

# AGATHA CHRISTIE'S



*Murder at the Victory Ball*

**Heather Lynn**

Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie

**BIG DOG PUBLISHING**

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**BIG DOG PUBLISHING**

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*Murder at the Victory Ball*

**MURDER-MYSTERY.** Adapted from the story by Agatha Christie. At a high-society costume ball, Lord Cronshaw is found stabbed in the heart with a kitchen knife, and his fiancée is mysteriously found dead at her home. The sensational case becomes a cause célèbre, and Scotland Yard must call on famed detective Hercule Poirot to help investigate the mysterious deaths in which the suspects at the ball were dressed as commedia dell'arte characters. Clues include six porcelain figurines, a green silk pompon, and a curtained recess. With dramatic flare, Poirot invites the suspects to attend a special harlequinade, where he finally reveals the murderer.

**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. "The Affair at the Victory Ball" is the first short story to feature Hercule Poirot, who later became one of Christie's most famous characters. The story was first published in *The Sketch* in March 1923 in the United Kingdom. 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*

(7 M, 3 F, 6 flexible, opt. extras)

**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.

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

**LORD CRONSHAW V:** 25, rich, unmarried, and fond of the theatre world; attends the Victory Ball dressed as Harlequin, the commedia dell'arte character; found murdered with a knife through his heart; male.

**"COCO" COURTENAY:** Popular actress who is rumored to be Lord Cronshaw V's fiancée; attends the Victory Ball dressed as the commedia dell'arte character, Columbine; found dead at her home on the night of the ball; female.

**LORD CRONSHAW VI (EUSTACE BELTANE):** A collector of fine porcelain figures and the uncle of Lord Cronshaw V; attends the Victory Ball dressed as the Commedia dell'arte character, Punchinello; described as "suave in manner and with a handsome, dissolute face" and "the appearance of an elderly roué, with the languid manner of a poseur"; male.

**MRS. MALLABY:** A vivacious American widow who attends the Victory Ball dressed as the Commedia dell'arte character, Punchinella; has dark hair; female.

**MR. CHRIS DAVIDSON:** Stage actor who attends the Victory Ball dressed as the Commedia dell'arte character Pierrot; male.

**MRS. DAVIDSON:** Married to Chris Davidson; attends the Victory Ball dressed as the Commedia dell'arte character, Pierrette; describe as a small, fair woman "whose fragility would have seemed pathetic and appealing had it not been for the rather shrewd and calculating gleam in her light blue eyes"; female.

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**CAPTAIN DIGBY:** A friend of Lord Cronshaw; attended the Victory Ball and told police that he had seen Lord Cronshaw alive at 1:30 a.m.; male.

**ACTOR 1-5:** Actors who perform at Poirot's harlequinade; nonspeaking; flexible.

**LIGHTING TECH:** Light tech at Poirot's harlequinade; nonspeaking, flexible.

**EXTRAS (opt.):** As Guests at the Victory Ball.

## *Setting*

London, 1925.

## *Sets*

**Poirot's study.** There is a fireplace, three armchairs, a window, and a coffee table. Harlequinade set includes a white screen erected at one side of the room, flanked by heavy curtains. Chairs for guests have been arranged to face the screen. A large light illuminates the screen.

**Victory Ball, Colossus Hall.** There is a theatre box that looks down on an open area.

**Berkeley Square, China Room.** Home of Lord Cronshaw VI. The room is filled with displays of porcelain figurines. There is a fireplace with a mantle and a mirror above it. Above the mantle is a small shelf with six figures depicting the commedia dell'arte characters Harlequin, Columbine, Pierrot, Pierrette, Punchinello, and Punchinella.

**Davidsons' drawing room.** A small room decorated with Asian artwork.

## *Synopsis of Scenes*

**Scene 1:** Poirot's study, a spring morning.

**Scene 2:** Berkeley Square, China Room.

**Scene 3:** The Davidsons' flat in Chelsea, a short time later.

**Scene 4:** Poirot's study, a week later, 8 p.m.

*Drops*

Pomade, for Poirot's mustache  
Small hand mirror  
Newspaper  
Pierrette costume with one green pompon on one shoulder, for  
Mrs. Davidson  
Pierrot costume, for Mr. Davidson  
Punchinello costume (ruffles and frills, a hump, a high hat), for  
Lord Cronshaw VI  
Punchinella costume, for Mrs. Mallaby  
Harlequin costume, for Lord Cronshaw V  
Harlequin costume (identical to Lord Cronshaw V's), for Mr.  
Davidson  
Columbine costume, for Coco Courtenay  
Pompon (emerald green silk with some ragged threads  
hanging from it)  
Handcuffs

