

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S



The Chocolate Box

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Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie

BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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The Chocolate Box

MURDER-MYSTERY. Adapted from the short story by Agatha Christie. Famed detective Hercule Poirot discretely recounts to his friend Arthur Hastings the shocking story of the one and only time he failed to solve a murder. Years ago while on vacation, Poirot is visited by Virginie Mesnard, who asks him to investigate the death of Paul Déroulard, a politician who mysteriously died the night before he was to be promoted to government minister. Clues include two boxes of chocolates with mismatched lids, poisonous eye drops, and a missing bottle of nitroglycerin. After recounting the “miserable affair,” Poirot insists that if he should ever grow too conceited, Hastings need only say two words “chocolate box” as a humble reminder. Easy to stage.

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes.

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 famed Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. Poirot later became one of Christie's most famous characters. "The Chocolate Box" was first published in *The Sketch* in May 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

(3 M, 3 F, 2 flexible)

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.

MADAME DÉROULARD: Pious, elderly mother of Paul Déroulard, a promising politician who mysteriously died the night before he was to be named a government minister; an imposing, aristocratic woman who is in failing health; female.

MADAMOISELLE VIRGINIE MESNARD: Paul Déroulard's late wife's cousin who asks Poirot to investigate Paul Déroulard's mysterious death; wears a veil; female.

FRANÇOIS: Paul Déroulard's loyal butler; male.

FÉLICE: Maid employed by Paul Déroulard; female.

DOCTOR: Paul Déroulard's doctor who claims Déroulard died of an apoplexy; flexible.

CHEMIST: Pharmacist who prepared a prescription of nitroglycerine tablets for one of Paul Déroulard's guests; flexible.

NOTE: For flexible roles, change the script accordingly.

Setting

Poirot's study, London, 1925. Various locations in Brussels, Belgium, early 1900s.

Sets

Locations are indicated by simple set pieces that can be moved on and off quickly.

Poirot's study, London, 1925. There is a fireplace, two armchairs, and a coffee table. A duster is hanging on a nail near the fireplace.

Hotel lobby. There is a small table and two chairs or two armchairs. A backdrop of a hotel lobby may be used.

Study, Avenue Louise. There are two armchairs. Other set pieces and/or a backdrop of a study may be used.

Doctor's office. There are two armchairs. Other set pieces and/or a backdrop of a medical office may be used.

Chemist's shop. There is a small counter. Other set pieces like shelves filled with medicine bottles, etc. and/or a backdrop of a chemist's shop may be used.

Madame Déroulard's suite, Avenue Louise. There are two armchairs. Other set pieces may be used and/or a backdrop bedroom suite may be used.

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Props

Pink china cup

Hot toddy glass

Log for fireplace

Veil, for Virginie Mesnard

Servants' bell (opt.)

Blue chocolate box with a pink lid (empty)

Pink chocolate box with a blue lid (full of chocolates)

Nitroglycerin tablets (candy)

Sheet of paper or stationery

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Special Effects

Sound of howling wind

Sound of rain beating against the windows in gusts

"Fire" in fireplace (lighting effect)

Lighting that indicates a flashback scene

Servants' bell (or may be a prop, if desired)

*"See here, my friend,
you have, I know,
kept a record of my little successes.
You shall add one more story
to the collection...
the story of a failure!"*

—Hercule Poirot

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(AT RISE: Poirot's study, evening. The sound of howling wind and rain beating against the windows in great gusts is heard. Poirot and Hastings are seated in armchairs near the fireplace with their legs stretched out. Between them is a coffee table. Hastings is drinking a hot toddy. Poirot is sipping hot chocolate out of a pink china cup.)

HASTINGS: (To Poirot.) It's a wild night out there. The wind is howling malevolently. A perfect night for a carefully brewed hot toddy. (Takes a sip of his hot toddy. Indicating Poirot's hot chocolate.) I would not drink that thick brown mess for a hundred pounds!

