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The Hunter's Lodge Case

Agatha Christie (1890-1976)

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An engraving-style sketch for The Hunter’s Lodge Case, The Hunter’s Lodge Case.

“After all,” murmured Poirot, “it is possible that I shall not die this time.”

Coming from a convalescent influenza patient, I hailed the remark as showing a beneficial optimism. I myself had been the first sufferer from the disease. Poirot in his turn had gone down. He was now sitting up in bed, propped up with pillows.

“Yes, yes,” my little friend continued. “Once more shall I be myself again, the great Hercule Poirot, the terror of evildoers! Figure to yourself, *mon ami*, that I have a little paragraph to myself in *Society Gossip*. But yes! Here it is!

"'Go it, criminals—all out! Hercule Poirot,—and believe me, girls, he's some Hercules!—our own pet society detective can't get a grip on you. 'Cause why? 'Cause he's got *la grippe* himself!'"

I laughed.

"Good for you, Poirot. You are becoming quite a public character. And fortunately you haven't missed anything of particular interest during this time."

"That is true. The few cases I have had to decline did not fill me with any regret."

Our landlady stuck her head in at the door.

"There's a gentleman downstairs. Says he must see M. Poirot or you, Captain. Seeing as he was in a great to-do,—and with all that quite the gentleman,—I brought up 'is card."

She handed me the bit of pasteboard. "'Hon. Roger Havering,'" I read.

Poirot motioned with his head toward the bookcase, and I obediently pulled forth the "Who's Who." Poirot took it from me and scanned the pages rapidly.

"Second son of fifth Baron Windsor. Married 1913 Zoe, fourth daughter of William Crabb."

"H'm," I said. "I rather fancy that's the girl who used to act at the Frivolity—only she called herself Zoe Carrisbrook. I remember she married some young man about town just before the war."

"Would it interest you, Hastings, to go down and hear what our visitor's particular trouble is? Make him all my excuses."

Roger Havering was a man of about forty, well set up and of smart appearance.

His face, however, was haggard, and he was evidently laboring under great agitation.

"Captain Hastings? You are M. Poirot's partner, I understand. It is imperative that he should come with me to Derbyshire today."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," I replied. "Poirot is ill in bed—influenza."

His face fell.

"Dear me, that is a great blow to me."

"The matter on which you want to consult him is serious?"

"My God, yes! My uncle, the best friend I have in the world, was foully murdered last night."

"Here in London?"

"No, in Derbyshire. I was in town and received a telegram from my wife this morning. Immediately upon its receipt I determined to come

round and beg M. Poirot to undertake the case."

"If you will excuse me a minute," I said, struck by a sudden idea.

I rushed upstairs, and in few brief words acquainted Poirot with the situation. He took any further words out of my mouth.

"I see—I see. You want to go yourself, is it not so? Well, why not? You should know my methods by now. All I ask is that you should report to me fully every day, and follow implicitly any instructions I may wire you."

To this I willingly agreed, and an hour later I was sitting opposite Mr. Havering in a first-class carriage on the Midland Railway, speeding rapidly away from London.

"To begin with, Captain Hastings, you must understand that Hunter's Lodge, where we are going, and where the tragedy took place, is only a small shooting-box in the heart of the Derbyshire moors. Our real home is near Newmarket, and we usually rent a flat in town for the season. Hunter's Lodge is looked after by a housekeeper who is quite capable of doing all we need when we run down for an occasional week-end. Of course, during the shooting season, we take down some of our own servants from Newmarket.

"My uncle, Mr. Harrington Pace (as you may know, my mother was a Miss Pace of New York), has for the last three years made his home with us. He never got on well with my father, or my elder brother, and I suspect that my being somewhat of a prodigal son myself rather increased than diminished his affection toward me. Of course, I am a poor man, and my uncle was a rich one—in other words, he paid the piper! But though exacting in many ways, he was not really hard to get on with, and we all three lived very harmoniously together.

