. When the news of my husband's death came, I was ill. My son, who had just come down from Oxford, went to Egypt. He brought the...the body home, but now he has gone to Egypt, in spite of my dramatic plea that he not go. He is so fascinated by the work that he intends to take his father's place and carry on the system of excavations. You may think me a foolish woman, but, Monsieur Poirot, I am afraid. Supposing that the spirit of the dead pharaoh is not yet appeased? Perhaps to you I seem to be talking nonsense.

POIROT: No, indeed, Lady Willard. I, too, believe in the force of superstition, one of the greatest forces the world has ever known. (*Surprised, Hastings looks at Poirot.*) What you really ask is that I protect your son? (*Lady Willard nods.*) I will do my utmost to keep him from harm.

LADY WILLARD: Yes, in the ordinary way, but against an occult influence?

POIROT: In the volumes of the Middle Ages, Lady Willard, you will find many ways of counteracting black magic. Perhaps they knew more than we moderns, with all our science. Now, let us come to facts so that I may have guidance. Your husband had always been a devoted Egyptologist?

LADY WILLARD: Yes, from his youth upward. He was one of the greatest living authorities on the subject.

POIROT: But Mr. Bleibner, I understand, was more or less an amateur?

LADY WILLARD: Oh, quite. He was a very wealthy man who dabbled freely in any subject that happened to take his fancy. My husband managed to interest him in Egyptology, and it was his money that was so useful in financing the expedition.

POIROT: And the nephew...what do you know of his tastes?
Was he with the party at all?

LADY WILLARD: I do not think so. In fact, I never knew of his existence till I read of his death in the paper. I do not think he and Mr. Bleibner had been at all close. He never spoke of having any relationship with him.

POIROT: Who are the other members of the party?

LADY WILLARD: Well, there is Dr. Tosswill, a minor official connected with the British Museum; Mr. Schneider of the Metropolitan Museum in New York; a young American assistant; Dr. Ames, who accompanies the expedition in his professional capacity; and Hassan, my husband's devoted assistant.

POIROT: Do you remember the name of the American assistant?

LADY WILLARD: Harper, I think, but I cannot be sure. He had not been with Mr. Bleibner very long. He is a very pleasant young fellow.

POIROT: Thank you, Lady Willard.

LADY WILLARD: Is there anything else?

POIROT: For the moment, nothing. Leave it now in my hands and be assured that I will do all that is humanly possible to protect your son.

LADY WILLARD: (*Winces.*) Those are not exactly reassuring words. Yet, at the same time, the fact that you have not pooh-poohed my fears seems in itself to be a relief.

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

HASTINGS: (*To Poirot.*) For my part, I never before suspected that you had so deep a vein of superstition in your nature.

POIROT: (*Grave, earnest.*) But, yes, Hastings. I believe in these things. You must not underrate the force of superstition.

HASTINGS: What are we going to do about it?

POIROT: [Toujours pratique], my good Hastings! [Eh bien], to begin with, we are going to send a cable to New York for the full details of young Mr. Bleibner's death. [*or "Always, practical" [or "Well"]*]

(Blackout.)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: Poirot's study, days later. Poirot and Hastings are seated. Poirot is drinking coffee, and Hastings is drinking tea.)

HASTINGS: *(To Poirot.)* Have you received a response to your cable?

POIROT: The reply was full and precise. Young Rupert Bleibner had been in low water for several years. He had been a beachcomber and a remittance man in several South Sea islands but had returned to New York two years ago, where he had rapidly sunk lower and lower. The most significant thing, to my mind, was that he had recently managed to borrow enough money to take him to Egypt.

HASTINGS: From whom did he borrow money?

POIROT: A good friend. However, his plans had gone awry. He returned to New York cursing his skinflint of an uncle who cared more for the bones of the dead and gone kings than his own flesh and blood. It was during his sojourn in Egypt that the death of Sir John Willard occurred. Rupert plunged once more into a life of debauchery in New York, and then, without warning, he committed suicide, leaving behind a letter that contained some curious phrases.

HASTINGS: What did the letter say?