(Poirot takes a sip of his hot chocolate.)

POIROT: (Content, sighs.) [Quelle belle vie!] [or "What a beautiful life!"]

HASTINGS: Yes, it's a good old world. Here I am with a job, and a good job, too! And here you are...famous —

POIROT: (Protesting.) Oh, [mon ami]! [or "my friend"]

HASTINGS: But you are. And rightly so! When I think back on your long line of successes, I am positively amazed. I don't believe you know what failure is.

POIROT: He would be a droll kind of original who could say that.

HASTINGS: No, but seriously, have you ever failed?

POIROT: Innumerable times, my friend. [La bonne chance], it cannot always be on your side. I have been called in too late. Very often, another working toward the same goal has arrived there first. Twice, have I been stricken down with illness just as I was on the point of success. One must take the downs with the ups, my friend. [or "good luck"]

HASTINGS: I didn't quite mean that. I meant, have you ever failed to solve a case due to your own fault?

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POIROT: Ah, I comprehend! You ask if I have ever made a complete "prize ass" of myself, as you say in England?

HASTINGS: Yes.

POIROT: (*A slow, reflective smile.*) Once, my friend. Yes, once I made a fool of myself.

HASTINGS: (*Smiles.*) Once?

POIROT: (*Sits up in his chair.*) See here, my friend, you have, I know, kept a record of my little successes. You shall add one more story to the collection...the story of my failure!

HASTINGS: (*Excited.*) Oh?

(Poirot leans forward and places a log on the fire. Poirot carefully wipes his hands on a little duster hanging on a nail by the fireplace and leans back in his chair to commence his story.)

POIROT: (*Sighs.*) That of which I tell you took place in Belgium many years ago. It was at the time of the terrible struggle in France between church and state. Monsieur Paul Déroulard was a French deputy of note. It was an open secret that the position of Minister awaited him. He was among the bitterest of the anti-Catholic party, and it was certain that on his accession to power, he would have to face violent opposition.

HASTINGS: What type of fellow was he?

POIROT: He was in many ways a peculiar man. Though he neither drank nor smoked, he was nevertheless not so scrupulous in other ways. [*C'était des femmes—toujours des femmes!*] You comprehend, Hastings? [*or "Women...it was always the women."*]

HASTINGS: (*Nods.*) Ah, a ladies' man.

POIROT: He had married some years earlier a young lady from Brussels who had provided him a substantial amount of money. Undoubtedly, the money was useful to him in his career, as his family was not rich. And he was entitled to call himself [Monsieur le Baron] if he chose. There were no children, and his wife died after two years...the result of a

fall down the stairs. Among the property that she bequeathed to him was a house on the Avenue Louise in Brussels. It was in this house that his sudden death took place, the event coinciding with the resignation of the Minister whose position he was to inherit. [*or "a baron"*]

HASTINGS: How did he die?

POIROT: His death had taken place quite suddenly in the evening after dinner and was attributed to heart failure. At that time, [*mon ami*], I was, as you know, a member of the Belgian detective force. The death of Monsieur Paul Déroulard was not particularly interesting to me. I am, as you know, [*bon catholique*], and his demise seemed to me fortunate. [*or "a good Catholic"*]

HASTINGS: Why did you take the case, then?

POIROT: It was some three days afterward, when my vacation had just begun, that I received a visitor at my apartment...Mademoiselle Virginie Mesnard, a lady heavily veiled but evidently quite young. And I perceived at once that she was a [*jeune fille tout à fait comme il faut*]... [*Or "a respectable young woman."*]

(Lights down on Poirot's study, London. Note: Special lighting should indicate to the audience that the following is a flashback. Flashback lights up on a hotel lobby in Brussels. Poirot is seated at a table or there are two armchairs. Mademoiselle Virginie Mesnard enters.)

VIRGINIE: *(In a low, sweet voice.)* You are Monsieur Hercule Poirot? *(Poirot nods.)* Of the detective service?