"Two days ago my uncle, rather wearied with some recent gayeties of ours in town, suggested that we should run down to Derbyshire for a day or two. My wife telegraphed to Mrs. Middleton, the housekeeper, and we went down that same afternoon. Yesterday evening I was forced to return to town, but my wife and my uncle remained on. This morning I received this telegram."

He handed it over to me, and I read:

> Come at once. Uncle Harrington murdered last night. Bring good detective if you can, but do come.
>
> Zoe.

"Then as yet you know no details?"

"No, I suppose it will be in the evening papers. Without doubt the police are in charge."

It was about three o'clock when we arrived at the little station of Elmer's Dale. From there a five-mile drive brought us to a small gray stone building in the midst of the rugged moors.

"A lonely place," I observed.

Havering nodded.

"I shall try and get rid of it. I could never live here again."

We unlatched the gate and were walking up the narrow path to the oak door when a familiar figure emerged and came to meet us.

"Japp!" I ejaculated.

The Scotland Yard Inspector grinned at me in a friendly fashion before addressing my companion.

"Mr. Havering, I think? I've been sent down from London to take charge of this case, and I'd like a word with you, if I may, sir."

"My wife——"

"I've seen your good lady, sir—and the housekeeper. I won't keep you a moment, but I'm anxious to get back to the village now that I've seen all there is to see here."

"I know nothing as yet as to what—"

"Ex-actly," said Japp soothingly. "But there are just one or two little points I'd like your opinion about all the same. Captain Hastings, here, he knows me, and he'll go on up to the house and tell them you're coming."

I went on to the house. I rang the bell, as Japp had closed the door behind him. After some moments it was opened to me by a middle-aged woman in black.

"Mr. Havering will be here in a moment," I explained. "He has been detained by the Inspector. I have come down with him from London to look into the case. Perhaps you can tell me briefly what occurred last night?"

"Come inside, sir." She closed the door behind me, and we stood in the dimly lighted hall. "It was after dinner last night, sir, that the man came. He asked to see Mr. Pace, sir, and seeing that he spoke the same way, I thought it was an American gentleman friend of Mr. Pace's, and I showed him into the gun-room, and then went to tell Mr. Pace. He wouldn't give no name, which of course was a bit odd, now I come to think of it.

"I told Mr. Pace, and he seemed puzzled, like, but he said to the mistress: 'Excuse me, Zoe, while I just see what this fellow wants.' He went off to the gun-room, and I went back to the kitchen, but after a

while I heard loud voices, as if they were quarreling, and I came out into the hall. At the same time, the mistress she comes out too, and just then there was a shot and then a dreadful silence. We both ran to the gun-room door, but it was locked, and we had to go round to the window. It was open, and there inside was Mr. Pace, all shot and bleeding."

"What became of the man?"

"He must have got away through the window, sir, before we got to it."

"And then?"

"Mrs. Havering sent me to fetch the police. Five miles to walk, it was. They came back with me; and the constable, he stayed all night; and this morning the police gentleman from London arrived."

"What was this man like who called to see Mr. Pace?"

The housekeeper reflected.

"He had a black beard, sir, and was about middle-aged, and had on a light overcoat. Beyond the fact that he spoke like an American, I didn't notice much about him."

"I see. Now, I wonder if I can see Mrs. Havering?"

"She's upstairs, sir. Shall I tell her?"

"If you please. Tell her that Mr. Havering is outside with Inspector Japp, and that the gentleman he has brought back with him from London is anxious to speak to her as soon as possible."

"Very good, sir."

I was in a fever of impatience to get at all the facts. Japp had two or three hours start of me, and his anxiety to be gone made me keen to be close at his heels.

Mrs. Havering did not keep me waiting long. In a few minutes I heard a light step descending the stairs, and looked up to see a very handsome young woman coming toward me. She wore a flame-colored jumper, that set off the slender boyishness of her figure. On her dark head was a little hat of flame-colored leather. Even the present tragedy could not dim the vitality of her personality.

I introduced myself, and she nodded in quick comprehension.

"Of course I have often heard of you and your colleague, M. Poirot. You have done some wonderful things together, haven't you? It was very clever of my husband to get you so promptly. Now, will you ask me questions? That is the easiest way, isn't it, of getting to know all you want to about this dreadful affair?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Havering. Now, what time was it that this man arrived?"

