

TRAGEDY AND HORROR AT THE MARSTON MANSION

Written by

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Based on the short story
"The Tragedy at Marsdon Manor"
by Agatha Christie

INT. CASA OCCIDERE (RESTAURANT) - DUSK

QUICK CUTS:

-A chef's hand RAPIDLY CHOPS carrots on an ornate cutting board.

-A cook FLIPS a searing burger on a large stovetop.

-A young couple sits by a massive, circular window, enjoying their steak dinner. The woman LAUGHS hysterically.

-A group of friends CLINK their wine glasses in a toast.

At the front of the room, an odd pair walks through the wooden doors. The first is an older, shorter man wearing a loud pinstripe suit and matching bow tie, the pompous confidence of his expression matched only by his velvet bowler hat and magnificent, greying mustache. This is HERCULE POIROT.

The younger man at his side is tall, slightly less assured in his composure, and wearing a more casual two-piece. His wavy, golden-brown hair contrasts with his companion's darker features. This is ARTHUR HASTINGS.

HASTINGS

Poirot, you're artistic sensibilities always manage to surprise me. How could you, of all people, not appreciate the ingenuity in the plotting of the mystery? A brilliant film, right up until they brought ghosts into it. That was silly and contrived!

POIROT

(in his exaggerated French-Belgian accent)

Oh, no, *mon amour*. The idiocy of this detective astounded me. He does not use reason! If he were a logical man, he would observe the psychological nature of the suspects before him, deducing the conscious *and* the unconscious thought.

Poirot waves a greeting to the hostess, then searches the room.

POIROT (CONT'D)

(puffing out his chest)

If he were I, Hercule Poirot, the case would have been solved far sooner. Then we would not be late for dinner.

Poirot scoffs. Hastings sighs.

POIROT (CONT'D)

But the supernatural, this is always fascinating. You must not underestimate the power of the spirits. There are more things in heaven and earth, Hastings...ah! There is Commissioner Japp. Come!

Hastings lets the subject drop. He follows Poirot through the bustling tables.

INT. WINDOW TABLE - DUSK

Poirot and Hastings are seated opposite LAPD COMMISSIONER JAMES JAPP - tall, with a dark beard, and dressed in uniform. The gorgeous city skyline of LOS ANGELES behind them stretches all the way to the mountains, painted gold by the setting sun.

JAPP

So how about it, Poirot - what sort of clever cases have been knocking at your door? How have you been keeping that Holmesian head of yours occupied?

Japp smiles. Poirot shrugs off the question, intently studying the dinner menu.

HASTINGS

(sarcastically)

James. You know Hercule. This is the man who recovered Margaret Opalsen's priceless jewels, who single-handedly devised the location of the kidnapped prime minister! He's far too grandiose to solve your run-of-the-mill homicide...

Japp shakes his head.

HASTINGS (CONT'D)

Tell him about this life insurance company that keeps calling the house, which you refuse to answer.

POIROT

Ah, the insurance. They are insufferable! Always sniffing for foul play in tragedy. *L'argent avant tout!*

Poirot's gaze drifts across the room.

POIROT (CONT'D)

But I fear you may get your wish.

HASTINGS

What do you mean?

POIROT

This man has yet to release me from his scrutiny. Ah. And here he comes.

After a few moments, a clean-cut, older man approaches the table. This is ALFRED WRIGHT.

WRIGHT

You must excuse me for the interruption, gentleman, but I must ask - are you the private investigator, Hercule Poirot?

POIROT

It is so.

WRIGHT

I thought so! Sir, your reputation precedes you! This is - well - I'm a partner at Northern LA Insurance, and - my secretary has been trying to reach you all day. There's significant interest in hiring you to investigate the death of Mr. John Marston, Jr.

JAPP

I've heard about this. Absolutely tragic. He was a nice fellow. Met him several times. Even bought a car from him once. Or was that his father? Besides the point. Just tragic.

WRIGHT

It certainly is. Mr. Marston came into our office just three weeks ago to insure his life for a - a substantial sum.

POIROT

May I ask how substantial?

WRIGHT

Er - well, in this case, the payout will come out to - roughly - 1.1 million dollars.

JAPP

That's substantial.

WRIGHT

We of course evaluated Mr. Marston's physical and mental condition, and despite some hereditary risks, there were no signs of an imminent death. There was, of course, the standard suicide clause - the money would be forfeited if it was found that Marston committed suicide within two years of the contract's signing.

POIROT

And the presumed cause of death?

WRIGHT

Intracerebral hemorrhage. A brain bleed. His body was discovered in his yard, just yesterday afternoon.
(a beat)

I should also mention - we've since found that Mr. Marston's net worth is - was - not as it was portrayed to us. His automotive business has been struggling lately, to the extent that - it seems - bankruptcy was forthcoming.

