

PROLOG:

This is a script of a “Locked Room” mystery play. The original story was written by P. G. Wodehouse in 1914 and it is in the public domain. Adaptation of the short story to a script for a play and the many changes necessary to accomplish this was done by James R. Latham on February 18, 2014 (version 1).

The script is arranged with the name of the speakers, their actions in parenthesis (), printed in italics and is followed by their dialog.

An announcer is used to set the scene and introduce characters.

An ellipse (...) in the script indicates a short delay in the dialog.

An “Aside” indicates actions taken by the actors without dialog and are printed in italics.

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Captain John Gunner – Retired ships captain and the victim.

Captain Muller – Retired ships captain and roommate of the victim.

Constable Grogan – The local policeman.

Doctor Brown – The local doctor and assistant coroner.

Elliot Oakes – A private detective and assistant to Mr. Paul Snyder.

James Burton – Nom de Guerre of Elliot Oakes investigating the case.

Mr. Paul Snyder – Owner of the Snyder Detective Agency.

Mrs. Laura Thompson – Principal Assistant to Mr. Paul Snyder.

Mrs. Pickett – Owner of the Excelsior Boarding House.

**DEATH AT THE EXCELSIOR**

SCENE I – A bedroom in the Excelsior Boarding House.

Aside:

*The curtain opens.*

Announcer:

This room is the typical bedroom of the typical boarding-house, furnished, insofar as it could be said to be furnished at all, with a severe simplicity. As you can see, it contains two beds, a pine chest of drawers, a strip of faded carpet, and a wash

basin. But there is that on the floor which sets this room apart from a thousand rooms of the same kind. Flat on his back, with his hands tightly clenched and one leg twisted oddly under him and with his teeth gleaming through his grey beard in a horrible grin is Captain John Gunner. He is staring up at the ceiling with eyes that see nothing.

...

Until a moment before, he had had the little room all to himself. But there are now two people standing just inside the door, looking down at him. One is a large policeman, who is twisting his helmet nervously in his hands. The other is a tall, gaunt old woman in a rusty black dress, who is gazing with pale eyes at the dead man. Her face is without expression.

...

The policeman's name is Grogan. He is a genial giant, a terror to the riotous element of the waterfront, but obviously ill at ease in the presence of death. The woman is Mrs. Pickett, owner of the Excelsior Boarding-House.

Constable Grogan (*Drawing in his breath, wipes his forehead, and whispers.*):

"Look at his eyes, ma'am!"

Mrs. Pickett (*having not spoken a word since bringing the policeman into the room, replied softly*):

"That's just how I found him,"

Constable Grogan (*starting at the sound of her voice*):

"It might have been apoplexy."

Doctor Brown (*entering the room carrying a black bag*):

"Good morning, Mrs. Pickett. I was told that – Good Lord!"

Doctor Brown (*dropping to his knees beside the body, raised one of the arms and after a moment gently lowers it to the floor, and then shaking his head in grim resignation*):

"He's been dead for hours. When did you find him?"

Mrs. Pickett:

"Good morning Doctor Brown. I found him twenty minutes back. I guess he died last night. He never wished to be called in the morning. Said he liked to sleep on. Well, he's got his wish."

Constable Grogan:

"What did he die of, sir?"

Dr. Brown:

"It's impossible to say without an examination. "It looks like a stroke, but I'm pretty sure it isn't. It might be a coronary attack, but I happen to know his blood pressure was normal, and his heart sound. He called in to see me only a week ago, and I examined him thoroughly. But sometimes you can be deceived. The inquest will tell us. I can't understand it. The man had no right to drop dead like this. He was a tough old sailor who ought to have been good for another twenty years. If you want my honest opinion – though I can't possibly be certain until after the inquest – I should say he had been poisoned."

Mrs. Pickett (*quietly*):

"How would he be poisoned?"

Dr. Brown:

"That's more than I can tell you. There's no glass about that he could have drunk it from. He might have got it in capsule form. But why should he have done it? He was always a pretty cheerful sort of old man, wasn't he?"

Constable Grogan:

"Yes, sir," said the Constable. "He had the name of being a joker in these parts. Kind of sarcastic, they tell me, though he never tried it on me."

Dr. Brown:

"He must have died quite early last night. What's become of Captain Muller? If he shares this room he ought to be able to tell us something about it."

Mrs. Pickett:

"Captain Muller spent the night with some friends at Portsmouth. He departed right after supper, and hasn't returned."

The Doctor Brown (*staring thoughtfully about the room, frowning*):

"I don't like it. I can't understand it. If this had happened in India I should have said the man had died from some form of snake bite. I was out there two years, and I've seen a hundred cases of it. The poor devils all looked just like this. But the thing's ridiculous. How could a man be bitten by a snake in a Southampton waterfront boarding-house? Was the door locked when you found him, Mrs. Pickett?"

Mrs. Pickett (*nodding*):

"I opened it with my own key. I had been calling to him and he didn't answer, so I guessed something was wrong."

Constable Grogan:

"You ain't touched anything, ma'am? They're always very particular about that. If the Doctor Brown's right, and there's been anything up, that's the first thing they'll ask."

Mrs. Pickett:

"Every thing's just as I found it."

