



Agatha Christie

**the unexpected
guest**

Adapted as a novel by CHARLES OSBORNE

The Unexpected Guest

Agatha Christie is known throughout the world as the Queen of Crime. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English with another billion in 100 foreign languages. She is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. She is the author of 80 crime novels and short story collections, 17 plays, and six novels written under the name of Mary Westmacott.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was written towards the end of the First World War, in which she served as a VAD. In it she created Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian detective who was destined to become the most popular detective in crime fiction since Sherlock Holmes. It was eventually published by The Bodley Head in 1920.

In 1926, after averaging a book a year, Agatha Christie wrote her masterpiece. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was the first of her books to be published by Collins and marked the beginning of an author-publisher relationship which lasted for 50 years and well over 70 books. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was also the first of Agatha Christie's books to be dramatised – under the name *Alibi* – and to have a successful run in London's West End. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play of all, opened in 1952 and is the longest-running play in history.

Agatha Christie was made a Dame in 1971. She died in 1976, since when a number of books have been published posthumously: the bestselling novel *Sleeping Murder* appeared later that year, followed by her autobiography and the short story collections *Miss Marple's Final Cases*, *Problem at Pollensa Bay* and *While the Light Lasts*. In 1998 *Black Coffee* was the first of her plays to be novelised by another author, Charles Osborne.

The Agatha Christie Collection

The Man In The Brown Suit
The Secret of Chimneys
The Seven Dials Mystery
The Mysterious Mr Quin
The Sittaford Mystery
The Hound of Death
The Listerdale Mystery
Why Didn't They Ask Evans?
Parker Pyne Investigates
Murder Is Easy
And Then There Were None
Towards Zero
Death Comes as the End
Sparkling Cyanide
Crooked House
They Came to Baghdad
Destination Unknown
Spider's Web *
The Unexpected Guest *
Ordeal by Innocence
The Pale Horse
Endless Night
Passenger To Frankfurt
Problem at Pollensa Bay
While the Light Lasts

Poirot

The Mysterious Affair at Styles
The Murder on the Links
Poirot Investigates
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd
The Big Four
The Mystery of the Blue Train
Black Coffee *
Peril at End House
Lord Edgware Dies
Murder on the Orient Express
Three-Act Tragedy
Death in the Clouds
The ABC Murders
Murder in Mesopotamia
Cards on the Table
Murder in the Mews
Dumb Witness
Death on the Nile
Appointment With Death
Hercule Poirot's Christmas
Sad Cypress
One, Two, Buckle My Shoe
Evil Under the Sun
Five Little Pigs

* novelised by Charles Osborne

The Hollow
The Labours of Hercules
Taken at the Flood
Mrs McGinty's Dead
After the Funeral
Hickory Dickory Dock
Dead Man's Folly
Cat Among the Pigeons
The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding
The Clocks
Third Girl
Hallowe'en Party
Elephants Can Remember
Poirot's Early Cases
Curtain: Poirot's Last Case

Marple

The Murder at the Vicarage
The Thirteen Problems
The Body in the Library
The Moving Finger
A Murder is Announced
They Do It With Mirrors
A Pocket Full of Rye
The 4.50 from Paddington
The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side
A Canbbean Mystery
At Bertram's Hotel
Nemesis
Sleeping Murder
Miss Marple's Final Cases
Tommy & Tuppence
The Secret Adversary
Partners in Crime
N or M?
By the Pricking of My Thumbs
Postern of Fate

Published as Mary Westmacott

Giant's Bread
Unfinished Portrait
Absent in the Spring
The Rose and the Yew Tree
A Daughter's a Daughter
The Burden