POIROT

I comprehend.

WRIGHT

What do you say, Mr. Poirot? Can you make an investigation?

Poirot looks at Japp, then at Hastings. He sighs.

INT./EXT. HASTING'S CAR - HOLLYWOOD HILLS - DAY

Hastings and Poirot drive up a winding, uphill road - Hastings in the driver's seat, Poirot in the passenger's. They pass several massive, contemporary mansions.

Hastings takes a sharp breath.

HASTINGS

These are magnificent.

POIROT

Eh. They are not my style.

Hastings rolls his eyes, but gives a small smile.

EXT. MARSTON MANSION - DAY

The car slows to a stop in front of a mansion, situated on top of one of the highest hills. There is a gorgeous view of the surrounding mansions, as well as the sprawling LA landscape.

The house is a true outlier - it stands alone, and is clearly much older than any nearby mansion. Victorian architecture rather than modern, with tall, pointed towers and intricate patterns on the siding. There has obviously been tremendous effort with the upkeep - yet some mossy overgrowth and decaying panels reveal wear and tear.

Hastings and Poirot exit the vehicle and walk towards the house.

POIROT

Ah, yes. The Marston Mansion. One of the first to be built in this area, and one of the last of its kind still standing.

HASTING

Looks as if it could be haunted. What do you think, Poirot?

Poirot looks at Hastings, with a solemn, thoughtful expression.

POIROT

Indeed.

INT./EXT. MANSION PORCH/ENTRANCE - DAY

They ascend the steps to the front porch, and ring the doorbell. After a few moments, a HOUSEKEEPER opens the door.

POIROT

Greetings! I am detective Hercule Poirot, and this is my partner, Hastings. We have been -

He is interrupted by the muffled tears of a woman inside the house. Behind the housekeeper (in the house's foyer), a young woman is being embraced by a bald man wearing a white jacket - DOCTOR RALPH BERNARD.

DR. BERNARD

(quiet, comforting)

I know, Olivia. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I will see you soon. Don't forget to take your medication.

He glances up and spots Poirot's spying glances. Bernard narrows his eyes. He releases the woman and walks towards the door. Rudely pushing past the housekeeper, Poirot stops him.

POIROT

Hello. I am detective Hercule Poirot. Would you be willing to answer a few questions, *Monsieur*...

DR. BERNARD

Bernard. Doctor Bernard.

POIROT

Docteur Bernard! This will only take several minutes of your time.

Bernard glances at Hastings, who looks at him sternly. Bernard gives a reluctant nod.

EXT. MANSION PORCH - DAY

Hastings and Poirot are seated on an antique porch swing, sitting across from Bernard, who sits in a chair.

DR. BERNARD

Yes. Olivia - Ms. Marston - is one of my clients. She has been for many years.

POIROT

You are very close?

DR. BERNARD

Well, yes. She's had some health troubles. We've become quite close.

POIROT

May I ask - what kinds of health troubles?

DR. BERNARD

Heart disease, if you must know. Poor thing. We've made great progress. She'll live for many years.

POIROT

I see. And did you ever examine *Monsieur* Marston?

Bernard's expression changes to one of distaste.

DR. BERNARD

Never. That man was...very religious.

POIROT

Pardon?

DR. BERNARD

Spiritual. Christian Scientist. I suppose he had a hard time...believing in the severity of illness.

POIROT

Ah! This is interesting. *Merci, bon docteur.* I am curious: when were you informed of *Monsieur* Marston's death?

DR. BERNARD

Ms. Marston called me soon after he was discovered. I came immediately.

POIROT

You came here?

DR. BERNARD

Yes. As I said, we are close. I wanted to be here for her. I arrived with the paramedics. John's body was found in his backyard shooting range. There was blood on his lips, but the rest of the bleeding was internal. The hemorrhage occurred spontaneously, and he died quickly. He was predisposed. His father died in the same manner. Such a shame...

POIROT

There was an autopsy?

DR. BERNARD

No. It was never ordered.

HASTINGS

What?

DR. BERANRD

As I said, he was predisposed. He didn't seek treatment. This was a preventable tragedy, but undoubtedly a natural one. Did you see the state Ms. Marston is in, understandably so? I see no reason to cause her any further unnecessary stress.

POIROT

I comprehend. You mentioned the body was found in the "shooting range?"

DR. BERNARD

Yes. I understand he was using his rifle when it happened. Target practice. It was a daily activity.

POIROT

Indeed! And we know the gun could not have been involved?

DR BERNARD

Of course it wasn't.