Dr. Brown:

"What's that on the floor beside him?"

Mrs. Pickett:

"Only his harmonica. He liked to play it of an evening in his room. I've had some complaints about it from some of the gentlemen, but I never saw any harm, so long as he didn't play it too late."

Constable Grogan:

"Seems as if he was playing it when it happened, that don't look much like suicide, sir."

Dr. Brown:

"I didn't say it was suicide."

Constable Grogan (*whistling*):

"You don't think? . . ."

Dr. Brown:

"I'm not thinking anything until after the inquest. All I can say is that it's queer."

Constable Grogan (*musings*):

"I guess this ain't going to do the Excelsior any good, ma'am."

Mrs. Pickett (*shrugging*):

"I'm going to brew myself a hot cup of strong tea. I will make you gentlemen a cup also. Stop by the kitchen before you leave. Oh yes, and lock the door if you please and bring me the key."

Aside:

*She hands Constable Grogan the room key and departs from the room.*

Constable Grogan:

"I have to tell you Doctor Brown, I'm much in awe of Mother Pickett, as is everybody else along the waterfront. Her silence, pale eyes, and the quiet decisiveness of her personality crows even these tough old salts who patronize the Excelsior. She is a formidable influence in this little community of sailor men."

Dr. Brown:

"Yes, she has that effect on me also. I suppose I had better go and notify the coroner after our tea."

Constable Grogan:

“After we have a spot of tea, I'll come back and seal the door so that no-one disturbs Captain Gunner until the coroner arrives. I am not greatly troubled with nerves, but I feel a decided desire to be somewhere where I cannot see his dead staring eyes.”

Aside:

*Dr. Brown went out and after a momentary pause the policeman followed him.  
The curtain closes.*

Announcer:

Mrs. Pickett inwardly was tormented and alarmed. It was the first time such a thing as this had happened at the Excelsior, and, as Constable Grogan had hinted, it was not likely to increase the attractiveness of the house in the eyes of possible boarders. It was not the threatened pecuniary loss which was troubling her. As far as money was concerned, she could have lived comfortably on her savings, for she was richer than most of her friends supposed. It was the blot on the escutcheon of the Excelsior and the stain on its reputation which was tormenting her.

The Excelsior was her life. Starting many years before, beyond the memory of the oldest boarder, she had built up the model establishment, the fame of which had been carried to every corner of the world. Men spoke of it as a place where you were fed well, cleanly housed, and where petty robbery was unknown.

Such was the chorus of praise that it is not likely that much harm could come to the Excelsior from a single mysterious death but Mother Pickett was not consoling herself with such reflections.

Next we will go to the private office of Mr. Paul Snyder the principal detective of the Snyder Detective Agency in New Oxford Street.

SCENE II – Mr. Paul Snyder's office at the offices of The Snyder Detective Agency in New Oxford Street. Mr. Snyder and his Principal Assistant Laura Thompson are on stage.

Paul Snyder (*in a reminiscing way*):

“Mrs. Thompson my haven't we grown. In just the course of a dozen years we have gone from a single room to this very impressive suite bright with polished wood, clicking typewriters, and other evidences of success. Once you and I had to sit and wait for clients and attend to them ourselves but now I sit in my private office and together we direct eight assistants. I do not say this by way of boasting because as we grew, we picked our as associates well and it was they that caused our phenomenal growth and prosperity. “

Mrs. Thompson:

“It is as you have said and those were very lean years.”

Paul Snyder:

“I have just accepted a case – a case that might be nothing at all or something exceedingly big. It is on the latter possibility that I have gambled. The fee offered is as judged by our present standards of prosperity, small. But the bizarre facts, coupled with something in the personality of the client, had won me over. I believe that I will assign this case to Mr. Elliot Oakes although I have some misgivings because of his attitude and personality.”

Mrs. Thompson:

“I fully understand your misgivings about Mr. Oakes. He is brash and so cocksure of himself that he has alienated all of the staff, myself included.”

Paul Snyder:

“Really, what did he do to get in your poor graces?”

Mrs. Thompson:

“I now know that he does everything tensely, partly from a natural nervous energy, and partly as a pose. He is a lean young man, with dark eyes and a thin-lipped mouth. He looks quite as much like a typical detective as you, Mr. Snyder, look like a comfortable and prosperous stock broker. Well, he had not been here a week when he made unwelcome advances to me. You can be sure that I saved him from a very thorough thrashing by my husband.”

Paul Snyder:

“Elliot Oakes is a young man who both amuses and interests me. For even though he has only recently joined the staff, he makes no secret of his intention of revolutionizing the methods of the agency. I, in common with most of our assistants, rely for results on hard work and plenty of common sense. We have never been detectives of the showy type. Results have justified our methods, but I am perfectly aware that young Mr. Oakes look on us dull old men who have been miraculously favored by luck.

...

I selected Oakes for the case in hand principally because it was one where inexperience could do no harm, and where the brilliant guesswork which Oakes preferred to call his inductive reasoning might achieve an unexpected success.

...

Another motive actuated me in his choice. I have a strong suspicion that the conduct of this case was going to have the beneficial result of lowering Oakes' self-esteem. If failure achieved this end, I feel that failure, though it would not help the Agency, would not be an unmixed ill.