*Special Effects*

Lighting to indicate flashback  
Lighting for harlequinade



*To "see" things with your eyes,  
as they say,  
is not always to see the truth.*

*One must see  
with the eyes of the mind.*

*-Hercule Poirot*

*Scene 1*

(AT RISE: *Hercule Poirot's study, a spring morning. Poirot is delicately applying pomade to his mustache. Having finished reading "The Daily Newsmonger," Hastings places it on the floor next to his chair. Hastings is lost in thought.*)

POIROT: (*Applying pomade to his mustache.*) Ah, a certain harmless vanity that falls in line with my general love of order and method. (*To Hastings.*) Of what are you thinking so deeply, [mon ami]? [*or "my friend."*]

HASTINGS: To tell you the truth, I was puzzling over this baffling affair at the Victory Ball. (*Taps the newspaper with his finger.*) The papers are full of it.

POIROT: Yes...?

HASTINGS: The more one reads of it, the more shrouded in mystery the whole thing becomes! Who killed Lord Cronshaw? Was Coco Courtenay's death on the same night a mere coincidence? Was it an accident, or did she deliberately take an overdose? (*Dramatically.*) These are the questions I ask myself!

(*Poirot picks up a small mirror and admires his mustache.*)

POIROT: Decidedly, this new pomade, it is a marvel for mustaches! (*Notices Hastings annoyance, adds hastily.*) Quite so. And how do you reply to your questions? (*Before Hastings can answer, Inspector Japp enters. Warmly.*) Ah, my good Inspector Japp. And what brings you to see us?

(*Poirot gestures for Inspector Japp to take a seat. Inspector Japp sits.*)

INSPECTOR JAPP: Well, Monsieur Poirot... (*Nods to Hastings.*) ...I'm on a case that strikes me as being very much in your line, and I came along to know whether you'd care to have a finger in the pie. It's the Victory Ball case.

*(Poirot doesn't respond. Persuasively.)* Come, now, surely you'd like to have a hand in that!

*(Poirot smiles at Hastings.)*

POIROT: My friend Hastings would. He was just discussing the case. *(To Hastings.)* [N'est-ce pas, mon ami]? *[or "Were you not so, my friend?"]*

INSPECTOR JAPP: *(To Hastings, condescendingly.)* Well, sir, you shall be in it, too. *(To Poirot.)* I can tell you, it's something of a feather in my cap to have inside knowledge of a case like this. Well, here's to business. You know the main facts of the case, I suppose, Monsieur Poirot?

POIROT: From the papers only...and the imagination of the journalist is sometimes misleading. Recount the whole story to me.

*(Inspector Japp settles into his chair.)*

INSPECTOR JAPP: As all the world knows, on Tuesday last, a grand Victory Ball was held. Every twopenny-halfpenny ball calls itself that nowadays, but this was the real thing—held at the Colossus Hall, and all London at it, including Lord Cronshaw and his party.

POIROT: *(Interrupting.)* His dossier?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Lord Cronshaw was fifth viscount, 25 years of age, rich, unmarried, and very fond of the theatrical world. There were rumors of his being engaged to Miss Courtenay of the Albany Theatre, who was known to her friends as "Coco" and who was, by all accounts, a very fascinating young lady.

POIROT: [Bien.] Continue... *[or "Good."]*

INSPECTOR JAPP: Lord Cronshaw's party consisted of six people: himself; his uncle, the Honorable Eustace Beltane; a pretty American widow, Mrs. Mallaby; a young actor, Chris Davidson and his wife; and last but not least, Miss Coco

Courtenay. It was a fancy dress ball, as you know, and the Cronshaw party wore character costumes from the old Italian comedy...whatever that may be.

POIROT: Ah, the commedia dell'arte.

INSPECTOR JAPP: Anyway, the costumes were copied from a set of porcelain figurines from Eustace Beltane's collection. Lord Cronshaw was Harlequin; Beltane was Punchinello; Mrs. Mallaby matched him as Punchinella; the Davidsons were Pierrot and Pierrette; and Miss Courtenay, of course, was Columbine.

POIROT: When was it apparent that there was something wrong?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Quite early in the evening. Lord Cronshaw was moody and acting strangely. When the party met together for supper in a small private room engaged by the host, everyone noticed that he and Miss Courtenay were no longer on speaking terms. She had obviously been crying and seemed on the verge of hysterics.