POIROT

I am sure you are right. I feel I must ask, nevertheless. Recently I have heard of a case where a verdict of heart failure was quickly determined - until it was pointed out that there was a bullet wound on the back of the victim's head!

DR BERNARD

(insulted)

You will not find any bullet wounds on the body of Mr. Marston.

Poirot surrenders his hands in the air, in defense. Bernard is unamused.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - LOUNGE - DAY

Poirot and Hastings are in a baroque lounge, with elaborate wallpaper and massive paintings. They are seated on a floral couch, across from OLIVIA MARSTON in a loveseat. She is young and beautiful, her eyes stained with tears.

OLIVIA

Is this necessary, gentleman?

She wipes a tear from her heavily-rouged eyelids.

POIROT

We deeply regret inconveniencing you in this way, *Madame* Marston. But, alas, *les affaires d'argent* - they know no mercy. Would you be kind enough to relay the events of Wednesday afternoon?

OLIVIA

I had just arrived home from the store. I was changing into some new clothes, in my bedroom, when - our housekeeper, Agatha, she...well, she screamed. From the dining room window, she had seen...oh no...

She places her head in her hands. Poirot stands, approaches her. Puts his hand on her shoulder.

POIROT

I comprehend, *Madame*. Do not distress yourself. Would you, perhaps, permit me to examine the scene?

She nods.

EXT. MANSION BACKYARD/SHOOTING RANGE - DAY

The trio are standing in a grassy patch towards the back of the wide, open yard. About 20 feet beyond sits a small target, and behind that, a panoramic view of the San Gabriel mountains.

POIROT

I take it that this was the very same rifle with which your husband was - "practicing"?

OLIVIA

Yes. He had just purchased it.
(distressed)
I couldn't bring myself to touch it.

Poirot stoops to examine it. It's an antique rook rifle.

POIROT

A...beautiful weapon. May I...?

She nods. He picks up the gun and unloads the clip, letting the bullets fall to the ground.

POIROT (CONT'D)

All rounds accounted for - except one.

OLIVIA

Yes...I believe he had just started shooting for the day...

They turn their heads collectively. Bullets litter the area surrounding the target.

POIROT

So it appears. Would you appease me. *madame*? Tell me about your husband.

OLIVIA

John and I were married a little over a year. He was a great husband, and a better human. I loved him.

HASTINGS

We are sorry for your loss.

POIROT

(disinterested)

Yes, so, so sorry. Now - what did you know of the state of your husband's financial affairs?

OLIVIA

Very little, Mr. Poirot. But of course I knew there'd been a bit of a downturn in the business.

POIROT

And the insurance policy?

OLIVIA

John was...continuously bringing up his own demise. I think he was terrified of his passing, leaving me with...insufficient resources. He made the decision to buy the policy a few weeks ago.

POIROT

Quite so. Thank you, *madame*. What of his interests, his *passions*?

OLIVIA

Besides the shooting, he had an obsession with films. Particularly old-fashioned horrors, and thrillers. We would watch them all the time in the cinema.

POIROT

Ah! You frequented the movies?

OLIVIA

Oh, no. John built a home cinema in the basement.

POIROT

Did he? I would love to see it.

HASTINGS

As would I.

Olivia nods.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - BASEMENT HALLWAY - DAY

They walk down a dark hallway, lit only by dim spotlights on the walls. Between the spotlights are framed film posters - nearly all horror and thriller pictures, from the 60s and 70s.

Olivia flicks a switch on the wall. Through a DOORWAY, a room lights up.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - HOME CINEMA - CONTINUOUS

They enter into a fairly large home theater, stepping on the blood-red carpeted flooring. The wall to their right is taken up by a massive, blank screen. To their left, elevated rows of about 30 seats, with a small door leading to a projection booth at the back.

HASTINGS

Impressive!

POIROT

Very much so!

OLIVIA

Thank you. John would appreciate that.

She wipes her finger along the edge of a seat.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

I apologize for the dust. I was under the impression that these had been cleaned recently.

POIROT

Not a worry. Do you have many visitors?

OLIVIA

Sometimes. But not frequently. John and I would sit down here alone most nights. I never shared his interest in these violent, gory films. But I watched them anyway. For him.

(a long, reflective beat)

He always did have a fascination with violence. And death.

POIROT

On that note, *madame* - I have heard these persistent rumors about this house of yours. It seems there are a great many who speak of its - being haunted!

Olivia gives him a quizzical look. The small man holds steadfast - completely serious.

OLIVIA

I wouldn't put much stock in such rumors, Mr. Poirot. Frankly I find that sort of thing ridiculous.

POIROT

And did your husband share these reservations?

Olivia hesitates. Then:

OLIVIA

He did mention - he seemed to feel the presence of his father. After his passing. But I always felt that was more a symptom of something psychological, rather than spiritual.