...

Mrs. Thompson please send Mr. Oakes in to me.”

Aside:

*Mrs. Thompson departs and after a few moments, the door opens and Oakes enters tensely.*

Paul Snyder:

"Sit down, Oakes, I've got a job for you."

Aside:

*Elliot Oakes, sinks into a chair like a crouching leopard, places the tips of his fingers together and nods curtly.*

Paul Snyder (*handing Oakes an envelope*):

"I want you to go to this address and look around. The address on that envelope is of a sailors' boarding-house down in Southampton. You know the sort of place

– retired sea captains and so on live there. All most respectable. In all its history nothing more sensational has ever happened than a case of suspected cheating at halfpenny nap. Well, a man has died there."

Elliot Oakes:

"Murdered?"

Paul Snyder:

"I don't know. That's for you to find out. The coroner left it open. 'Death by Misadventure' was the verdict, and I don't blame him. I don't see how it could have been murder. The door was locked on the inside, so nobody could have got in."

Elliot Oakes:

"The window?"

Paul Snyder:

"The window was open, granted. But the room is on the second floor. Anyway, you may dismiss the window. I remember the old lady saying there was a bar across it, and that nobody could have squeezed through."

Elliot Oakes (*eyes glistening with interest*):

"What was the cause of death?"

Paul Snyder (coughing):

"Snake bite,"

Elliot Oakes (*his calm deserting him*):

"Why, that's incredible!"

Paul Snyder:

"It's the literal truth. The medical examination proved that the fellow had been

killed by snake poison--cobra, to be exact, which is found principally in India."

Elliot Oakes:

"Cobra!"

Paul Snyder (*looking at Oakes with a certain quiet satisfaction*):

"Just so. In a Southampton boarding-house, in a room with a locked door, this man was stung by a cobra. To add a little mystification to the limpid simplicity of the affair, when the door was opened there was no sign of any cobra. It couldn't have got out through the door, because the door was locked. It couldn't have got out of the window, because the window was too high up, and snakes can't jump. And it couldn't have gotten up the chimney, because there was no chimney. So there you have it. Also it has come to my ears that you had been heard to complain of the infantile nature and unworthiness of the last two cases to which you had been assigned. They said that you hoped some day to be given a problem which should be beyond the reasoning powers of a child of six. It seemed to me that you are about to get your wish.

Elliot Oakes (*nonplussed and a little breathless*):

"I should like further details."

Paul Snyder:

"You had better apply to Mrs. Pickett, who owns the boarding-house. It was she who put the case in my hands. She is convinced that it is murder. But, if we exclude ghosts, I don't see how any third party could have taken a hand in the thing at all. However, she wanted a man from this agency, and was prepared to pay for him, so I promised her I would send one. It is not our policy to turn business away. And in pursuance of that policy I want you to go and put up at Mrs. Pickett's boarding house and do your best to enhance the reputation of our agency. I would suggest that you pose as a ship's chandler or something of that sort. You will have to be something maritime or they'll be suspicious of you. If your visit produces no other results, it will, at least, enable you to make the acquaintance of a very remarkable woman. I commend Mrs. Pickett to your notice. By the way, she says she will help you in your investigations."

Elliot Oakes (*amused, he laughed shortly*):

Paul Snyder (in a benevolent paternal manner):

"It's a mistake to scoff at amateur assistance, my boy. Crime investigation isn't an exact science. Success or failure depends in a large measure on applied common sense, and the possession of a great deal of special information. Mrs. Pickett knows certain things which neither you nor I know, and it's just possible that she may have some stray piece of information which will provide the key to the entire mystery."

Elliot Oakes (*laughing*):

"It is very kind of Mrs. Pickett," he said, "but I prefer to trust to my own methods. I'd better be starting at once. I'll send you reports from time to time."

Paul Snyder:

"Good. The more detailed the better. I hope your visit to the Excelsior will be pleasant. And cultivate Mrs. Pickett. She's worth while."

Paul Snyder (*lighting a fresh cigar as the door closed.*):

"Dashed young fool. Now let's see what else I have on my plate today."

Aside:

*The curtain closes.*

Announcer:

It is now several day later when we return to the office of Mr. Paul Snyder.

SCENE III – Mr. Paul Snyder's office at the offices of The Snyder Detective Agency in New Oxford Street. Mr. Snyder is on stage.

Announcer:

Mr. Snyder sits in his office reading a typewritten report. It appeared to be of a humorous nature, for, as he read, chuckles escaped him. Finishing the last sheet he threw his head back and laughed heartily. The manuscript had not been

intended by its author for a humorous effort. What Mr. Snyder had been reading was the first of Elliott Oakes' reports from the Excelsior.

Paul Snyder (*reading*):

I am sorry to be unable to report any real progress. I have made.

The whole affair seems to me at the moment of writing quite inexplicable. Assuming that this Captain Gunner was murdered, there appears to have been no motive for the crime whatsoever. I have made careful inquiries about him, and find that he was a man of fifty-five; had spent nearly forty years of his life at sea, the last dozen in command of his own ship; was of a somewhat overbearing disposition, though with a fund of rough humor; had traveled all over the world, and had been an inmate of the Excelsior for about ten months. He had a small annuity, and no other money at all, which disposes of money as the motive for the crime.