POIROT: *(Nods. Gestures for her to join him.)* Be seated, I pray of you, mademoiselle.

(Virginie sits and draws aside her veil. She has been crying and looks anxious.)

VIRGINIE: Monsieur, I understand that you are on vacation. Therefore, you will be free to take up a private case. You understand that I do not wish to call in the police.

POIROT: (*Shakes his head no.*) I fear what you ask is impossible, mademoiselle. Even though I am on vacation, I am still of the police.

VIRGINIE: (*Leans forward.*) [*Ecoutez, monsieur.*]. All that I ask of you is to investigate. The result of your investigations...you are at perfect liberty to report to the police. If what I believe to be true is true, we shall need the full force of the law. [*or "Listen, sir."*]

POIROT: That places a somewhat different complexion on the matter, and I place myself at your service without more ado.

VIRGINIE: I thank you, monsieur. (*Slight pause.*) It is the death of Monsieur Paul Déroulard that I ask you to investigate.

POIROT: (*Surprised.*) Pardon?

VIRGINIE: Monsieur, I have nothing to go upon...nothing but my woman's instinct. But I am convinced—convinced, I tell you—that Monsieur Déroulard did not die a natural death!

POIROT: But, surely, the doctors—

VIRGINIE: Doctors can be mistaken. He was so robust, so strong. Ah, Monsieur Poirot, I beseech of you to help me!

POIROT: I will help you, mademoiselle. I feel almost sure that your fears are unfounded, but we will see. First, I will ask you to describe to me the residents of the house.

VIRGINIE: There are the domestics, of course: Jeannette, Félice, and Denise the cook. Denise has been there many years. The others are simple country girls. Also, there is François, but he, too, is an old servant. Then there is Monsieur Déroulard's mother and myself. My name is Virginie Mesnard. I am a poor cousin of the late Madame Déroulard, Monsieur Paul's wife, and I have been a member of their residence for more than three years. Also, there were two guests staying at the house.

POIROT: And they were...?

VIRGINIE: Monsieur de Saint Alard, a neighbor of Monsieur Déroulard's in France. Also, an English friend, Mr. John Wilson.

POIROT: Are they still staying there?

VIRGINIE: Mr. Wilson, yes, but Monsieur de Saint Alard departed yesterday.

POIROT: And what is your plan, Mademoiselle Mesnard?

VIRGINIE: If you will present yourself at the house in half an hour's time, I will have arranged some story to account for your presence. I will introduce you as someone connected with journalism in some way. I shall say you have come from Paris and that you have brought a card of introduction from Monsieur de Saint Alard. Madame Déroulard is very feeble in health and will pay little attention to details.

(Flashback lights down on the scene at the hotel. Lights up on Poirot's study, London.)

POIROT: *(To Hastings, continuing.)* On mademoiselle's ingenious pretext, I was admitted to the house, and after a brief interview with the dead deputy's mother, Madame Déroulard, who was a wonderfully imposing and aristocratic figure, though obviously in failing health, I left the premises. I wonder, my friend, whether you can imagine the difficulties of my task?

HASTINGS: I am sure I cannot.

POIROT: Here was a man whose death had taken place three days previously. If there had been foul play, only one possibility was likely...poison! I had no chance of seeing the body, and there was no possibility of examining or analyzing any medium in which the poison could have been administered.

HASTINGS: Were there any clues?

POIROT: There were no clues, false or otherwise, to consider! Had the man been poisoned? Had he died a natural death? I, Hercule Poirot, with nothing to help me, had to find out!

HASTINGS: Who did you interview?

POIROT: First, I interviewed the domestics, and with their aid, I reconstructed the evening. I paid especial notice to the food at dinner and the method of serving it. The soup had been served by Monsieur Déroulard himself from a tureen. Next, a dish of cutlets and then a chicken. Finally, a compote of fruits. And all had been placed on the table and served by Monsieur himself. The coffee was brought in a big pot to the dinner table. Nothing there, [mon ami] since it is impossible to poison one without poisoning all!

