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Closed Casket

The New Hercule Poirot Mystery

Written by Sophie Hannah

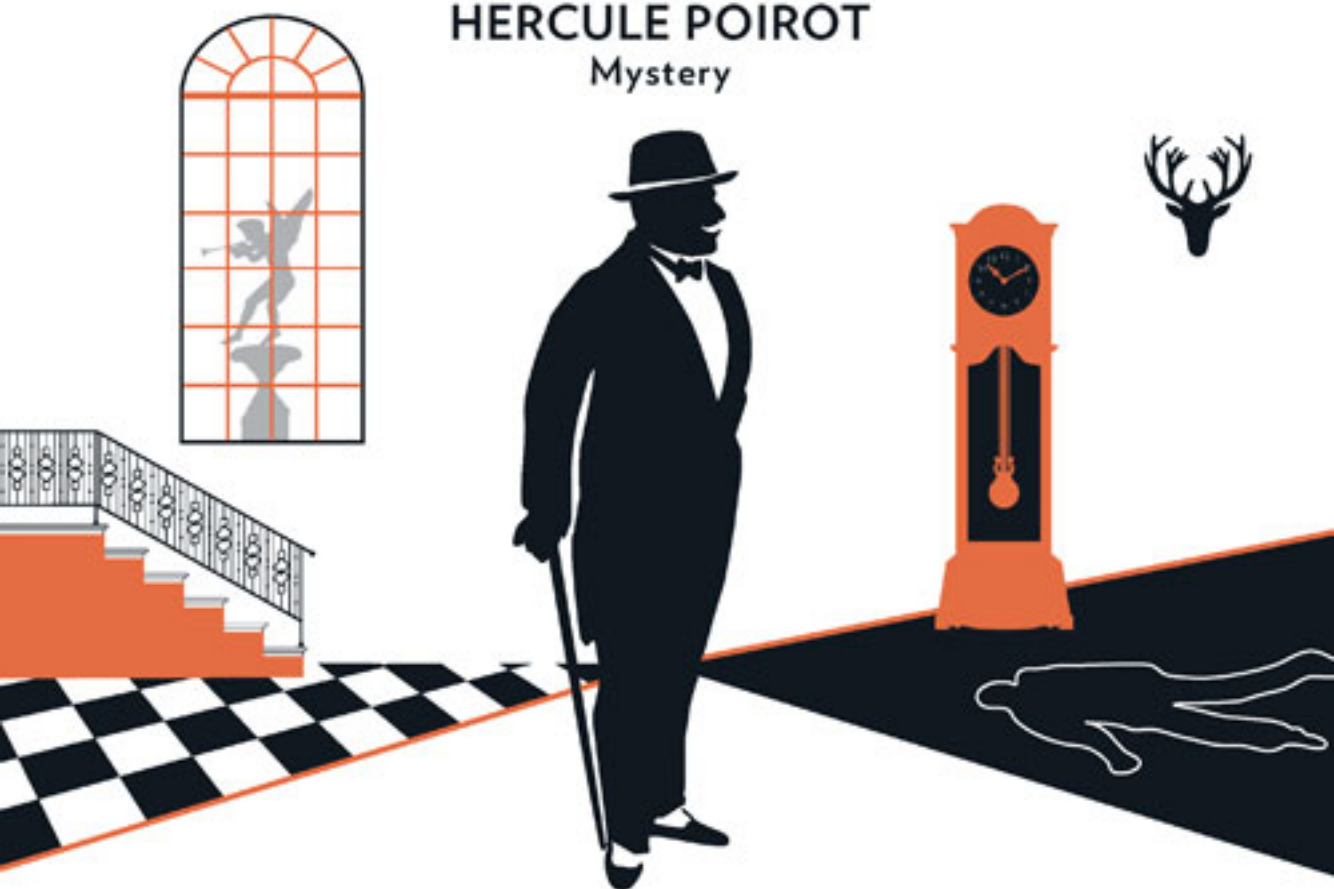
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SOPHIE HANNAH

The Brand New
HERCULE POIROT
Mystery



CLOSED CASKET

Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie[®]

Closed Casket

THE NEW HERCULE POIROT MYSTERY

SOPHIE HANNAH



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Closed Casket

from Chapter One

...

'Now, about my will . . .'

She returned to her chair by the window and arranged herself in it. 'I want you to make a new one for me.'

