

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S



The Case of the Missing Will

Heather Lynn

Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie

BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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P.O. Box 1401

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The Case of the Missing Will

MYSTERY. Upon his death, Andrew Marsh left instructions allowing his niece, Violet, to live at Crabtree Manor for one year to “prove her wits” or all his worldly goods will go to charitable institutions and she will inherit nothing. Somewhere in Crabtree Manor, Mr. Marsh has either concealed a large sum of money or a second will, and Violet has just one year in which to find it. Mr. Marsh was opposed to higher education for women and believed women should have as little to do with “book learning” as possible. Since Violet had gone against his wishes by attending Girton College, Mr. Marsh has set forth this challenge. After learning of Violet’s predicament, famed detective Hercule Poirot conducts a search of Crabtree Manor but finds nothing. Just as Poirot declares himself defeated and takes a train back to London, he suddenly remembers a key clue, and hastens back to Crabtree Manor.

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 Case of the Missing Will" was first published 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, 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.

MISS VIOLET MARSH: The niece of the late Andrew Marsh, owner of Crabtree Manor; orphaned at 14, she was sent to live with her uncle and pursued higher education despite her uncle's belief that education for women was unnecessary; described as "plainly but neatly dressed, with an assured and businesslike manner"; female.

MR. BAKER: Servant at Crabtree Manor; described as "gnarled and pink-cheeked, like a shriveled pippin"; male.

MRS. BAKER: Servant at Crabtree Manor; married to Mr. Baker; described as a "woman of vast proportions and true Devonshire calm wears an apron"; female.

COGHAN: Worker at a construction firm in Plymouth who worked for Mr. Marsh; described as "a big, gaunt man with a grizzled moustache"; male.

Setting

London and Crabtree Manor, Devonshire.

Sets

Hercule Poirot's study. There are two armchairs, a settee, a coffee table, and a fireplace.

Crabtree Manor, study. A cozy, paneled room. Against a wall, there is a desk chair and a roll top desk stuffed with papers, all neatly docketed. There is a key to each drawer in the desk. Each key has its own ivory label except for one (see props). There is an armchair and a chintz settee along the opposite wall. Deep low window seats are covered with faded chintz. The room also features a fireplace and a china cabinet with neatly arranged china inside it.

Office of a construction firm. There is a counter or desk. An office backdrop may be used, if desired.

Train compartment. There are two seats. A backdrop of a train compartment may be used, if desired.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Hercule Poirot's study, 11 a.m.

Scene 2: Crabtree Manor, study, the next morning.

Scene 3: Office of a construction firm, Plymouth.

Scene 4: Crabtree Manor study, later that day.

Scene 5: Train compartment.

Scene 6: Crabtree Manor study, early morning, the next day.

Props

Will (legal-looking document)

Bell (or can be a sound effect)

Desk key with a dirty envelope attached to it with "Key of Roll

Top Desk" sloppily written on it

Charred fragment of stiff paper

Pocketknife or letter opener

Special Effects

Sound of a train coming to a halt
Sound of train departing the station
"Fire" in the fireplace (lighting effect)

*“Imbecile that I have been!
Triple imbecile!
Not again will I flaunt
my little grey cells!”*

—Hercule Poirot

Scene I

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

HASTINGS: *(To audience.)* The problem presented to us by Miss Violet Marsh made rather a pleasant change from our usual routine work. Poirot had received a brisk and businesslike note from the lady asking for an appointment, and he had replied asking her to call upon him at eleven o'clock the following day...

(Spotlight down. Lights up on Hercule Poirot's study. Hastings and Poirot are seated with Miss Violet Marsh.)

VIOLET: *(To Poirot.)* My business is of a somewhat unusual nature. I had better begin at the beginning and tell you the whole story.

POIROT: If you please, mademoiselle...

VIOLET: I am an orphan. My father was one of two brothers, sons of a farmer in Devonshire. The farm was a poor one, and the elder brother, Andrew, emigrated to Australia, where he did very well indeed, and by means of successful speculation in land, became a very rich man. The younger brother, Roger, my father, had no leanings toward the agricultural life. He managed to educate himself a little and obtained a post as a clerk with a small firm. My mother was the daughter of a poor artist. My father died when I was six years old. When I was 14, my mother followed him to the grave. My only living relation then was my Uncle Andrew, who had recently returned from Australia and bought Crabtree Manor.

POIROT: What type of relationship did you have with your uncle?