HASTINGS: What happened after dinner?

POIROT: Madame Déroulard retired to her room and Mademoiselle Virginie accompanied her. The three men adjourned to Monsieur Déroulard's study. There, they chatted amicably for some time, when suddenly, without any warning, Monsieur Déroulard fell to the ground. Monsieur de Saint Alard rushed out and told François to fetch the doctor immediately. The doctor said it was without doubt an apoplexy. When the doctor arrived, the patient was past help. Mr. John Wilson, to whom I was presented by Mademoiselle Virginie, was what was known in those days as a regular John Bull Englishman...middle-aged and burly. His account, delivered in a very British accent, was substantially the same. (*In his "best" English accent.*) "Déroulard went very red in the face, and down he fell." There was nothing further to be found out there.

HASTINGS: Did you discover any clues at the scene of the tragedy?

POIROT: I went to the study and was left alone at my own request. So far, there was nothing to support Mademoiselle Mesnard's theory. I could not but believe that it was a delusion on her part. Evidently, she had entertained a romantic passion for the dead man, which had not permitted her to take a normal view of the case. Nevertheless, I searched the study with meticulous care. After a thorough search, I flung myself down in a chair with

a gesture of despair: "There is not a clue anywhere! Everything is perfectly normal!" As I said these words, my eyes fell on a large box of chocolates on a table nearby, and my heart gave a leap. It might not be a clue to Monsieur Déroulard's death, but here at least was something that was not normal. I lifted the lid. The box was full, untouched. Not a chocolate was missing, but that only made the peculiarity that had caught my eye more striking.

HASTINGS: What is so unusual about a full box of chocolates?

POIROT: While the box itself was pink, the lid was blue. Now, one often sees a blue ribbon on a pink box, and vice versa, but a box of one color, and a lid of another...no, decidedly... [*ça ne se voit jamais!*] [*or "it's never done!"*]

HASTINGS: I do not see how a pink box with a blue lid could be of much help to you.

POIROT: I, too, did not yet see that this little incident was of any use to me, yet I was determined to investigate it as being out of the ordinary...

(Lights down on Poirot's study, London. Flashback lights up on the study at Avenue Louise. Poirot rings the servants' bell. François enters.)

FRANÇOIS: You rang?

POIROT: François, was your late master fond of sweets?

FRANÇOIS: *(Melancholy smile.)* Passionately fond of them, monsieur. He would always have a box of chocolates in the house. He did not drink wine of any kind, you see.

POIROT: Yet this box has not been touched? *(Lifts the blue lid of the pink box of chocolates to show François that no chocolates are missing from the box.)*

FRANÇOIS: Pardon, monsieur, but that was a new box purchased on the day of his death, the other being nearly finished.

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POIROT: Then the other box was finished on the day of his death?

FRANÇOIS: Yes, monsieur, I found it empty in the morning and threw it away.

POIROT: Did Monsieur Déroulard eat sweets at all hours of the day?

FRANÇOIS: Usually after dinner, monsieur.

POIROT: François, can you be discreet?

FRANÇOIS: If there is need, monsieur.

POIROT: [Bon]! Know, then, that I am of the police. Can you find me that other box? [*or, "Good!"*]

FRANÇOIS: Without doubt, monsieur. It will be in the dustbin.

(François exits. Pause. François re-enters, carrying a dusty box of chocolates. Note: The box is the same as the box Poirot is holding, except this box is blue, the lid is pink, and it is empty.)

POIROT: This box is blue and the lid is pink... *(Opens the lid of the box.)* ...and it is empty. The lids have been switched. Thank you, François. I urge you to be discreet on this matter.

(Flashback lights down on the study at Avenue Louise. Lights up on Poirot's study, London.)