POIROT

Ah! You make an intriguing point there. The psychological and the spiritual. Yet, I hold that there are some things in this world that *cannot* be explained with reason, *madame*.

At this, both Hastings and Olivia look confused.

EXT. MARSTON MANSION - FRONT YARD - DAY

Poirot and Hastings depart, heading towards the car.

HASTINGS

Some interesting characters here. But nothing to indicate foul play.

POIROT

(thinking)

Hmm? *Eh bien!* I suppose you are right. And yet - you did not notice the discrepancy? *Mon amour*, you look, but you do not see!

HASTINGS

What do you mean, Poirot? I can't understand how this was anything other than a natural -

He looks over and realizes Poirot has stopped walking several feet back. Annoyed, he walks back to meet him.

Poirot is staring at a man trimming a hedge near the far right side of the house, who hums to himself.

POIROT

Hello!

The man turns and smiles. He approaches the pair.

LANDSCAPEER

Good afternoon. How may I help you gentleman?

POIROT

If it pleases you, my partner Hastings and I are eager to hear your perspective on the tragic passing of *Monsieur* Marston.

LANDSCAPER

Ahh. An investigator? I'd be happy to help. I'm a freelance landscaper, but I work for the Marston's nearly every day. They should bring me on as staff. It's a lot of work maintaining a home like this.

POIROT

Indeed! I take it, then, that you were here on the day of *Monsieur* Marston's death.

LANDSCAPER

Believe it or not, that was the first afternoon in weeks that I didn't spend on this property. My daughter was sick. I stayed home to look after her. Otherwise, I'm sure I would have been here when John passed away.

POIROT

This is unfortunate...

HASTINGS

Poirot...

POIROT

(to the landscaper)

Not for you, of course. My greatest sympathies, *mon bon monsieur*. I wonder - what has been your impression of the wife - *Madame Olivia*?

LANDSCAPER

From what I've seen? She has a kind heart. There will always be rumors - ludicrous rumors - where romance is tangled up with money. But John and Olivia did love each other. They would always walk around the lawn, holding hands. He had this inside joke where he'd knock on the window three times, trying to catch her off guard. They were a sweet, loving couple.

POIROT

Thank you, sir. This is truly fascinating -

At this moment, a TALL MAN strolls by, ignoring their presence. He's holding a bouquet of flowers. Hastings is startled.

POIROT (CONT'D)

(when the man's out of earshot)

Tell me: do you know this man?

LANDSCAPER

Yes...I believe his name is Bryan Michael Black. A film director, if I'm not mistaken.

HASTINGS

(excited)

Really?

POIROT

Excuse my Hastings, he *adores* the cinema.

LANDSCAPER

I don't care too much for it myself. I only recognize him because he was a guest here this past Tuesday. I believe he stayed the night.

POIROT

Tuesday? The night prior to *Monsieur Marston's* demise.

(MORE)

POIROT (CONT'D)
 (to Hastings)
 Come, *mon amour*. We follow!

EXT. MARSTON MANSION - FRONT YARD TREE LINE/PORCH

Poirot and Hasting sneak back towards the house, using the tree line on the right side of the driveway as cover.

They hear the doorbell ring, and spy through the bushes. BRYAN MICHAEL BLACK is standing on the front porch near the door. After a moment, it opens.

OLIVIA
 Mr. Black? Why - what can I do for you?

BLACK
 I'm afraid I heard what happened. Just a horrible, horrible tragedy. John was a great friend.

She gingerly takes the flowers from him.

OLIVIA
 I appreciate the gesture. Thank you.

John nods. There's an awkward beat. Lasts for a while. Then -

BLACK
 I want you to know that...I'm here for you. If you need anything. Just...let me know.

OLIVIA
 Thanks...

BLACK
 Of course.

Yet another awkward beat, after which he turns to leave.

POIROT
 (whispering)
 Get down!

Poirot and Hastings duck below the bushes as Black descends the steps, and exits down the footpath to the driveway.

HASTINGS
 What's next on the agenda?

POIROT
 Tonight? We eat dinner! Tomorrow? We speak to *Monsieur* Black.

EXT. GLOBAL PICTURES FILM STUDIO - NEXT DAY

Poirot and Hastings are walking through a fairly hectic film studio lot.

HASTINGS

I don't know how you are able to
gain access to these places,
Poirot.

Poirot looks at Hastings, a twinkle in his eye.

POIROT

The security guard owed me a favor.
I once discovered his missing cat.

HASTINGS

I never know if you're joking.

They spot a fairly large sign on a building, reading: "*Roses in Berlin*, dir. Bryan Michael Black."

