

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S



The Case of the Family Curse

Heather Lynn

Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie

BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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The Case of the Family Curse

MYSTERY. Mrs. Lemesurier's eldest son, Ronald, has narrowly escaped death three times in the past six months and seems destined to become the next victim of the Lemesurier family curse. The medieval family curse states that no first-born son shall ever inherit the family's wealth. To protect her child, Mrs. Lemesurier calls upon famed detective Hercule Poirot. Fearing the child is in great peril, Poirot along with his friend Arthur Hastings travel to the Lemesurier estate in Northumberland and post a harrowing vigil in the child's bedroom to catch the diabolical murderer before he can strike.

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 Lemesurier Inheritance" was first published in *The Sketch* in December 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

(6 M, 2 F, 2 boys)

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.

HUGO LEMESURIER: Vincent Lemesurier's uncle who is suffering from an incurable disease; married to Sadie and is the father of two young boys, Ronald and Gerald; male.

SADIE LEMESURIER: American wife of Hugo and the mother of Ronald and Gerald; had been a musical comedy actress in America when she met Hugo; conveys a great deal of determination and strong common sense; female.

RONALD LEMESURIER: 8, Hugo and Sadie's eldest son who has escaped death three times; has red hair; male.

GERALD LEMESURIER: 6, Hugo and Sadie's youngest son; while Ronald, his elder brother, has had several near accidents and narrow escapes from death in recent months, Gerald has always been untouched; has dark hair; male.

MISS SAUNDERS: Ronald and Gerald's governess; female.

VINCENT LEMESURIER: Nephew of Hugo Lemesurier and an old army friend of Hastings; male.

ROGER LEMESURIER: A distant cousin of Vincent Lemesurier who informs Vincent that his father has fallen off a horse and died; male.

JOHN GARDINER: Hugo Lemesurier's secretary; handsome with red hair; male.

Setting

London and Northumberland.

Sets

Carlton dining room. There are two small tables with four chairs at one table and two chairs at the other table. A backdrop may be used, if desired.

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

Train car. The interior of a train car with two seats.

Lemesurier estate, study. There are armchairs and a coffee table. Other assorted furnishings may be added, if desired.

Lemesurier estate, terrace. There is a small garden table with three chairs. A backdrop may be used.

Lemesurier estate, Robert's bedroom. There is a small bed. Other assorted furnishings may be added, if desired.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Carlton dining room, during the war.

Scene 2: Carlton dining room, the next morning.

Scene 3: Poirot's study, years later.

Scene 4: Train car, the next day.

Scene 5: Lemesurier estate, Northumberland.

Scene 6: Lemesurier terrace.

Scene 7: Robert's bedroom, later that evening.

Scene 8: Poirot's study, evening.

Props

Watch, for Roger
Newspaper
2 Teacups
Tea set
Pile of mail
Coffee cup, for Poirot
Sheaf of papers
Small lantern
Syringe (hypodermic needle)
Pink teacup, for Poirot
Hot toddy glass, for Hastings

Special Effects

Lighting for flashback scenes

Sound of door opening

Sound of quick, hurried breathing

Sound of footsteps approaching

"Click" sound

*"Yes, there is nothing
more amazing than
the extraordinary sanity
of the insane...
unless it is
the extraordinary eccentricity
of the sane!"*

—Hercule Poirot

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Scene 1

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

HASTINGS: *(To audience.)* In company with Poirot, I have investigated many strange cases, but none, I think, compares with that extraordinary series of events that held our interest over a period of many years, and which culminated in the ultimate problem brought to Poirot to solve. Our attention was first drawn to the family history of the Lemesuriers one evening during the war. Poirot and I had recently met up, renewing the old days of our exploits in Belgium. Poirot had been handling some little matter for the War Office, and we had been dining at the Carlton and were finishing our meal in a leisurely fashion...

(Lights down on Hastings. Flashback lights up on the Carlton dining room. Poirot and Hastings are seated at a table. Hastings looks over and recognizes Captain Vincent Lemesurier sitting at a nearby table with his uncle, Hugo Lemesurier.)

POIROT: Are you acquainted with the young fellow over there, [mon ami]? *[or "my friend"]*

HASTINGS: Yes, I believe it is Vincent Lemesurier. I do not know him well, but he is a pleasant young fellow. I remember hearing that he belongs to an old and exclusive family with property in Northumberland, which dates back to medieval times.

(Vincent and Hugo approach Hastings and Poirot.)

VINCENT: Well, Hastings! It's so good to see you again.

HASTINGS: Please...join us.

VINCENT: My uncle and I aren't in a hurry and would love to join you.

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(Vincent and Hugo sit at the table with Hastings and Poirot.)