"It must have been just before nine o'clock. We had finished dinner, and were sitting over our coffee and cigarettes."

"Your husband had already left for London?"

"Yes, he went up by the six-fifteen."

"Did he go by car to the station, or did he walk?"

"Our own car isn't down here. One came out from the garage in Elmer's Dale to fetch him in time for the train."

"Was Mr. Pace quite his usual self?"

"Absolutely—most normal in every way."

"Now, can you describe this visitor at all?"

"I'm afraid not. I didn't see him. Mrs. Middleton showed him straight into the gun-room and then came to tell my uncle."

"What did your uncle say?"

"He seemed rather annoyed, but went off at once. It was about five minutes later that I heard the sound of raised voices. I ran out into the hall, and almost collided with Mrs. Middleton. Then we heard the shot. The gun-room door was locked on the inside, and we had to go round the house to the window. Of course that took some time, and the murderer had been able to get well away. My poor uncle"—her voice faltered—"had been shot through the head. I saw at once that he was dead, and I sent Mrs. Middleton for the police straight away. I was careful to touch nothing in the room but to leave it exactly as I found it."

I nodded approval.

"Now, as to the weapon?"

"Well, I can make a guess at it, Captain Hastings. A pair of revolvers of my husband's were mounted upon the wall. One of them is missing. I pointed this out to the police, and they took the other one away with them. When they have extracted the bullet, I suppose they will know for certain."

"May I go to the gun-room?"

"Certainly. The police have finished with it. But the body has been removed."

She accompanied me to the scene of the crime. At that moment Havering entered the hall, and with a quick apology, his wife ran to him. I was left to undertake my investigations alone.

I may as well confess at once that they were rather disappointing. In detective-novels, clues abound, but here I could find nothing that struck me as out of the ordinary except a large bloodstain on the carpet where I judged the dead man had fallen. I examined everything with painstaking care and took a couple of pictures of the room with

my little camera, which I had brought with me. I also examined the ground outside the window, but it appeared to have been so heavily trampled that I judged it was useless to waste time over it. Now I had seen all that Hunter's Lodge had to show me. I must go back to Elmer's Dale and get into touch with Japp. Accordingly I took leave of the Haverings, and was driven off in the car that had brought us up from the station.

Japp I found at the Matlock Arms, and he took me forthwith to see the body. Harrington Pace was a small, spare, cleanshaven man, typically American in appearance. He had been shot through the back of the head, and the revolver had been discharged at close quarters.

"Turned away for a moment," remarked Japp, "and the other fellow snatched up a revolver and shot him. The one Mrs. Havering handed over to us was fully loaded, and I suppose the other one was also. Curious what darn fool things people do. Fancy keeping two loaded revolvers hanging up on your wall!"

"What do you think of the case?" I asked as we left the gruesome chamber behind us.

"Well, I'd got my eye on Havering to begin with.... Oh, yes,"—noting my exclamation of astonishment,—"Havering has one or two shady incidents in his past. When he was a boy at Oxford, there was some funny business about the signature on one of his father's checks. All hushed up, of course. Then he's pretty heavily in debt now, and they're the kind of debts he wouldn't like to go to his uncle about; whereas you may be sure the uncle's will would be in his favor. Yes, I'd got my eye on him, and that's why I wanted to speak to him before he saw his wife; but their statements dovetail all right, and I've been to the station, and there's no doubt whatever that he left by the six-fifteen. That gets up to London about ten-thirty. He went straight to his club, he says, and if that's confirmed all right—why, he couldn't have been shooting his uncle here at nine o'clock in a black beard!"

"Ah, yes—I was going to ask you what you thought about that beard?"

Japp winked.

"I think it grew pretty fast—grew in the five miles from Elmer's Dale to Hunter's Lodge. Americans that I've met are mostly clean shaven. I questioned the housekeeper first, and then her mistress, and their stories agree all right; but I'm sorry Mrs. Havering didn't get a look at the fellow. She's a smart woman, and she might have noticed something that would set us on the track."