In my character of James Burton, a retired ship's chandler, I have mixed with the other boarders, and have heard all they have to say about the affair. I gather that the deceased was by no means popular. He appears to have had a bitter tongue, and I have not met one man who seems to regret his death. On the other hand, I have heard nothing which would suggest that he had any active and violent enemies. He was simply the unpopular boarder – there is always one in every boarding house – but nothing more.

I have seen a good deal of the man who shared his room – another sea captain, named Muller. He is a big, silent person, and it is not easy to get him to talk. As regards the death of Captain Gunner he can tell me nothing. It seems that on the night of the tragedy he was away at Portsmouth with some friends. All I have got from him is some information as to Captain Gunner's habits, which leads nowhere. The dead man seldom drank, except at night when he would take some whiskey. His head was not strong, and a little of the spirit was enough to make him semi-intoxicated, when he would be hilarious and often insulting. I gather that Muller found him a difficult roommate, but he is one of those placid persons who can put up with anything. He and Gunner were in the habit of playing draughts together every night in their room, and Gunner had a harmonica which he played frequently. Apparently, he was playing it very soon before he died, which is significant, as seeming to dispose of the idea of suicide.

As I say, I have one or two theories, but they are in a very nebulous state. The

most plausible is that on one of his visits to India – I have ascertained that he made several voyages there – Captain Gunner may in some way have fallen foul of the natives. The fact that he certainly died of the poison of an Indian snake supports this theory. I am making inquiries as to the movements of several Indian sailors who were here in their ships at the time of the tragedy.

I have another theory. Does Mrs. Pickett know more about this affair than she appears to? I may be wrong in my estimate of her mental qualities. Her apparent stupidity may be cunning. But here again, the absence of motive brings me up against a dead wall. I must confess that at present I do not see my way clearly. However, I will write again shortly.

Paul Snyder (*to himself*):

“Ha Ha . . . I must say that I have derived the utmost enjoyment from this report. I like the substance of it, and above all, I am tickled by the bitter tone of frustration which characterizes it. Oakes is baffled, and my knowledge of him tells me that the sensation of being baffled is gall and wormwood to that high-spirited young man. Whatever might be the result of this investigation, it would teach him the virtue of patience. I will write him a short reply.”

Paul Snyder (*reading aloud while writing*):

Dear Oakes,

Your report received. You certainly seem to have got the hard case which, I hear, you were pining for. Don't build too much on plausible motives in a case of this sort. Fauntleroy, the London murderer, killed a woman for no other reason than that she had thick ankles. Many years ago, I myself was on a case where a man murdered an intimate friend because of a dispute about a bet. My experience is that five murderers out of ten act on the whim of the moment, without anything which, properly speaking, you could call a motive at all.

Yours very cordially,  
Paul Snyder

P. S. I don't think much of your Pickett theory. However, you're in charge. I wish you luck.

Aside:

*The curtain closes.*

SCENE IV – Elliot Oakes room at the Excelsior Boarding house.

Elliot Oakes:

“Since I am not making much progress on this case I'm going to have to use a ploy that Sherlock Holmes once said helped him to see the big picture. I need to vocalize the case and what I have uncovered so far as though I were briefing an associate, much the same as Holmes did with Watson. Since I am alone, I can be very candid. Truly I am not enjoying myself. This is the first time in my life, my self-confidence which normally characterizes all my actions seems to be failing me. The fact that this case has the appearance of presenting the unusual had stimulated me at first but lately I have some doubts. The problem has begun to appear insoluble.

. . .

It's true, that I have only just taken it up, but something seems to tell me that, for all the progress I have made and likely to make, I might just as well have been working on it steadily for a month. So far I am completely baffled. And every moment which I spend in the Excelsior Boarding-House makes it clearer to me that that infernal old woman with the pale eyes thinks me an incompetent fool. It was that, more than anything, which made me acutely conscious of my lack of success. My nerves are being sorely troubled by the quiet scorn of Mrs. Pickett's gaze. Perhaps I was a shade too self-confident and abrupt in the short interview which I had had with her on my arrival.

. . .

As you might have expected, my first act, after my brief interview with Mrs. Pickett, was to examine the room where the tragedy had taken place. The body was gone, but otherwise nothing had been moved.

. . .

If I were completely honest, I would say that I belong to the Sherlock Holmes magnifying-glass school of detection. Therefore, the first thing I did on entering the room was to make a careful examination of the floor, the walls, the furniture, and the windowsill. I would have hotly denied the assertion that I did this because it looked well, but I would have been hard put to advance any other reason.

. . .

My discoveries were entirely negative, and served only to deepen the mystery of the case. As Mr. Snyder had said, there was no chimney, and nobody could have

entered through the locked door without considerable force which would surely be evident.

...

There remains the window. It was small, and possibly because of the possibility of burglars, had caused the proprietress to make it doubly secure with an iron bar. No human being could have squeezed his way through it.

...

It is getting late this night and I still have to write and dispatch my preliminary report to headquarters.”

Aside:

*The Curtain closes.*

SCENE V – Mr. Paul Snyder's office at the offices of The Snyder Detective Agency in New Oxford Street. Only Mr. Snyder is on stage.