Gathercole was surprised. According to the terms of Lady Playford's existing will, her substantial estate was to be divided equally, upon her death, between her two surviving children: her daughter Claudia and her son Harry, the sixth Viscount Playford of Clonakilty. There had been a third child, Nicholas, but he had died young.

'I want to leave everything to my secretary, Joseph Scotcher,' announced the clear-as-a-bell voice.

Gathercole sat forward in his chair. It was pointless to try to push the unwelcome words away. He had heard them, and could not pretend otherwise.

'I am in my right mind and entirely serious, Michael. Joseph Scotcher is to inherit everything.'

'But...what about your children? I must appeal to you to think very carefully before—'

Lady Playford cut him off. 'Do you imagine the idea first occurred to me as you knocked on the door a few minutes ago? Or is it more likely that I have been ruminating on this for months? The careful thought you urge upon me has taken place, I assure you. Now: are you going to draw up my new will or must I call for Mr Rolfe?'

'Do Harry and Claudia know your intentions?' Gathercole asked.

'No. At present the only people who know are you and me.'

'Has there been a conflict within the family of which I am unaware?'

'Not at all!' Lady Playford smiled. 'Harry, Claudia and I are the best of friends - at least until I announce the changes to my will at dinner tonight.'

'I . . . but . . . you have known Joseph Scotcher a mere six years.'

'There is no need to tell me what I already know, Michael.'

'Whereas your children . . . Additionally, my understanding was that Joseph Scotcher . . .'
'*Speak, dear man.*'

'Is Scotcher not seriously ill?' Silently, Gathercole added: *Do you no longer believe he will die before you?*

Athelinda Playford was not young but she was full of vitality. It was hard to believe that anyone who relished life as she did might be deprived of it.

'Indeed, Joseph is very sick,' she said. 'He grows weaker by the day. He tells me his doctors have said he has only weeks, now, to live.'

'But . . . then I'm afraid I'm quite baffled,' said Gathercole. 'You wish to make a new will in favour of a man you know won't be around to make use of his inheritance.'

'Nothing is ever known for certain in this world, Michael.'

'I must ask you something,' said Gathercole, in whom a painful anxiety had started to grow.

'Forgive the impertinence. Do you have any reason to believe that you too will die imminently?'

'Me?' Lady Playford laughed. 'I'm strong as an ox. I expect to chug on for years.'

‘Then Scotcher will inherit nothing on your demise, being long dead himself, and the new will you are asking me to arrange will achieve nothing but to create discord between you and your children.’

‘On the contrary: my new will might cause *something wonderful* to happen.’ She said this with relish.

Gathercole sighed. ‘I’m afraid to say I’m still baffled.’

‘Of course you are,’ said Athelinda Playford. ‘I knew you would be.’

Chapter Two

Conceal and reveal: how appropriate that those two words should rhyme. They sound like opposites and yet, as all good storytellers know, much can be revealed by the tiniest attempts at concealment, and new revelations often hide as much as they make plain. All of which is my clumsy way of introducing myself as the narrator of this story. Everything you have learned so far – about Michael Gathercole’s meeting with Lady Athelinda Playford – has been revealed to you by me, yet I started to tell the tale without making anybody aware of my presence.

My name is Edward Catchpool, and I am a detective with London’s Scotland Yard. The extraordinary events that I have barely begun to describe did not take place in London, but in Clonakilty, County Cork, in the Irish Free State. It was on 14 October 1929 that Michael Gathercole and Lady Playford met in her study at Lillieoak, and it was on that same day, and only an hour after that meeting commenced, that I arrived at Lillieoak after a long journey from England.

Six weeks earlier, I had received a puzzling letter from Lady Athelinda Playford, inviting me to spend a week as a guest at her country estate. The various delights of hunting, shooting and fishing were offered to me – none of which I had done before and nor was I keen to try them, though my prospective host wasn’t to know that – but what was missing from the invitation was any explanation of why my presence was desired.

I put the letter down on the dining room table at my lodging house and considered what to do. I thought about Athelinda Playford – writer of detective stories, probably the famous author of children’s books that I could think of – and then I thought about me: a bachelor, a policeman, no wife and therefore no children to whom I might read books . . .

No, Lady Playford’s world and mine need never overlap, I decided – and yet she had sent me this letter, which meant that I had to do something about it.