VINCENT: *(To Hastings and Poirot.)* This is my uncle, Hugo Lemesurier.

HASTINGS: *(To Hugo.)* So what brings you here?

HUGO: At the moment, I'm engaged upon some chemical research work for the government.

(The conversation is interrupted when Roger Lemesurier enters and approaches the table, looking distressed.)

ROGER: *(To Vincent and Hugo.)* Thank goodness I've found you both!

VINCENT: What's the matter, Roger?

ROGER: *(Rapidly.)* Your father, Vincent. Bad fall. Young horse.

VINCENT: Slow down, Roger. Go on...

ROGER: Your father has had a serious accident while riding a young horse and is not expected to live.

(Vincent is stunned by the news and goes deadly white.)

VINCENT: We must hurry! *(To Hastings and Poirot.)* Please excuse us. We must take our leave.

(Vincent, Hugo, and Roger exit. Hastings looks surprised by their hasty exit.)

POIROT: *(To Hastings.)* You look surprised, [mon ami]. [*or "my friend"*]

HASTINGS: In a way, I am surprised. From the few words Vincent had let fall on the subject while we were in France, I had gathered that he and his father were not on particularly friendly terms, and so his display of filial feeling now rather astonishes me.

(Roger re-enters and approaches Poirot and Hastings.)

ROGER: Rather a curious business, this. I remained behind...perhaps it would interest Monsieur Poirot. I've heard of you, you know, Monsieur Poirot. You're known as an expert on psychology.

POIROT: *(Cautiously.)* I study psychology, yes.

ROGER: Did you see my cousin's face? He was absolutely bowled over, wasn't he? Do you know why? A good old-fashioned family curse! Would you care to hear about it?

POIROT: It would be most kind of you to recount it to me.

ROGER: *(Looks at his watch.)* Lots of time. I'm meeting them at King's Cross. Well, Monsieur Poirot, the Lemesuriers are an old family. Way back in medieval times, a Lemesurier became suspicious of his wife. He found the lady in a compromising situation. She swore that she was innocent, but old Baron Hugo didn't listen. She had one child, a son, and he swore that the boy was no child of his and would never inherit. Some quaint medieval fancy like walling up the mother and son alive. Anyway, he killed them both, and she died protesting her innocence and solemnly cursing the Lemesuriers forever.

POIROT: And the curse?

ROGER: No first born son of a Lemesurier should ever inherit...so the curse ran. Well, time passed, and the lady's innocence was established beyond doubt. I believe that Hugo wore a hair shirt and ended his days on his knees in a monk's cell.

POIROT: What about the modern-day curse?

ROGER: I'm coming to that. The curious thing is...that from that day to this, no first-born son has ever inherited the estate. It's gone to brothers, to nephews, to second sons...never to the eldest son. Vincent's father was the second of five sons, the eldest of whom died in infancy. Of course, all through the war, Vincent, the eldest son, was convinced that he was most certainly doomed. But,

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strangely enough, his two younger brothers were killed, and he himself has remained unscathed.

POIROT: An interesting family history. But now that his father is dying...he, as the eldest son, inherits?

ROGER: Exactly.

POIROT: (*Shakes his head.*) It looks as though the family curse has gone rusty...unable to stand the strain of modern life.

ROGER: (*Looks at his watch.*) Well, I must be off.

(*Roger exits. Blackout.*)

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Scene 2

(AT RISE: Carlton dining room, the next morning. Poirot and Hastings are seated at a small table. Poirot is drinking coffee. Hastings is drinking tea and reading the newspaper.)

HASTINGS: *(Scanning the newspaper, shocked.)* See here, Vincent Lemesurier has died! *(Reads.)* "...Tragic death of Captain Vincent Lemesurier."

POIROT: Ah, the sequel to the story has come on the morrow.

HASTINGS: *(Reads.)* "Captain Vincent Lemesurier had been traveling north by the Scotch mail train, and during the night, must have opened the door of the compartment and jumped out on the line. The shock of his father's accident coming on top of the shellshock was deemed to have caused a temporary mental aberration."

POIROT: Is the new heir named in the paper?

HASTINGS: Yes, the new heir is his father's brother, Ronald Lemesurier, whose only son died—

POIROT: The curse prevalent in the Lemesurier family...it appears the rust has been removed and it is now shiny and new.

HASTINGS: Indeed.

(Blackout.)

Scene 3

(AT RISE: Years later. Poirot's study, morning. Stage is dark. Spotlight up on Hastings, who is standing off to one side.)

HASTINGS: (To audience.) Beyond commenting on the extraordinary series of misfortunes which befell the Lemesuriers over the years, Poirot had taken no personal interest in the matter, but the time was now close at hand when he was to take a more active part...