POIROT: It seemed written in a sudden fit of remorse. He referred to himself as a "leper" and an "outcast," and the letter ended by declaring that he was better off dead.

HASTINGS: A shadowy theory has leapt into my brain. I never really believed in the vengeance of a long-dead Egyptian king. I see here a more modern crime. Supposing this young man had decided to do away with his uncle, preferably by poison, and by mistake, Sir John Willard receives the fatal dose. The young man returns to New York, haunted by his crime. The news of his uncle's death

reaches him. He realizes how unnecessary his crime has been, and stricken with remorse, he takes his own life.

POIROT: It is interesting what you have thought of there.

Decidedly, it is ingenious. It may even be true, but you leave out the fatal influence of the tomb.

HASTINGS: (*Shrugs.*) You still think that has something to do with it?

POIROT: So much so, [*mon ami*], that we will head for Egypt tomorrow. [*or "my friend"*]

HASTINGS: (*Astonished.*) What?

POIROT: I have said it. (*Laments.*) But, oh, the hateful sea! (*Groans. Blackout.*)

Scene 3

(AT RISE: Spotlight up on Hastings. The rest of the stage is dark.)

HASTINGS: *(To audience.)* Beneath our feet was the golden sand of the desert. The hot sun poured down overhead. Poirot, the picture of misery, wilted by my side. The little man was not a good traveler. Our four days' voyage from Marseilles had been one long bout of seasickness for him. Poirot landed at Alexandria the wraith of his former self. Even his usual neatness had deserted him. We arrived in Cairo and drove out at once to the Mena House Hotel, right in the shadow of the Pyramids. The charm of Egypt had laid hold of me. Not so Poirot. Dressed precisely the same as in London, he carried a small clothes brush in his pocket and waged an unceasing war on the dust that accumulated on his dark apparel...

(Spotlight down on Hastings. Lights up on the scene. Cairo, Egypt, a week later. Pyramids can be seen in the distance. With a look of desperation, Poirot is brushing sand/dust off his clothing with his clothes brush. Hastings is standing by, looking helpless.)

POIROT: And my boots! Regard them, Hastings! My boots, of neat patent leather, usually so smart and shining. The sand is inside them, which is painful, and outside them, which outrages the eyes. Also, the heat! It causes my moustache to become limp! Limp!

HASTINGS: *(Excited.)* Look at the Sphinx! Even I can feel the mystery and the charm it exhales!

POIROT: *(Indicating Sphinx, discontentedly.)* It cannot be happy. How could it? Half-buried in sand in that untidy fashion? Ah, this cursed sand! *(Brushes his pants.)*

HASTINGS: *(Calmly.)* Come, now, there's a lot of sand in Belgium. Remember the holiday spent at Knocke-sur-Mer in

the midst of “les dunes impeccables” as the guidebook had phrased it? [or “impeccable dunes”]

POIROT: Not in Brussels! (*Gazes at the pyramids. Indicating pyramids, thoughtfully.*) It is true that they, at least, are of a shape solid and geometrical, but their surface is of an unevenness most unpleasing. And the palm trees...I like them not! Not even do they plant them in rows!

HASTINGS: I must cut short your lamentations by suggesting that we head for the camp. We are to ride there on camels, and the beasts are patiently kneeling, waiting for us.

(Poirot groans. Poirot and Hastings exit. Lights down on scene. Spotlight up on Hastings, who is standing off to one side as before. Note: For the following, Poirot makes the sounds offstage as indicated in Hastings's narration.)

HASTINGS: *(To audience.)* I will pass over the spectacle of Poirot riding a camel except to say he started with groans... *(Poirot groans.)* ...and then lamentations... *(Poirot adlibs lamentations.)* ...and ended with shrieks, gesticulations, and invocations to the Virgin Mary and every saint in the calendar. *(Poirot shrieks and adlibs invocations to the Virgin Mary, etc.)* In the end, he descended ignominiously and finished the journey on a diminutive donkey. I must admit that a trotting camel is no joke for the amateur. I was stiff for several days.

(Hastings limps off. Blackout.)

[END OF FREEVIEW]