POIROT

Ah! It appears we are in the right
place.

INT. FILM SET - DAY

The pair enter a bustling film set, with employees rushing every which way. They approach a YOUNG MAN with headphones.

POIROT

Good morning! I am searching for
the director, I have important
business with -

The young man doesn't wait for Poirot to finish - he points towards the back of the room, and continues walking.

POIROT (CONT'D)

Ah! *Merci beaucoup!*

They continue towards a cement wall at the back of the soundstage. Two men - Bryan Michael Black, along with a younger man, with rugged good looks. This is SEBASTIAN EVERETT.

EVERETT

"More emotion"? What does that even
mean?

BLACK

I don't appreciate your tone -
(noticing Poirot)
Who are you? The new gaffer?

POIROT
Not yet, I hope!

Silence. Nobody understands the joke.

POIROT (CONT'D)
My name is Hercule Poirot, and this
is -

HASTINGS
Arthur Hastings. Sorry to
interrupt.

POIROT
Yes, yes. *Mille excuses*, I am sure.
We would like to consult you
regarding the death of *Monsieur*
John Marston, Jr.

BLACK
I thought you looked familiar. I
saw you at the house yesterday. Do
you think this could wait,
gentleman? We're developing a scene
- oh, I'm sorry. Mr. Poirot, this
is Sebastian Everett. He's starring
in the film.

Poirot and Hastings shake his hand.

POIROT
Enchanté. And I am sorry, *monsieur*,
but the tide of justice waits for
no one!

Black is befuddled by Poirot's theatrics.

INT. SOUND STAGE (SIDE) - DAY

Poirot and Hastings privately consult with Black in a quiet
area off to the side of the sound stage.

BLACK
John was a close family friend -
growing up, he sort of became
an...older brother to me. His
passion for films shaped my own.

POIROT
Ah! So you are a connoisseur of the
horror genre yourself?

BLACK
No, no. I gravitate
towards...historical fiction.

Poirot peers curiously over at the set, which resembles portions of World War II-era Berlin.

POIROT

I comprehend. Did *Monsieur* Marston never show interest in trying his hand in this industry?

BLACK

I'm sure he did. His father would never entertain it. There's no way his only child wouldn't follow in his footsteps. Back then, Marston Auto Group was the most profitable car sales enterprise in Southern California!

POIROT

Most impressive. And yet it does not seem that our young *Monsieur* Marston had much luck in...maintaining the success?

BLACK

Well, I...suppose not. After John, Sr. died - he just couldn't hack it. Not that I blame him. It was a lot of pressure.

POIROT

You and he, you kept in touch over the years?

BLACK

Less frequently than you would think. I wasn't even invited to the wedding. The most recent one, that is. I visited his home recently, though. Just before...

He has to steady himself.

POIROT

Thank you, *Monsieur* Black. It is most tragic. Would you be kind enough to relay any details about your visit with the Marston's?

BLACK

Let's see...we had dinner. The poor man was nursing an injury - hit his head on his bedpost or something. He asked about my work, as he usually does. He loves hearing all the Hollywood gossip. After that, he asked that I stay the night.

(MORE)

BLACK (CONT'D)

Didn't give me much of a choice, really. He wanted the three of us to watch some films in his theater.

POIROT

Ah! Did you stream the pictures?

Black laughs.

BLACK

No. You wouldn't be able to find these on Netflix. Actually, it's become a bit of a recurring courtesy I provide - I borrow some films at random from the DVD library here at the studio, and I loan them out to John. Always obscure, gory mystery and horror flicks from the 60s and 70s. Not my style. He always appreciated it.

POIROT

This is very interesting. And you say you viewed one of the films that night?

BLACK

Two or three, I believe. It was a long night. I fell asleep.

POIROT

And the titles of the films? I ask only for my partner Hastings - he has an interest in these things.

Hastings rolls his eyes.

BLACK

I couldn't tell you the plots, let alone the titles. As I said, I fell asleep rather quickly. Felt bad about it. John - or was it Olivia? - tried to have a conversation with me about the films when they concluded. That...was uncomfortable.

POIROT

I thank you for your efforts to recall, *Monsieur* Black - I believe you have told me all your conscious mind knows. Now, I would like to try a *quick* psychological experiment. It won't take more than a few moments.

BLACK
 Sure. I'll try my best.

POIROT
 This is a simple exercise. You will hear me say one word, and you will say out loud the first word that enters your mind, with no hesitation. Hastings will mark down your responses on his cell phone. Do you comprehend?

Black nods. Hastings takes out his phone.

POIROT (CONT'D)
 Excellent! We will commence. *Day.*

BLACK
 (after a beat)
 Night.

Black then begins answering more rapidly.