(Spotlight down on Hastings. Lights up on Poirot's study. Poirot and Hastings are seated. Poirot is drinking coffee, sorting through his mail. Hastings is drinking tea and reading the newspaper. Mrs. Lemesurier enters.)

MRS. LEMESURIER: Monsieur Poirot? (Poirot nods.) I am pleased to meet you. My husband, Hugo Lemesurier, met you once many years ago, but you will hardly remember the fact.

POIROT: I recollect it perfectly, madame. It was at the Carlton.

MRS. LEMESURIER: I am impressed that you remember. (Slight pause.) Monsieur Poirot, I'm very worried.

POIROT: What about, madame?

MRS. LEMESURIER: My elder boy. I've two boys, you know. Ronald's eight, and Gerald's six.

POIROT: Proceed, madame. Why should you be worried about little Ronald?

MRS. LEMESURIER: Monsieur Poirot, within the last six months, Ronald has had three narrow escapes from death: once from drowning when we were all down at Cornwall this summer; once when he fell from the nursery window; and once from poisoning. Of course, I know you think I'm just a silly fool, making mountains out of molehills.

POIROT: No, indeed, madame. Any mother might be excused for being upset at such occurrences, but I hardly see where I can be of any assistance to you. I am not [le bon Dieu] and control the waves. For the nursery window, I would suggest some iron bars. And for the food...what can equal a mother's cooking? [*or "God"*]

MRS. LEMESURIER: But why would these things happen to Ronald and not to Gerald?

POIROT: Chance, madame.

MRS. LEMESURIER: You think so?

POIROT: What do you think, madame...you and your husband?

MRS. LEMESURIER: It's no good going to Hugo. He won't listen. As perhaps you may have heard, there's supposed to be a curse on the family...no eldest son can inherit.

POIROT: Yes, I have heard.

MRS. LEMESURIER: Well, Hugo believes in it. He's wrapped up in the family history, and he's superstitious to the last degree. When I go to him with my fears, he just says it's the curse and we can't escape it. But I'm from the States, Monsieur Poirot, and over there, we don't believe much in curses.

POIROT: Ah, curses are quite popular in high-toned old families in England. It gives them cachet.

MRS. LEMESURIER: Yes. I was just a musical comedy actress in a small part when Hugo met me, and I thought his family curse was just too lovely for words. That kind of thing's all right for telling round the fire on a winter's evening, but when it comes to one's own children— (*Stops.*) I just adore my children, Monsieur Poirot. I'd do anything for them.

POIROT: So you decline to believe in the family curse, madame?

MRS. LEMESURIER: Can a curse saw through an ivy vine?

POIROT: (*Astonished.*) What is it that you are saying, madame?

MRS. LEMESURIER: I said, can a curse—or a ghost, if you like to call it that—saw through an ivy vine? I'm not saying anything about Cornwall. Any boy might go out too far and run into difficulties, though Ronald could swim since he was four years old. But the ivy's different. Both the boys were very naughty. They'd discovered they could climb up and down on the ivy. They were always doing it. One day—Gerald was away at the time—Ronald did it once too often, and the ivy gave way and he fell. Fortunately, he didn't injure himself seriously. But I went out and examined the ivy. It was cut through, Monsieur Poirot...deliberately cut through.

POIROT: It is very serious what you are telling me, madame. You say your younger boy, Gerald, was away from home at the time?

MRS. LEMESURIER: Yes.

POIROT: And at the time of Ronald's poisoning...was he away as well?

MRS. LEMESURIER: No, they were both there.

POIROT: Curious. Now, madame, who are the residents of your establishment?

MRS. LEMESURIER: Miss Saunders, the children's governess, and John Gardiner, my husband's assistant. *(Pauses, as though slightly embarrassed.)*

POIROT: And who else, madame?

MRS. LEMESURIER: Major Roger Lemesurier, whom I believe you also met on that night, stays with us a good deal.

POIROT: Ah, yes. He is a cousin, is he not?

MRS. LEMESURIER: A distant cousin. He does not belong to our branch of the family. Still, I suppose now he is my husband's nearest relative. He is a dear fellow, and we are all very fond of him. The boys are devoted to him.

POIROT: It was not he who taught them to climb up the ivy?

MRS. LEMESURIER: It might have been. He incites them to mischief often enough.

POIROT: Madame, I apologize for what I said to you earlier.

The danger is real, and I believe that I can be of assistance. I propose that you should invite us both to stay with you. Your husband will not object?

MRS. LEMESURIER: Oh, no. But he will believe it to be all of no use. It makes me furious the way he just sits around expecting the boy to die.

POIROT: Calm yourself, madame. Let us make our arrangements methodically.

[END OF FREEVIEW]