Paul Snyder (*seated at his desk, wide eyed reading aloud a telegram he had just received*):

HAVE SOLVED GUNNER MYSTERY. RETURNING.... OAKES.

Paul Snyder (*ringing the bell for his Principal Assistant*):

Mrs. Laura Thompson (*enters the room*):

“You rang Mr. Snyder.”

Paul Snyder:

“Send Mr. Oakes to me directly as soon as he arrives, Mrs. Thompson. But first read this telegram that he sent.”

Mrs. Laura Thompson (*gasping*):

“I can hardly believe this Mr. Snyder.”

Paul Snyder:

“I am pained to find that my chief emotion is one of bitter annoyance. The swift

solution of such an apparently insoluble problem would reflect the highest credit on the Agency, and there were picturesque circumstances connected with the case which would make it popular with the newspapers and lead to its being given a great deal of publicity.

. . .

Yet, in spite of all this, I am annoyed. I realize now how large a part the desire to reduce Oakes' self-esteem had played with me. I further realize, looking at the thing honestly, that I had been firmly convinced that the young man would not come within a mile of a reasonable solution of the mystery. I only desired that his failure would prove a valuable educational experience for him. For I had believed that failure at this particular point in his career would make Oakes a more valuable asset to the Agency. But now Oakes was, within a ridiculously short space of time, returning to the fold, not humble and defeated, but triumphant. I look forward with apprehension to the young man's probable demeanor under the intoxicating influence of victory."

Mrs. Laura Thompson:

"I suspect that your apprehensions are well grounded."

Aside:

*After dismissing Mrs. Thompson and upon her departure, He begun the first of a series of cigars. The stage goes dark for a few moments indicating the passage of time. The series of cigars like milestones, marked the progress of Snyder's afternoon. Then the lights returned, the door opened and young Oakes entered.*

Paul Snyder (*faintly*):

"I got your telegram."

Elliot Oakes (*smirking in a patronizing tone*):

"It surprised you, eh?"

Paul Snyder (*resignedly with a visible expression of anger*):

"Yes," he replied, "I must say it did surprise me. I didn't gather from your report that you had even found a clue. Was it the Indian theory that turned the trick?"

Elliot Oakes (*in a pompous tone*):

"Oh, I never really believed that preposterous theory for one moment. I just put it in to round out my report. I hadn't begun to think about the case then – not really think."

Paul Snyder (*nearly exploding with wrath, extended his cigar-case*):

"Light up, and tell me all about it."

Elliot Oakes (*lighting up and puffing away*):

"Well, I won't say I haven't earned this. My first act on arriving, was to have a talk with Mrs. Pickett. A very dull old woman."

Paul Snyder:

"Curious. She struck me as rather intelligent. And by the way, as a rule, my assistants, unless particularly pleased with themselves, use the ashtray."

Elliot Oakes:

"Well Sir, I am particularly pleased with myself. And as for Mrs. Pickett, she gave me no assistance whatever. I then examined the room where the death had taken place. It was exactly as you described it. There was no chimney, the door had been locked on the inside, and the one window was very high up. At first sight, it looked extremely unpromising. Then I had a chat with some of the other boarders. They had nothing of any importance to contribute. Most of them simply gibbered. I then gave up trying to get help from the outside, and resolved to rely on my own intelligence. It is a theory of mine, Mr. Snyder, which I have found valuable that, in nine cases out of ten, remarkable things don't happen."

Paul Snyder (*interrupting*):

"I don't quite follow you there,"

Elliot Oakes:

"I will put it another way, if you like. What I mean is that the simplest explanation is nearly always the right one. Consider this case. It seemed impossible that

there should have been any reasonable explanation of the man's death. Most men would have worn themselves out guessing at wild theories. If I had started to do that, I should have been guessing now. As it is – here I am. I trusted to my belief that nothing remarkable ever happens, and I won out."

Paul Snyder (*sighing softly*):

"Mr. Oakes, you are entitled to a certain amount of self indulgence, but there could be no doubt that your way of telling a story is downright infuriating."

Elliot Oakes:

"I believe in the logical sequence of events. I refuse to accept effects unless they are preceded by causes. In other words, with all due respect to your possibly contrary opinions, Mr. Snyder, I simply decline to believe in a murder unless there was a motive for it. The first thing I set myself to ascertain was – what was the motive for the murder of Captain Gunner? And, after thinking it over and making every possible inquiry, I decided that there was no motive. Therefore, there was no murder."

Paul Snyder (about to protest but thinks better of it):

Elliot Oakes:

"I then tested the suicide theory. What motive was there for suicide? There was no motive. Therefore, there was no suicide."

Paul Snyder:

"You haven't been spending the last few days in the wrong house by any chance, have you? You will be telling me next that there wasn't any dead man."

Elliot Oakes (smiling):

"Not at all. Captain John Gunner was dead, all right. As the medical evidence proved, he died of the bite of a cobra. It was a small cobra which came from Java."

Paul Snyder:

"How do you know?"

Elliot Oakes:

"I do know, beyond any possibility of doubt."

Paul Snyder:

"Did you see the snake?"