POIROT
Name.

BLACK
Place.

POIROT
Bernard.

BLACK
Shaw.

POIROT
Tuesday.

BLACK
Marston.

POIROT
Movie.

BLACK
Berlin.

POIROT
Country.

BLACK
Uganda.

POIROT
Rifle.

BLACK
Farm.

POIROT
Shot.

BLACK
Suicide.

POIROT
Money.

BLACK
Box office. Wait. Sorry, that's two words.

POIROT
Not to worry, *Monsieur* Black. We have concluded. Hastings - what does my little experiment tell you?

Hastings scratches his chin.

POIROT (CONT'D)
If you do not mind, *Monsieur* Black, I will try to extrapolate my findings. The first two responses were normal associations - and your quick adjustment to my game tells me you have nothing to conceal. Next, it appears you have not had experience with our friend, Dr. Ralph Bernard. After our interview, you quickly associated Marston with Tuesday - but recall the name of your own film rather than those you viewed the other night. Not a surprise. Here, though, we have reached the unexpected. "Germany" would have been a rational response to "country," not "Uganda." Since *Monsieur* Black's subconscious is still planted in the scope of Tuesday evening, we can assume that these uncommon associations are related to this night.

Hastings and Black struggle to keep up.

POIROT (CONT'D)
Monsieur Black, is it possible that one of these films which you viewed, depicted a suicide on a Ugandan farm?

BLACK

Well...hmm. That's incredibly strange...but sounds familiar. Yes...I can recall it now. It was a period piece. A farmer was found dead with a rook rifle at his side...but there were no bullet wounds! I remember thinking how absurd it was...apparently, back in the day, with those short-range weapons, the muzzle velocities were far lower. The bullet became lodged in his brain! The only external evidence of death was the blood on his lips. I can't believe I remember this...I was hardly awake.

Poirot gives Hastings a side-eye. Hastings sighs.

POIROT

Once again, the subconscious prevails, even when consciousness does not!

BLACK

You don't mean...that the film suggested to him...oh my God!

HASTINGS

It's not your fault. If he wanted to end his life, he would have found one way or another.

BLACK

I knew the man was always rather morbid. I didn't think he was a suicide risk!

Poirot's eyes dart around the studio, clearly pondering something.

POIROT

Try not to distress yourself.
(to Hastings)
It is time that I make some calls.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

INT. MARSTON MANSION - LOUNGE - DAY

Poirot and Hastings are once again seated with Olivia Marston. We can't hear what they are saying, but she shakes her head in denial. Then drops her head to her palms, breaking down into tears.

INT. MORGUE - DAY

Poirot, Hastings, Olivia, Dr. Bernard, and Black all watch as a pathologist slowly removes a BULLET from inside JOHN MARSTON, JR.'s open skull.

Olivia turns, unable to look. She FALLS INTO Black's arms. He holds her. Poirot eyes them suspiciously.

END MONTAGE.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Poirot and Hastings are seated across the table from Olivia and Black, eating dinner.

HASTINGS

Thank you so much for the meal, Ms. Marston. It was delicious.

OLIVIA

It's the least I could do. I really do feel in debt to you for finding the cause of John's death...no matter how tragic...

They finish up the meal in silence. Poirot slurps the side of his bowl of soup. Hastings KICKS HIM under the table.

POIROT

You know, *madame*...the dead are never truly dead.

She nods respectfully at his comment. There's more uncomfortable silence.

Then - a woman's SCREAM. The housekeeper, Agatha, RUHSES INTO THE ROOM. Someone drops their silverware.

AGATHA

There's a man! In the hall!

OLIVIA

What? Agatha, calm yourself.

AGATHA

It was him! It looked like...it looked like John!!

Olivia looks confused, and slightly nervous. Black STANDS UP from the table, in a defensive position, and takes a few steps towards the door.

POIROT

I would advise you, *Monsieur Black*,
to not confuse bravery with
stupidity.

Suddenly, there are THREE KNOCKS ON THE REAR WINDOW. Hastings and Olivia JUMP. Everybody turns to look. There's nothing there.

OLIVIA

(distressed)

That's...that's what he used to
do...

POIROT

Quick! We will take the stairs to
the cinema, and lock ourselves in
until the police arrive.

They all head towards the back of the room.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - BASEMENT HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

The group flees down the dark hallway. Hastings is on the phone.

HASTINGS

Yes, *that* Marston Mansion. Hurry!

Olivia flicks the light switch as she passes. They all enter through the cinema doorway.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - HOME CINEMA - CONTINUOUS

Poirot shuts the door behind then, locking it. They all crowd towards the back of the front row, facing the door.

HASTINGS

The police are on their way.