VIOLET: He was exceedingly kind...took me to live with him and treated me like I was his own daughter. Crabtree Manor, in spite of its name, is really only an old farmhouse.

Farming was in my uncle's blood, and he was intensely interested in various modern farming experiments. Although kind to me, he had certain peculiar and deeply rooted ideas as to the upbringing of women. A man of little or no education, though possessing remarkable shrewdness, he placed little value on what he called "book knowledge." He was especially opposed to the education of women. In his opinion, girls should learn housework and dairy work, be useful about the home, and have as little to do with book learning as possible. He proposed to bring me up this way, to my bitter disappointment and annoyance.

POIROT: What did you do?

VIOLET: I rebelled frankly. I knew that I possessed a good brain and had absolutely no talent for domestic duties. My uncle and I had many bitter arguments on the subject, for though much attached to each other, we were both strong-willed.

POIROT: Did you pursue an education?

VIOLET: I was lucky enough to win a scholarship, and up to a certain point, was successful in getting my own way. The crisis arose when I decided to go to Girton College. I had a little money of my own, left to me by my mother, and I was quite determined to make the best use of the gifts God had given me.

POIROT: When did things come to a head in your relationship?

VIOLET: I had one long, final argument with my uncle. He put the facts plainly before me. He had no other relations, and he intended that I should be the sole heiress. As I have told you, he was a very rich man. He said if I persisted in these "new-fangled notions" of mine, I need look for nothing from him. I remained polite, but firm. I told him I would always be deeply attached to him, but I must lead my own life. He said, "You fancy your brains, my girl. I've no book learning, but for all that, I'll pit mine against yours any day. We'll see what we shall see." We parted on that note.

POIROT: How long ago was that?

VIOLET: That was nine years ago. I have stayed with him for a weekend occasionally, and we were perfectly amicable, though his views remained unaltered. He never referred to my having graduated, nor to my degree. For the last three years, his health had been failing, and a month ago he died.

POIROT: Pray tell me...what is the purpose of your visit?

VIOLET: My uncle left a most extraordinary will. By its terms, Crabtree Manor and its contents are to be at my disposal for a year from his death "during which time my clever niece may prove her wits," were his actual words. At the end of that period, he says, "my wits having proved better than hers," the house and all my uncle's large fortune will pass to various charitable institutions.

POIROT: That is a little hard on you, mademoiselle, seeing that you were Mr. Marsh's only blood relation.

VIOLET: I do not look at it in that way. Uncle Andrew warned me fairly, and I chose my own path. Since I would not fall in with his wishes, he was at perfect liberty to leave his money to whomever he pleased.

POIROT: Was the will drawn up by a lawyer?

VIOLET: No. It was written on a printed form and witnessed by the Bakers, a couple who lives in the house and works for my uncle.

POIROT: Might there be a possibility of contesting such a will?

VIOLET: I would not even attempt to do such a thing.

POIROT: You regard it, then, as a sporting challenge on the part of your uncle?

VIOLET: That is exactly how I look upon it.

POIROT: It bears that interpretation, certainly. So somewhere in this rambling, old manor house, your uncle has concealed either a sum of money or possibly a second will and has given you a year in which to exercise your ingenuity to find it?

VIOLET: Exactly, Monsieur Poirot. And I am paying you the compliment of assuming that your ingenuity will be greater than mine.

POIROT: [Eh bien], that is very charming of you! My grey cells are at your disposal. You have made no search yourself? [*or "Well"*]

VIOLET: Only a cursory one, but I have too much respect for my uncle's abilities to think that the task will be an easy one.

POIROT: Do you have the will or a copy of it with you? (*Miss Marsh hands Poirot the will. Scans the will, nodding to himself.*) Made three years ago. Dated March 25th, and the time is given also, 11 a.m. That is very suggestive. It narrows the field of search. Assuredly, there is another will we have to seek. A will made even half-an-hour later would contest this. [Eh bien], mademoiselle, it is a problem charming and ingenious that you have presented to me here. I shall have all the pleasure in the world solving it for you. Granted your uncle was a man of ability, but his grey cells cannot have been of the quality of Hercule Poirot's! [*or "Well"*]

HASTINGS: (*To Poirot, aside.*) Really, your vanity is blatant!

POIROT: (*Ignores Hastings. To Violet.*) Fortunately, I have nothing on hand at the moment. Hastings and I will go down to Crabtree Manor tonight. The man and wife who worked for your uncle are still there, I presume?

VIOLET: Yes, their name is Baker.

[END OF FREEVIEW]