HASTINGS: Ah, that meal must have been an uncomfortable one!

*(Poirot shoots Hastings a hard look.)*

POIROT: *(To Inspector Japp.)* Please, continue...

INSPECTOR JAPP: *(With a nod to Hastings.)* Yes, the meal was a rather uncomfortable one, and as they all left the dining room, she turned to Chris Davidson and requested that he take her home as she was "sick of the ball." The young actor hesitated, glanced over at Lord Cronshaw, and finally drew them both back to the dining room. But all his efforts to secure a reconciliation failed, and he got a taxi and escorted the weeping Miss Courtenay back to her flat.

POIROT: Did she confide in Chris Davidson?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Although obviously very much upset, she did not confide in him but merely reiterated again and again that she would "make old Cronch sorry for this!" That is the

only hint we have that her death may not have been accidental, and it's precious little to go on. By the time Davidson had quieted her down somewhat, it was too late to return to the Victory Ball, so Davidson went straight home to his flat in Chelsea, where his wife arrived shortly afterward, bearing the news of the terrible tragedy that had occurred after his departure.

POIROT: What had occurred?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Lord Cronshaw, it seems, became more and more moody as the ball went on. He kept away from his party, and they hardly saw him during the rest of the evening. It was about 1:30 a.m.—just before the grand cotillion when everyone was to unmask—when Captain Digby, a friend of Lord Cronshaw's who knew his disguise, noticed Lord Cronshaw standing in a theatre box gazing down on the scene...

*(Lights down on Poirot, Hastings, and Inspector Japp. Flashback lights up on the scene at the Victory Ball. "Lord Cronshaw V" is standing in a theatre box looking down at the activities below as costumed Guests mingle. [Note: "Lord Cronshaw V" is really Mr. Davidson dressed in an identical Harlequin costume.] Captain Digby and Mrs. Davidson are CS.)*

CAPTAIN DIGBY: *(Calls up to "Lord Cronshaw V.")* Hullo, Cronch! Come down and be sociable! Why are you moping about up there like a boiled owl?

MR. DAVIDSON: *(As Lord Cronshaw V, calls down.)* Right! Wait for me, or I'll never find you in the crowd.

*("Lord Cronshaw V" exits the theatre box. Captain Digby and Mrs. Davidson wait for him but he doesn't appear. Mrs. Mallaby enters and joins Mrs. Davidson and Captain Digby.)*

CAPTAIN DIGBY: *(To others, impatient.)* Does the fellow think we're going to wait all night for him?

MRS. MALLABY: He's like a bear with a sore head tonight. Let's go and rout him out. *(Captain Digby, Mrs. Mallaby, and Mrs. Davidson search for Lord Cronshaw V in the crowd but do not find him. To Captain Digby and Mrs. Davidson.)* He might be found in the room where we supped an hour ago. I shall see. *(Mrs. Mallaby exits. Pause. Mrs. Mallaby screams offstage. Mrs. Mallaby rushes on.)* What a sight has met my eyes! There was Harlequin...stretched on the ground with a table knife in his heart!

*(Flashback lights down on the scene at the Victory Ball. Lights up on Poirot's study.)*

POIROT: *(To Inspector Japp.)* [Mon Dieu]! And there was no clue as to the perpetrator of the deed? But how should there be! *[or "My God!"]*

INSPECTOR JAPP: And you know the rest. The tragedy was a double one.

HASTINGS: The next day, there were headlines in all the newspapers and a brief statement to the effect that Miss Courtenay, the popular actress, had been discovered dead in her bed and that her death was due to an overdose of drugs.

POIROT: *(To Inspector Japp.)* An accident or suicide?

INSPECTOR JAPP: *(Shrugs.)* Her maid, who was called upon to give evidence, admitted that Miss Courtenay was a confirmed taker of drugs, and a verdict of "accidental death" was returned. Nevertheless, we can't leave the possibility of suicide out.

POIROT: An unfortunate death.

INSPECTOR JAPP: Particularly unfortunate since it leaves us no clue now as to the cause of the quarrel with Lord Cronshaw the preceding night. By the way, a small enamel box was found on the dead man. It had "Coco" written across it in diamonds and was half full of a white powder. It was identified by Miss Courtenay's maid as belonging to her mistress, who nearly always carried it about with her since it

contained her supply of the drug to which she was fast becoming an addict.