Memoirs

An Autobiography
Come, Tell Me How You Live

Play Collections

The Mousetrap and Selected Plays
Witness for the Prosecution and
Selected Plays

Agatha Christie

The Unexpected Guest

novelised by

Charles Osborne



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Chapter 1

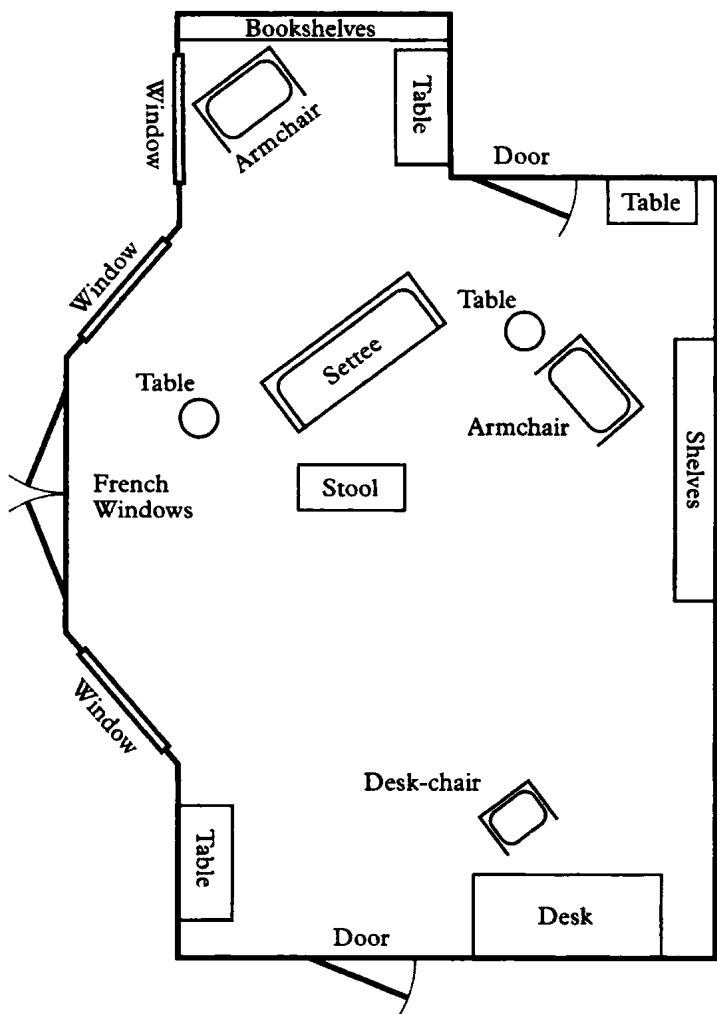
It was shortly before midnight on a chilly November evening, and swirls of mist obscured parts of the dark, narrow, tree-lined country road in South Wales, not far from the Bristol Channel whence a foghorn sounded its melancholy boom automatically every few moments. Occasionally, the distant barking of a dog could be heard, and the melancholy call of a night-bird. What few houses there were along the road, which was little better than a lane, were about a half-mile apart. On one of its darkest stretches the road turned, passing a handsome, three-storey house standing well back from its spacious garden, and it was at this spot that a car sat, its front wheels caught in the ditch at the side of the road. After two or three attempts to accelerate out of the ditch, the driver of the car must have decided it was no use persevering, and the engine fell silent.

A minute or two passed before the driver emerged

from the vehicle, slamming the door behind him. He was a somewhat thick-set, sandy-haired man of about thirty-five, with an outdoor look about him, dressed in a rough tweed suit and dark overcoat and wearing a hat. Using a torch to find his way, he began to walk cautiously across the lawn towards the house, stopping halfway to survey the eighteenth-century building's elegant façade. The house appeared to be in total darkness as he approached the french windows on that side of the edifice which faced him. After turning to look back at the lawn he had crossed, and the road beyond it, he walked right up to the french windows, ran his hands over the glass, and peered in. Unable to discern any movement within, he knocked on the window. There was no response, and after a pause he knocked again much louder. When he realized that his knocking was not having any effect, he tried the handle. Immediately, the window opened and he stumbled into a room that was in darkness.

Inside the room, he paused again, as though attempting to discern any sound or movement. Then, 'Hello,' he called. 'Is anyone there?' Flashing his torch around the room which revealed itself to be a well-furnished study, its walls lined with books, he saw in the centre of the room a handsome middle-aged man sitting in a wheelchair facing the french windows, with a rug over his knees. The man appeared to have fallen asleep

The Unexpected Guest



in his chair. 'Oh, hello,' said the intruder. 'I didn't mean to startle you. So sorry. It's this confounded fog. I've just run my car off the road into a ditch, and I haven't the faintest idea where I am. Oh, and I've left the window open. I'm so sorry.' Continuing to speak apologetically as he moved, he turned back to the french windows, shut them, and closed the curtains. 'Must have run off the main road somewhere,' he explained. 'I've been driving round these topsy-turvy lanes for an hour or more.'

There was no reply. 'Are you asleep?' the intruder asked, as he faced the man in the wheelchair again. Still receiving no answer, he shone his torch on the face of the chair's occupant, and then stopped abruptly. The man in the chair neither opened his eyes nor moved. As the intruder bent over him, touching his shoulder as though to awaken him, the man's body slumped down into a huddled position in the chair. 'Good God!' the man holding the torch exclaimed. He paused momentarily, as though undecided what to do next, and then, shining his torch about the room, found a light switch by a door, and crossed the room to switch it on.

The light on a desk came on. The intruder put his torch on the desk and, looking intently at the man in the wheelchair, circled around him. Noticing another door with a light switch by it, he went across and flicked the switch, thus turning on the lamps on two

occasional tables strategically placed around the room. Then, taking a step towards the man in the wheelchair, he gave a start as he suddenly noticed for the first time an attractive, fair-haired woman of about thirty, wearing a cocktail dress and matching jacket, standing by a book-lined recess on the opposite side of the room. With her arms hanging limply by her sides, she neither moved nor spoke. It seemed as though she was trying not even to breathe. There was a moment's silence while they stared at each other. Then the man spoke. 'He – he's dead!' he exclaimed.