Elliot Oakes (*shaking his head in a negative way*):

Paul Snyder:

"Then, how in heaven's name----"

Elliot Oakes:

"I have enough evidence to make a jury convict Mr. Snake without leaving the box."

Paul Snyder:

"Then suppose you tell me this. How did your cobra from Java get out of the room?"

Elliot Oakes (*impassively*):

"By the window,"

Paul Snyder:

"How can you possibly explain that? You say yourself that the window was high up."

Elliot Oakes:

"Nevertheless, it got out by the window. The logical sequence of events is proof enough that it was in the room. It killed Captain Gunner there, and left traces of its presence outside. Therefore, as the window was the only exit, it must have

escaped by that route. It may have climbed or it may have jumped, but somehow it got out of that window."

Paul Snyder:

"What do you mean – it left traces of its presence outside?"

Elliot Oakes:

"It killed a dog in the backyard behind the house. The window of Captain Gunner's room projects out over it. The backyard is full of boxes and litter and there are a few stunted shrubs scattered about. In fact, there is enough cover to hide any small object like the body of a dog. That's why it was not discovered at first. The maid at the Excelsior came on it the morning after I sent you my report. She was emptying a box of ashes in the yard. It was just an ordinary stray dog without collar or license. The analyst examined the body, and found that the dog had died of the bite of a cobra."

Paul Snyder:

"But you didn't find the snake?"

Elliot Oakes:

"No. We cleaned out that yard till you could have eaten your breakfast there, but the snake had gone. It must have escaped through the door of the yard, which was standing ajar. That was a couple of days ago, and there has been no further tragedy. In all likelihood it is dead. The nights are pretty cold now, and it would probably have died of exposure."

Paul Snyder (*amazedly*):

"But, I just don't understand how a cobra got to Southampton."

Elliot Oakes:

"Can't you guess it? I told you it came from Java."

Paul Snyder:

"How did you know it did?"

Elliot Oakes:

"Captain Muller told me. Not directly, but I pieced it together from what he said. It seems that an old shipmate of Captain Gunner's was living in Java. They corresponded, and occasionally this man would send the captain a present as a mark of his esteem. The last present he sent was a crate of bananas. Unfortunately, the snake must have got in unnoticed. That's why I told you the cobra was a small one. Well, that's my case against Mr. Snake, and short of catching him with the goods, I don't see how I could have made out a stronger one. Don't you agree?"

Paul Snyder (*resignedly*):

"Well I am forced to admit that you did certainly seem to have solved the impossible. I congratulate you, my boy. To be completely frank, when you started out, I didn't think you could do it. By the way, I suppose Mrs. Pickett was pleased?"

Elliot Oakes:

"If she was, she didn't show it. I'm pretty well convinced she hasn't enough sense to be pleased at anything. However, she has invited me to dinner with her tonight. I imagine she'll be as boring as usual, but she made such a point of it, I had to accept."

Aside:

*The curtain closes.*

SCENE VI – Mr. Paul Snyder's office at the offices of The Snyder Detective Agency in New Oxford Street. Mr. Snyder is on stage.

Announcer:

For some time after Oakes had gone, Mr. Snyder sat smoking and thinking, in embittered meditation. Suddenly there was brought the card of Mrs. Pickett, who would be grateful if he could spare her a few moments. Mr. Snyder was glad to see Mrs. Pickett. He was a student of character, and she had interested him at

their first meeting. There was something about her which had seemed to him unique, and he welcomed this second chance of studying her at close range.

Mrs. Pickett (*entered and sat down stiffly, balancing herself on the extreme edge of the chair in which a short while before young Oakes had lounged so luxuriously*):

Paul Snyder (*genially*):

"How are you, Mrs. Pickett? I'm very glad that you could find time to pay me a visit. Well, so it wasn't murder after all."

Mrs. Pickett:

"Sir?"

Paul Snyder:

"I've just been talking to Mr. Oakes, whom you met as James Burton. He has told me all about it."

Mrs. Pickett (*dryly*):

"He told me all about it."

Paul Snyder (*looking at her inquiringly*):

Mrs. Pickett:

"A conceited, headstrong young fool."

Paul Snyder:

"This is no new picture of my assistant that you have drawn. I have often drawn it himself, but at the present juncture it surprises me. Oakes, in his hour of triumph, surely does not deserve this sweeping condemnation. Did not Mr. Oakes' solution of the mystery satisfy you, Mrs. Pickett?"

Mrs. Pickett:

"No!"

Paul Snyder:

"It struck me as logical and convincing.

Mrs. Pickett:

"You may call it all the fancy names you please, Mr. Snyder. But Mr. Oakes' solution was not the right one."

Paul Snyder:

"Have you an alternative to offer?"

Mrs. Pickett (*tightening her lips*):

Paul Snyder:

"If you have, I should like to hear it."

Mrs. Pickett:

"You will – at the proper time."

Paul Snyder:

"What makes you so certain that Mr. Oakes is wrong?"

Mrs. Pickett:

"He starts out with an impossible explanation, and rests his whole case on it. There couldn't have been a snake in that room because it couldn't have gotten out. The window was too high."

Paul Snyder:

"But surely the evidence of the dead dog?"

Mrs. Pickett (*looking disappointed*):

"I had always heard you spoken of as a man with common sense, Mr. Snyder."