I sat down and wrote a minute and lengthy account to Poirot. I

was able to add various further items of information before I posted the letter.

The bullet had been extracted and was proved to have been fired from a revolver identical in size to the one held by the police. Furthermore, Mr. Havering's movements on the night in question had been checked and verified, and it was proved beyond doubt that he had actually arrived in London by the train in question. And thirdly, a sensational development had occurred. A city gentleman, living at Ealing, on crossing Haven Green to get to the District Railway station that morning, had observed a brown paper parcel stuck between the railings. Opening it, he found that it contained a revolver. He handed the parcel over to the local police station, and before night it was proved to be the one we were in search of, the fellow to that given us by Mrs. Havering. One bullet had been fired from it.

All this I added to my report. A wire from Poirot arrived while I was at breakfast the following morning:

> Of course black-bearded man was not Havering. Only you or Japp would have such an idea. Wire me description of housekeeper and what clothes she wore this morning. Same of Mrs. Havering. Do not waste time taking photographs of interiors. They are underexposed and not in the least artistic.

It seemed to me that Poirot's style was unnecessarily facetious. I also fancied he was a shade jealous of my position on the spot, with full facilities for handling the case. His request for a description of the clothes worn by the two women appeared to me to be simply ridiculous, but I complied as well as I, a mere man, was able to. At eleven a reply wire came from Poirot:

> Advise Japp arrest housekeeper before it is too late.

Dumfounded, I took the wire to Japp. He swore softly under his breath.

"He's the goods, M. Poirot! If he says so, there's something in it. And I hardly noticed the woman! I don't know that I can go so far as arresting her, but I'll have her watched. We'll go up right away and take another look at her."

But it was too late. Mrs. Middleton, that quiet, middle-aged woman, who had appeared so normal and respectable, had vanished

into thin air. Her box had been left behind. It contained only ordinary wearing apparel. There was no clue in it to her identity, or as to her whereabouts.

From Mrs. Havering we elicited all the facts we could.

"I engaged her about three weeks ago, when Mrs. Emery, our former housekeeper, left. She came to me from Mrs. Selboume's Agency in Mount St.—a very well-known place. I get all my servants from there. They sent several women to see me, but this Mrs. Middleton seemed much the nicest, and had splendid references. I engaged her on the spot, and notified the Agency of the fact. I can't believe that there was anything wrong with her. She was such a nice, quiet woman."

The thing was certainly a mystery.

While it was clear that the woman herself could not have committed the crime, since at the moment the shot was fired Mrs. Havering was with her in the hall, nevertheless she must have some connection with the murder, or why should she suddenly take to her heels and bolt?

I wired the latest development to Poirot, and suggested returning to London and making inquiries at Selbourne's Agency. Poirot's reply was prompt:

> Useless to inquire at Agency. They will never have heard of her. Find out what vehicle took her up to Hunter's Lodge when she first arrived there.

Though mystified, I was obedient. The means of transport in Elmer's Dale were limited. The local garage had two cars, and there were two station flies. None of these had been requisitioned on the date in question. I may also mention that inquiries at the Agency in London bore out Poirot's prognostication. No such woman as "Mrs. Middleton" had ever been on their books. They had received the Hon. Mrs. Havering's application for a housekeeper, and had sent her various applicants for the post. When she sent them the engagement fee, she omitted to mention which woman she had selected.

It is suggested that the reader pause in his perusal of the story at this point, make his own solution of the mystery—and then see how close he comes to that of the author—*The Editors.*

Somewhat crestfallen, I returned to London. I found Poirot established in an armchair by the fire. He greeted me with much affection.

"*Mon ami Hastings!* But how glad I am to see you! Veritably I have for you a great affection! And you have enjoyed yourself? You

have run to and fro with the good Japp? You have interrogated and investigated to your heart's content?"

"Poirot," I cried, "the thing's a dark mystery! It will never be solved."

"It is true that we are not likely to cover ourselves with glory over it."

"No, indeed. It's a hard nut to crack."