POIROT: Was Lord Cronshaw addicted to the drug?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Very far from it. He held unusually strong views on the subject.

POIROT: *(Nods, thoughtfully.)* But since the box was in his possession, he knew that Miss Courtenay took it. Suggestive, is it not, my good Inspector Japp?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Ah. Well, that's the case. What do you think of it?

POIROT: You found no clue of any kind that has not already been reported?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Yes, there was this.

*(Inspector Japp takes out a small green pompon from his pocket and hands it to Poirot.)*

POIROT: *(Inspecting pompon.)* It is a small pompon of emerald green silk with some ragged threads hanging from it, as though it has been wrenched violently off.

INSPECTOR JAPP: We found it in the dead man's hand, which was tightly clenched over it.

*(Poirot hands the pompon back to Inspector Japp without any comment.)*

POIROT: Had Lord Cronshaw any enemies?

INSPECTOR JAPP: None that anyone knows of. He was a popular young fellow.

POIROT: Who benefits from his death?

INSPECTOR JAPP: His uncle, the Honorable Eustace Beltane, comes into the title and estates. There are one or two suspicious facts against him. Several people declare that they heard a violent altercation going on in the dining room and that Eustace Beltane was one of the disputants. You see,

the table knife being snatched up off the table would fit in with the murder being done in the heat of a quarrel.

POIROT: What does Mr. Beltane say about the matter?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Declares one of the waiters was the worse for liquor and that he was giving him a dressing down. Also, that it was nearer to one than 1:30. You see, Captain Digby's evidence fixes the time pretty accurately. Only about ten minutes elapsed between his speaking to Cronsshaw and the finding of the body.

POIROT: And, in any case, I suppose Mr. Beltane, dressed as Punchinello, was wearing a hump and a ruffle?

INSPECTOR JAPP: I don't know the exact details of the costumes. (*Gives Poirot a curious look.*) And, anyway, I don't quite see what that has to do with it.

POIROT: (*Smiles, hint of mockery.*) No? There was a curtain in this dining room, was there not?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Yes, but—

POIROT: With a space behind it sufficient to conceal a man?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Yes, in fact, there's a small recess, but how did you know about it? You haven't been to the place, have you, Monsieur Poirot?

POIROT: No, my good Inspector Japp, I imagined the curtain. Without it, the drama is not possible. And, always, one must be reasonable. But, tell me, did they not send for a doctor?

INSPECTOR JAPP: At once, of course. But there was nothing to be done. Death must have been instantaneous.

POIROT: (*Nods, impatiently.*) Yes, yes, I understand. This doctor...he gave evidence at the inquest?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Yes.

POIROT: Did he say nothing of any unusual symptom? Was there nothing about the appearance of the body that struck him as being abnormal?

INSPECTOR JAPP: (*With a hard stare.*) Yes, Monsieur Poirot. I don't know what you're getting at, but he did mention that



there was a tension and stiffness about the limbs that he was quite at a loss to account for.

POIROT: Aha! Aha! [Mon Dieu]! That makes one think, does it not? [*or "My God!"*]

INSPECTOR JAPP: (*Perplexed by Poirot's comment.*) If you're thinking of poison, monsieur, who on earth would poison a man first and then stick a knife into him?

POIROT: In truth, that would be ridiculous.

INSPECTOR JAPP: Now, is there anything you want to see, monsieur? If you'd like to examine the room where the body was found—

POIROT: (*Waving his hand.*) Not in the least. You have told me the only thing that interests me: Lord Cronshaw's views on the subject of drug-taking.

INSPECTOR JAPP: Then there's nothing you want to see?

POIROT: Just one thing.

INSPECTOR JAPP: What is that?

POIROT: The set of porcelain figurines from which the costumes were copied.

(*Inspector Japp stares at Poirot and then bursts out laughing.*)

INSPECTOR JAPP: Well, you're a funny one!

POIROT: You can manage that for me?

INSPECTOR JAPP: Come to Berkeley Square now, if you like. Mr. Beltane—or His Lordship, as I should say now—won't object. Come, let us go now.

(*Inspector Japp exits. Poirot and Hastings start to exit after Inspector Japp, but Poirot stops.*)

POIROT: (*To Hastings.*) I have a good opinion of our good Inspector Japp's abilities, though I deplore his lamentable lack of method. However, I, for my part, realize that Inspector Japp's highest talent lay in the gentle art of seeking favors under the guise of granting them.

[END OF FREEVIEW]