POIROT

Excellent! Now we will wait here -

THREE KNOCKS ON THE DOOR. Everyone (but Poirot) jumps back, startled.

There's a terrifyingly quiet beat. THEN THREE MORE KNOCKS.
THE LIGHTS GO OUT.

Olivia starts crying - different from her earlier tears, these are the wails of true terror. Black stands in front of her defensively.

The door SWINGS OPEN to reveal THE GHOST OF JOHN MARSTON, JR. His face is PALE, his mouth BRIGHT RED.

- but his gray hair and clothes are identical to those on Marston's body. His face is spookily illuminated by the soft spotlights in the hallway.

Silently, he steps into the room. Lifts his arm, and points his finger directly at Olivia. Inexplicably, a shining light illuminates her face.

THE PROJECTOR STARTS UP. Everyone (but the ghost) looks at the screen. On it, a scene from an old 60's film plays. A man picks up a rook rifle, gingerly turns it, and places the barrel in his mouth. He uses a nearby BRANCH to activate the TRIGGER. He FALLS BACK - the bullet doesn't emerge from his head.

Olivia turns - and THE GHOST is standing only a few feet away. She COLLAPSES to the floor. The ghost's hand (and light) follow her. Illuminated, she lifts her hands from the ground - revealing they are COVERED IN BLOOD.

GHOST

(eerily)

You...

OLIVIA

(bawling)

I'm sorry...I'm so sorry I killed you! Please...don't kill me!

POIROT

Lights!

The lights flick on.

POIROT (CONT'D)

Did you catch the confession, Commissioner Japp? Perhaps not enough alone to prosecute, but fingerprints on the weapon, which she claims to not have touched, and a detailed toxicology report should *faire l'affaire*.

COMMISSIONER JAPP emerges from the projection booth.

JAPP

Your little schemes always manage to impress me, Poirot. I couldn't imagine the significance of knocking on a window and...pushing play on a film!

The film's title screen is now showing. It's called: "Tragedy and Horror in Kampala."

POIROT

Your assistance is always appreciated, *mon cher ami*. Yours as well, *Monsieur* Everett. The flashlight in the sleeve was an ingenious addition. And the stage blood on the carpet! This is why you are a star.

The "ghost" REMOVES HIS WIG. It is the actor, Sebastian Everett.

EVERETT

Happy to help. Not my usual type of role, but I tried my best.

POIROT

The magic of the movies!

Japp descends the theater stairs and starts to place Olivia in handcuffs. She is confused and speechless - along with Black and Hastings.

HASTINGS

I, for one, would like an explanation, Poirot.

BLACK

As would I.

POIROT

Ah, yes. But it is as I said, is it not? The great detective attends not only to the suspects' conscious actions, but also to their psychological natures. The unique relationship between *Docteur* Bernard and his client, the uncommon diagnosis of the young widow, the abandonment of the autopsy - mere peculiarities in isolation, but pieced together, one begins to glimpse the image of an agreeable young woman with a consummate capacity to disarm.

Olivia's expression hardens. Reality has set in.

POIROT (CONT'D)

I referenced an initial discrepancy, did I not, Hastings? Do you not find it strange that *le docteur* describes to us a religious, denier of medicine, only for the wife of the victim to call him a health-conscious hypochondriac?

(MORE)

POIROT (CONT'D)

His obsessive spiritualism could corroborate either, but not both. Blood thinners, as kindly provided to *Madame* Marston by *Docteur* Bernard for her heart condition, have a well-documented risk of increased brain bleeding after head trauma. I immediately suspected that Olivia was implicitly giving her husband anticoagulants in an attempt to induce a hemorrhage in the brain. This theory was later confirmed when *Monsieur* Black detailed the "head injury" from which *Monsieur* Marston was recovering this past Tuesday.

HASTINGS

You believe Ms. Marston assaulted him?

POIROT

Indeed! In his sleep. The poor man did not see it coming.

INT. MARSTONS' BEDROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Olivia stands over John, asleep in bed. She HITS HIM HARD in the head with a plank of wood.

POIROT (V.O.)

Convincing him that he accidentally hit his head on the bedpost was child's play.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - HOME CINEMA - NIGHT

POIROT

As was manipulating Bernard into canceling the autopsy.

BLACK

But...why?

POIROT

Remember the psychology, *monsieur*. *Madame* Marston has the uncanny ability to manipulate. It was unspeakably easy to prey on the dejected John Marston, to make him believe his love for her. Like a game! And yet, when John opened about the state of his business...

HASTINGS

The jig was up.

POIROT

Your idioms are ever so pertinent, *mon amour*. *Madame* Marston persuaded her husband with ease to purchase the hefty insurance. I'm afraid this is where our friend in the garden is wrong, Hastings. It is where the matters of love and money meet, that disaster so often strikes.