POIROT: *(To Hastings, continuing.)* Next, I called upon the doctor who had attended Monsieur Déroulard. With him, I had a difficult task. He entrenched himself behind a wall of learned phraseology, but I fancied that he was not quite as sure about the case as he would like to be...

(Lights down on Poirot's study, London. Flashback lights up on the Doctor's office. Poirot has just finished updating the Doctor on the case.)

DOCTOR: *(To Poirot.)* There have been many curious occurrences of this kind. A sudden fit of anger, a violent emotion after a heavy dinner...then, with an excess of rage, the blood flies to the head, and pst! There you are!

POIROT: But Monsieur Déroulard had exhibited no violent emotion that night.

DOCTOR: No? I thought he had a stormy altercation with Monsieur de Saint Alard.

POIROT: Why should he?

DOCTOR: *(Shrugs.)* [C'est evident]! Was not Monsieur de Saint Alard a Catholic of the most fanatical? Their friendship was being ruined by this question of church and state. Not a day passed without discussion. To Monsieur de Saint Alard, Déroulard appeared almost as an antichrist. [*or "It's obvious"*]

POIROT: One more question, Doctor: Would it be possible to introduce a fatal dose of poison into a chocolate?

DOCTOR: *(Ponders this.)* It would be possible, I suppose. Pure prussic acid would work if there was no chance of evaporation. And a tiny globule of anything might be swallowed unnoticed. But it does not seem a very likely supposition. A chocolate full of morphine or strychnine... *(Makes a wry face.)* You comprehend, Monsieur Poirot...one bite would be enough! The unwary one would not stand upon ceremony.

POIROT: Thank you, [Monsieur le Docteur]. [*or "Doctor"*]

(Flashback lights down on Doctor's office. Lights up on Poirot's study, London.)

POIROT: *(To Hastings, continuing.)* Next, I made inquiries of the chemists, especially those in the neighborhood of Avenue Louise. Only in one case did I hear of any poison having been supplied to the house in question...eye drops.

HASTINGS: *(Surprised.)* Eye drops?

POIROT: Eye drops of atropine sulphate for Madame Déroulard. Atropine is a potent poison, and for a moment, I was elated. But the symptoms of atropine poisoning are closely allied to those of ptomaine and bear no resemblance to those I was studying. Besides, the prescription was an old one. Madame Déroulard had suffered from cataracts in both eyes for many years. I was turning away discouraged when the chemist's voice called me back. "Un moment, Monsieur Poirot. I remember...the girl who brought that prescription, she said something about having to go to the English chemist. You might try there." I did, and I got the information I wanted. On the day before Monsieur Déroulard's death, they had made up a prescription for Mr. John Wilson...little tablets of nitroglycerine. I asked if I might see some. The Chemist showed me them, and my heart beat faster...for the tiny tablets were of chocolate...

(Lights down on Poirot's study, London. Flashback lights up on the Chemist's shop. Poirot is questioning the Chemist.)

POIROT: *(To Chemist, indicating nitroglycerin tablets.)* Is it a poison?

CHEMIST: No, monsieur.

POIROT: Can you describe to me its effect?

CHEMIST: It lowers blood pressure. It is given for some forms of heart trouble...angina pectoris, for instance. It relieves the arterial tension. In arteriosclerosis—

POIROT: *(Impatient.)* This rigmarole says nothing to me! Does it cause the face to flush?

CHEMIST: Certainly, it does.

POIROT: And supposing I ate ten or 20 of your little tablets, what then?

CHEMIST: I should not advise you to attempt it.

POIROT: And yet you say it is not poison?

CHEMIST: There are many things not called "poison" that can kill a man...

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(Flashback lights down on Chemist's shop. Lights up on Poirot's study, London.)

POIROT: *(To Hastings, continuing.)* I left the shop elated. At last, things had begun to progress! I now knew that John Wilson had the means for the crime, but what about the motive?

[END OF FREEVIEW]