Did I want to go? Not greatly, no – and that meant that I probably would. Human beings, I have noticed, like to follow patterns, and I am no exception. Since so much of what I do in my daily life is not anything I would ever undertake by choice, I tend to assume that if something crops up that I would prefer not to do, that means I will certainly do it.

Some days later, I wrote to Lady Playford and enthusiastically accepted her invitation. I suspected she wished to pick my brains and use whatever she extracted in a future book or books. Maybe she had finally decided to find out a little more about how the police operated. As a child, I had read one or two of her stories and been flabbergasted to discover that senior policemen were such nincompoops, incapable of solving even the simplest mystery without the help of a group of conceited, loud-mouthed ten-year-olds. My curiosity on this point was, in fact, the beginning of my fascination with the police force – an interest that led directly to my choice of career. Strangely, it had not occurred to me before that I had Athelinda Playford to thank for this.

During the course of my journey to Lillieoak, I had read another of her novels, to refresh my memory, and found that my youthful judgement had been accurate: the finale was very much a case of Sergeant Halfwit and Inspector Imbecile getting a thorough ticking-off from precocious Shrimp Seddon for being stumped by a perfectly obvious trail of clues that even Shrimp's fat, long-haired dog, Anita, had managed to interpret correctly.

The sun was about to set when I arrived at five o'clock in the afternoon, but it was still light enough for me to observe my rather spectacular surroundings. As I stood in front of Lady Playford's grand Palladian mansion on the banks of the Argideen river in Clonakilty – with formal gardens behind me, fields to the left and what looked like the edge of a forest on my right – I was aware of endless space – the uninterrupted blues and greens of the natural world. I had known before setting off from London that the Lillieoak estate was eight hundred acres, but it was only now that I understood what that meant: no shared margins of your own world and that of anyone else if you did not desire it; nothing and nobody pressing in on you or hovering nearby the way they did in the city. It was no wonder, really, that Lady Playford knew nothing of the way policemen conducted themselves.

As I breathed in the freshest air I had ever inhaled, I found myself hoping I was right about the reason I had been invited here. Given the opportunity, I thought, I would happily suggest that a little realism would significantly improve Lady Playford's books. Perhaps Shrimp Seddon and her gang, in the next one, could work in cooperation with a more competent police force . . .

Lillieoak's front door opened. A butler peered out at me. He was of medium height and build, with thinning grey hair and lots of creases and lines around his eyes, but nowhere else. The effect was of an old man's eyes inserted into a much younger man's face.

The butler's expression was odder still. It suggested that he needed to impart vital information in order to protect me from something unfortunate, but could not do so, for it was a matter of the utmost delicacy.

I waited for him to introduce himself or invite me into the house. He did neither. Eventually I said, 'My name is Edward Catchpool. I have just arrived from England. I believe Lady Playford is expecting me.'

My suitcases were by my feet. He looked at them, then looked over his shoulder; he repeated this sequence twice. There was no verbal accompaniment to any of it.

Eventually, he said, 'I will have your belongings taken to your room, sir.'

'Thank you.' I frowned. This really was most peculiar – more so than I can describe, I fear.

Though the butler's statement was perfectly ordinary, he conveyed a sense of so much more left unsaid – an air of 'In the circumstances, this is, I am afraid, the most I can divulge.'

'Was there something else?' I asked.

The face tightened. 'Another of Lady Playford's . . . guests awaits you in the drawing room, sir.'

'Another?' I had assumed I was to be the only one.

My question appeared to repel him. I failed to see the point of contention, and was considering allowing my impatience to show when I heard a door opening inside the house, and a voice I recognized. 'Catchpool! *Mon cher ami!*'

'Poirot?' I called out. To the butler I said, 'Is that Hercule Poirot?' I pushed open the door and walked into the house, tired of waiting to be invited in out of the cold. I saw an elaborately tiled floor of the sort you might see in a palace, a grand wooden staircase, too many doors and corridors for a newcomer to take in, a grandfather clock, the mounted head of a deer on one wall. The poor creature looked as if it was smiling, and I smiled back at it.

Despite being dead and detached from its body, the deer's head was more welcoming than the butler.

'Catchpool!' Again came the voice.

'Look here, is Hercule Poirot in this house?' I asked more insistently.

This time the butler replied with a reluctant nod, and moments later the Belgian moved into view at a pace that, for him, was fast. I could not help chuckling at the egg-shaped head and the shiny shoes, both so familiar, and of course the unmistakable moustaches...