"Oh, as far as that goes, me, I am very good at cracking the nuts! A veritable squirrel! It is not that which embarrasses me. I know well enough who killed Mr. Harrington Pace."

"You know? How did you find out?"

"Your illuminating answers to my wires supplied me with the truth..... See here, Hastings, let us examine the facts methodically and in order. Mr. Harrington Pace is a man with a considerable fortune which at his death will doubtless pass to his nephew—point number one. His nephew is known to be desperately hard up—point number two. His nephew is also known to be—shall we say a man of loose moral fiber? Point number three!"

"But Roger Havering is proved to have journeyed straight up to London."

"*Précisément!* And therefore, as Mr. Havering left Elmer's Dale at six-fifteen, and since Mr. Pace cannot have been killed before he left (or the doctor would have spotted the time of the crime as being given wrongly when he examined the body), we conclude, quite rightly, that Mr. Havering did *not* shoot his uncle. But there is a Mrs. Havering, Hastings."

"Impossible! The housekeeper was with her when the shot was fired."

"Ah, yes, the housekeeper. But she has disappeared."

"She will be found."

"I think not. There is something peculiarly elusive about that housekeeper—don't you think so? It struck me at once."

"She played her part, I suppose, and then got out in the nick of time."

"And what was her part?"

"Well—I presume to admit her confederate, the black-bearded man."

"Oh, no, that was not her part. Her part was what you have just mentioned, to provide an alibi for Mrs. Havering at the moment the shot was fired. And no one will ever find her, *mon ami*, because she does not exist! 'There's no sech person,' as your so great Shakespeare

says."

"It was Dickens," I murmured, smiling. "But what do you mean, Poirot?"

"I mean that Zoe Havering was an actress before her marriage, that you and Japp only saw the housekeeper in a dark hall, a dim, middle-aged figure in black with a faint, subdued voice, and finally that neither you, nor Japp, nor the local police whom the housekeeper fetched, ever saw Mrs. Middleton and her mistress at one and the same time. It was a child's play for that clever and daring woman. On the pretext of summoning her mistress, she runs upstairs, slips on a bright jumper and a hat with black curls attached which she jams down over the gray transformation. A few deft touches, and the make-up is removed; a slight dusting of rouge, and the brilliant Zoe Havering comes down with her clear ringing voice."

"But the revolver that was found at Ealing? Mrs. Havering could not have placed it there?"

"No, that was Roger Havering's job—but it was a mistake on their part. It put me on the right track. A man who has committed a murder with a revolver which he found on the spot would fling it away at once; he would not carry it up to London with him. No, the motive was clear; the criminals wished to focus the interest of the police on a spot far removed from Derbyshire; they were anxious to get the police away as soon as possible from the vicinity of Hunter's Lodge. Of course, the revolver found at Ealing was not the one with which Mr. Pace was shot. Roger Havering discharged one shot from it, brought it up to London, went straight to his club to establish his alibi, then went quickly out to Ealing by the District Railway, a matter of about twenty minutes only, placed the parcel where it was found and so back to town. That charming creature his wife, quietly shoots Mr. Pace after dinner—you remember he was shot from behind? Another significant point, that! She reloads the revolver and puts it back in its place, and then starts off with her desperate little comedy."

"It's incredible," I murmured, fascinated. "And yet—"

"And yet it is true. *Bien sûr*, my friend, it is true! But to bring that precious pair to justice, that is another matter. Well, Japp must do what he can—I have written him fully; but I very much fear, Hastings, that we shall be obliged to leave them to Fate—or *le bon Dieu*—whichever you prefer."

"The wicked flourish like a green bay tree," I reminded him.

"But at a price, Hastings, always at a price, *croyez moi*!"

Poirot's forebodings were confirmed. Japp, though convinced of the

truth of his theory, was unable to get together the necessary evidence to insure a conviction. Mr. Pace's huge fortune passed into the hands of his murderers. Nevertheless, Nemesis did overtake them, and when I read in the paper that the Hon. Roger and Mrs. Havering were among those killed in the crashing of the Air Mail to Paris, I knew that Justice was satisfied.

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