BLACK

If what you're saying is true...why risk using the gun at all?

POIROT

Impatience. *Madame* Marston was increasingly bored of her acting role. Perhaps she should have instead joined *Monsieur* Everett in Hollywood!

HASTINGS

Get to the point, Poirot.

POIROT

Yes, yes. Inducing an intracerebral hemorrhage was not working as she'd hoped, and perhaps the murder attempt would have failed entirely. This is where our *Monsieur* Black enters the picture!

He laughs at it his own pun.

POIROT (CONT'D)

The hypothesis that the movie inspired *Monsieur* Marston to end his life is unlikely for several reasons. Not the least of which: the psychology of the hopeless romantic is dissimilar fro, that of the suicidal. He loved Olivia, and could not bear to be apart from her.

INT. HOME CINEMA - TUESDAY NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Olivia watching "Tragedy and Horror in Kampala," John directly to her left, intently watching the screen. He holds her hand.

POIROT (V.O.)

No. It was in the film that the wife saw an ideal solution! If the gun wound remained internal, the death would still appear natural, and arouse far less suspicion. If it failed, she could still stage it as a suicide.

A few seats to her right sits Black, fast asleep in his chair. Olivia looks at him.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - HOME CINEMA - NIGHT

POIROT

She first ensured that *Monsieur* Black had slept through the scene. Then, it was a matter of pure fortune that the landscaper was absent Wednesday afternoon. She put her plan into action. After asking her housekeeper to clean the theater, she went on a stroll around the grounds with John.

EXT. MANSION BACKYARD/SHOOTING RANGE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Olivia and John walk towards the shooting range, holding hands.

OLIVIA

I still can't get over the scene from that film last night. The one with the farmer and the rook rifle?
(half laughing)
Is it even possible to shoot yourself like that? I don't even know how you'd get that in your mouth.

POIROT (V.O.)

Marston, the gullible, *macabre* man he was, said -

JOHN

Well, let's see.

John picks up the rook rifle. He awkwardly flips the barrel into his mouth, while Olivia supports the stock. Olivia laughs.

OLIVIA

Wow! And then - I suppose - it was as easy as...

She wiggles her fingers around the trigger. Then PULLS IT!
The gun FIRES, blood sprays out of his mouth, but the bullet stays lodged in his head.

She steps back. Drops the gun. Takes in what she's done. Then SPRINTS BACK TOWARD S THE HOUSE.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - HOME CINEMA - NIGHT

POIROT

Then there was Agatha - who played her role perfectly tonight I might add. Thank you, my dear.

AGATHA

Of course, sir.

POIROT

Expecting Marston's gunfire, she was initially unfazed by the shot. She quickly returned up the stairs earlier than expected, however, searching for more cleaning supplies.

INT./EXT. - STAIRS/DINING ROOM WINDOW - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Agatha emerges from the stairwell and crosses the dining room. Spotting John's BODY through the window, she DROPS the bucket she is carrying and SCREAMS.

INT. MARSTON MANSION - HOME CINEMA - NIGHT

POIROT

It was the dusty seats which signified to me the housekeeper's premature ascent - and the implied, unprecedented speed of *Monsieur* Marston's death is what first suggested the method of murder lay beyond the medication.

HASTINGS

And why not turn her into the police right away?

POIROT

I'm afraid, without the necessary examinations, it was my word against *Madame* Marston's. Knowing the murderer's psychology, I constructed a funny scenario which I knew would extract the truth from the guilty conscious.

BLACK

Funny?

POIROT

Yes! Have you seen *Monsieur* Everett's make up? Laughable! And yet, the effect is the same!

Everyone in the room attempts to take it all in.

JAPP

Good old Poirot. It's a good thing you took up the case after all!

Japp escorts the handcuffed Olivia towards the hallway. As they leave, Black approaches her.

BLACK

Olivia...

Olivia SPITS on the ground at his feet. Japp pushes her away.

POIROT

Ah! Yet another tragedy to which we have bore witness. The tragedy of the heart.

Black is speechless.

POIROT (CONT'D)

What is the expression you Americans like so much? Oh, yes. Plenty of fish in the sea! And, remember, *Monsieur* Black: you should consider yourself lucky. Had you not incidentally given *Madame* Marston an idea for the murder, I strongly suspect you would find yourself her next victim! And we can only guess how that would have ended...

Black sighs.

POIROT (CONT'D)

What is that other...? Oh, yes. You dodged a bullet!

HASTINGS

Poirot!

POIROT

Mille excuses! Come, *mon amour*. We will be late for dinner.

Hastings shakes his head. Poirot smiles.