Paul Snyder:

"I have always tried to use common sense."

Mrs. Pickett:

"Then why are you trying now to make yourself believe that something happened which could not possibly have happened just because it fits in with something which isn't easy to explain?"

Paul Snyder:

"You mean that there is another explanation of the dead dog?"

Mrs. Pickett:

"Not another. What Mr. Oakes takes for granted is not an explanation. But there is a common sense explanation, and if he had not been so headstrong and conceited he might have found it."

Paul Snyder:

"You speak as if you had found it," chided Mr. Snyder."

Mrs. Pickett (*leaning forward as she spoke, and stared at him defiantly*):

"I have."

Paul Snyder (*startled*):

"You have?"

Mrs. Pickett:

"Yes."

Paul Snyder:

"What is it?"

Mrs. Pickett (*reprimandingly*):

"You will know before tomorrow. In the meantime try and think it out for yourself. A successful and prosperous detective agency like yours, Mr. Snyder, ought to do something in return for a fee."

Paul Snyder (*laughing*):

"We do our best, Mrs. Pickett, but you mustn't forget that we are only human and cannot guarantee results."

Mrs. Pickett:

"Now you must swear out a warrant for the arrest of a man on a charge of murder as he is known to us both as Captain Muller."

Paul Snyder (*gasping breathlessly*):

"My God, Mrs Pickett has this whole case made you unhinged? As a rule, I always try to receive my clients' communications calmly, strange as they often are. But at your words I must really take pause. The details of the case are fresh in my memory, and I distinctly recollect that the person you mentioned had been away from the boarding house on the night of Captain Gunner's death, and could, I imagine, produce witnesses to prove it."

Mrs. Pickett (*regarding him with an unfaltering stare*):

"Mr. Snyder, regardless of all appearances, I am the opposite of unbalanced."

Paul Snyder:

"But you can't swear out a warrant without evidence,"

Mrs. Pickett:

"I have evidence."

Paul Snyder:

"Precisely what kind of evidence?"

Mrs. Pickett:

"If I told you now you would think that I was out of my mind."

Paul Snyder:

"But, Mrs. Pickett, do you realize what you are asking me to do? I cannot make this agency responsible for the arbitrary arrest of a man on the strength of a single individual's suspicions. It might ruin me. At the least it would make me a laughing stock."

Mrs. Pickett:

"Mr. Snyder, you may use your own judgment whether or not to make the arrest on that warrant. You will listen to what I have to say, and you will see for yourself how the crime was committed. If after that you feel that you cannot make the arrest I will accept your decision. I know who killed Captain Gunner. I knew it from the beginning. It was like a vision but I had no proof. Now things have come to light and everything is clear."

Paul Snyder (*visibly impressed*):

"It . . . it sounds incredible." But, even as I speak, I remember that it had long been a professional maxim of mine that nothing is incredible."

Mrs. Pickett:

"Mr. Snyder, I ask you to swear out that warrant."

Paul Snyder:

"Very well,"

Mrs. Pickett (*rising*):

"If you will come and dine at my house to-night I think I can prove to you that it will be needed. Will you come?"

Paul Snyder:

"I'll come."

Aside:

*The curtain closes.*

SCENE VII – Mrs. Pickett's sitting room at the Excelsior Boarding House.

Announcer:

When Mr. Snyder arrived at the Excelsior and shortly after he was shown into the little private sitting room where he found Oakes, the third guest of the evening unexpectedly arrived. Mr. Snyder looked curiously at the newcomer. Captain Muller had a peculiar fascination for him. It was not Mr. Snyder's habit to trust overmuch to appearances. But he could not help admitting that there was something about this man's aspect which brought Mrs. Pickett's charges out of the realm of the fantastic into that of the possible. There was an unnatural aspect of gloom about the man. He bore himself like one carrying a heavy burden. His eyes were dull, his face haggard. The next moment the detective was reproaching himself with allowing his imagination to run away with his calmer judgment.

Mr. Snyder:

"One of the most remarkable points about this dinner is the evident metamorphosis of Mrs. Pickett from the brooding silent woman we have known to the gracious and considerate hostess that she must be."

Elliot Oakes:

"I too am overcome with surprise, so much so that I am unable to keep my astonishment to myself. I had come prepared to endure a dull evening absorbed in grim silence, and I find myself instead opposite a bottle of champagne of a brand and year which commands my utmost respect. What was more incredible, our hostess seems to have transformed herself into a pleasant old lady whose only aim seemed to be to make us feel at home."

Mrs. Pickett (*entering without excuse for her lateness*):

Mr. Snyder:

"I see that beside each of the guests' plates is a neat paper parcel. Is this some kind of party favor Mrs. Pickett?"

Mrs. Pickett:

"It is just a small token of my esteem."

Elliot Oakes (*picking up his parcel, opening it and staring at it*):

"Why, this is more than a party souvenir, Mrs. Pickett. It's the kind of mechanical marvel I've always wanted to have on my desk."

Mrs. Pickett (*smiling*):

"I'm glad you like it, Mr. Oakes. You must not think of me simply as a tired old woman whom age has completely defeated. I am an ambitious hostess. When I give these little parties, I like to make them a success. I want each of you to remember this dinner."

Elliot Oakes:

"I'm sure I will."

Mrs. Pickett (*smiling*):

"I think you all will. You, Mr. Snyder . . . And you, Captain Muller."

Aside:

*There was so much meaning in her voice as she said this that Paul Snyder was amazed that it conveyed no warning to Muller. Captain Muller, however, was already drinking heavily. He looked up when addressed and uttered a sound which might have been taken for an expression of polite acquiescence. Then he filled his glass again.*

Mrs. Pickett:

"Mr. Snyder's parcel contains a watch-charm fashioned in the shape of a tiny, candid-eye camera. That, is a compliment to your profession. Mr. Snyder is a detective, Captain Muller."

Captain Muller (*looking up with a look of fear that lit up his heavy eyes for an instant. The look came and went, if indeed it came at all, so swiftly, then speaking evenly with interest*):

"So?"

Elliot Oakes:

"Now for yours, Captain. I would guess it's something special. It's twice the size of mine, anyway."

Aside:

*It may have been something in the old woman's expression as she watched Captain Muller slowly tearing the paper that sent a thrill of excitement through Mr. Snyder. Something seemed to warn him of the approach of a psychological moment. He bent forward eagerly.*

*There was a strangled gasp, a thump, and onto the table from the captain's hands there fell a little harmonica. There was no mistaking the look on Muller's face now. His cheeks were like wax, and his eyes, so dull till then, blazed with a panic and horror which he could not repress. The glasses on the table rocked as he clutched at the cloth.*

Mrs. Pickett:

"Why, Captain Muller, has the little harmonica upset you? I thought that, as his best friend, the man who shared his room, you would value a memento of Captain Gunner. How fond you must have been of him for the sight of his harmonica to be such a shock."

Captain Muller (*not speaking, staring fascinated at the thing on the table. Mrs. Pickett turned to Mr. Snyder. Her eyes, as they met his, held him entranced*):

Mrs. Pickett:

"Mr. Snyder, as a detective, you will be interested in a curious and very tragic affair which happened in this house a few days ago. One of my boarders, Captain Gunner, was found dead in his room. It was the room which he shared with Captain Muller. I am very proud of the reputation of my house, Mr. Snyder, and it was a blow to me that this should have happened. I applied to an agency for a detective, and they sent me a stupid boy, with nothing to recommend him except his belief in himself. He said that Captain Gunner had died by accident, killed by a snake which had come out of a crate of bananas. I knew better. I knew that Captain Gunner had been murdered. Are you listening, Captain Muller? This will interest you, as you were such a friend of his."

Captain Muller (*not answering but looking straight before him, as if he saw something invisible in eyes forever closed in death*):

Mrs. Pickett:

"Yesterday we found the body of a dog. It had been killed, as Captain Gunner had been, by the poison of a snake. The boy from the agency said that this was conclusive. He said that the snake had escaped from the room after killing Captain Gunner and had in turn killed the dog. I knew that to be impossible, for, if there had been a snake in that room it could not have made its escape. It was not a snake that killed Captain Gunner. It was a cat. Captain Gunner had a friend who hated him. One day, in opening a crate of bananas, in the backyard this friend found a snake. He killed it, and extracted the poison. He knew Captain Gunner's habits. He knew that he played a harmonica. This man also had a cat. He knew that cats hated the sound of a harmonica. He had often seen this particular cat fly at Captain Gunner and scratch him when he played. He took the cat and covered its claws with the poison. And then he left it in the room with Captain Gunner. He knew what would happen. The death of the dog was coincidental and probably occurred before Captain Muller discovered the snake in the banana crate."

Elliot Oakes and Mr. Snyder (*both standing*):

Captain Muller (*remained seated, his fingers gripping the table cloth*):

Mrs. Pickett (*arose, went to the closet and unlocked the door*):

Mrs. Pickett:

"Kitty!" . . . "Kitty! Kitty!"

Aside:

*A black cat ran swiftly out into the room. As Captain Muller staggered to his feet the table heaved, rocked and overturned with a clatter and a crash of crockery and a ringing of glass.*

Captain Muller (*throwing up his hands as if to ward something off and with a choking cry*):

"Gott! Gott in heven!"

Mrs. Pickett (in a cold and biting voice):

"Captain Muller, you murdered Captain Gunner!"

Captain Muller (*replying mechanically*):

"Gott! Yes, I killed him. The man was overbearing and insulted all those who he felt beneath him. As a Captain of many years, he felt that everyone was beneath him. Lately he had become even more recalcitrant and on several occasions accused me of stealing his belongings only to find them the next day.

Mrs. Pickett:

"You heard him Mr. Snyder. He has confessed before witnesses. Please take him away."

Paul Snyder (*smirking*):

"Oakes, give me a hand with Captain Muller. And by the way, let us have a little talk when all this is over and we return to the Agency.

Aside:

*Captain Muller, with his arm in Mr. Snyder's grip, went limp and allowed himself to be moved toward the door. Mrs. Pickett, stopped, bent over, took something from the debris on the floor and arose, holding the harmonica.*

Mrs. Pickett:

"Captain Muller, you are forgetting your souvenir."

Aside:

*The curtain closes. Actors take a curtain call.*

End of Death at the .