Completely without expression, the woman answered him. 'Yes.'

'You already knew?' asked the man.

'Yes.'

Cautiously approaching the body in the wheelchair, the man said, 'He's been shot. Through the head. Who – ?'

He paused as the woman slowly brought her right hand up from where it had been hidden by the folds of her dress. In her hand was a revolver. The man drew in his breath sharply. When it seemed that she was not threatening him with it, he approached her, and gently took the gun from her. 'You shot him?' he asked.

'Yes,' the woman replied, after a pause.

The man moved away from her, and put the gun on a table by the wheelchair. For a moment he stood

looking at the dead body, and then gazed uncertainly around the room.

‘The telephone is over there,’ said the woman, nodding towards the desk.

‘Telephone?’ the man echoed. He sounded startled.

‘If you want to ring up the police,’ the woman continued, still speaking in the same detached, expressionless manner.

The stranger stared at her as though unable to make her out. Then, ‘A few minutes one way or the other won’t make any difference,’ he said. ‘They’ll have a bit of a job getting here in this fog anyway. I’d like to know a little more –’ He broke off and looked at the body. ‘Who is he?’

‘My husband,’ replied the woman. She paused, and then continued, ‘His name is Richard Warwick. I am Laura Warwick.’

The man continued to stare at her. ‘I see,’ he murmured finally. ‘Hadn’t you better – sit down?’

Laura Warwick moved slowly and somewhat unsteadily to a sofa. Looking around the room, the man asked, ‘Can I get you a – drink – or something? It must have been a shock.’

‘Shooting my husband?’ Her tone was drily ironic.

Appearing to regain his poise somewhat, the man attempted to match her expression. ‘I should imagine so, yes. Or was it just fun and games?’

‘It was fun and games,’ replied Laura Warwick inscrutably as she sat down on the sofa. The man frowned, looking puzzled. ‘But I would like – that drink,’ she continued.

The man took off his hat and threw it onto an arm-chair, then poured brandy from a decanter on the table close to the wheelchair and handed her the glass. She drank and, after a pause, the man said, ‘Now, suppose you tell me all about it.’

Laura Warwick looked up at him. ‘Hadn’t you better ring the police?’ she asked.

‘All in good time. Nothing wrong with having a cosy little chat first, is there?’ He took off his gloves, stuffed them into his overcoat pocket, and started unbuttoning his coat.

Laura Warwick’s poise began to break. ‘I don’t –’ she began. She paused and then continued, ‘Who are you? How did you happen to come here tonight?’ Without giving him time to answer, she went on, her voice now almost a shout, ‘For God’s sake, tell me who you are!’

Chapter 2

‘By all means,’ the man replied. He ran a hand through his hair, looked around the room for a moment as though wondering where or how to begin, and then continued, ‘My name’s Michael Starkwedder. I know it’s an unusual name.’ He spelt it out for her. ‘I’m an engineer. I work for Anglo-Iranian, and I’m just back in this country from a term in the Persian Gulf.’ He paused, seeming briefly to be remembering the Middle East, or perhaps trying to decide how much detail to go into, then shrugged his shoulders. ‘I’ve been down here in Wales for a couple of days, looking up old landmarks. My mother’s family came from this part of the world and I thought I might buy a little house.’

He shook his head, smiling. ‘The last two hours – more like three, I should think – I’ve been hopelessly lost. Driving round all the twisting lanes in South

Wales, and ending up in a ditch! Thick fog everywhere. I found a gate, groped my way to this house, hoping to get hold of a telephone or perhaps, if I was lucky, get put up for the night. I tried the handle of the french window there, found it wasn't locked, so I walked in. Whereupon I find –' He gestured towards the wheelchair, indicating the body slumped in it.

Laura Warwick looked up at him, her eyes expressionless. 'You knocked on the window first – several times,' she murmured.

'Yes, I did. Nobody answered.'

Laura caught her breath. 'No, I didn't answer.' Her voice was now almost a whisper.

Starkwedder looked at her, as though trying to make her out. He took a step towards the body in the wheelchair, then turned back to the woman on the sofa. To encourage her into speaking again, he repeated, 'As I say, I tried the handle, the window wasn't locked, so I came in.'

Laura stared down into her brandy glass. She spoke as though she were quoting. "'The door opens and the unexpected guest comes in.'" She shivered slightly. 'That saying always frightened me when I was a child. "The unexpected guest".' Throwing her head back she stared up at her unexpected visitor, and exclaimed with sudden intensity, 'Oh, why don't you ring up the police and get it over?'

Starkwedder walked over to the body in the chair. 'Not yet,' he said. 'In a moment, perhaps. Can you tell me why you shot him?'

The note of irony returned to Laura's voice as she answered him. 'I can give you some excellent reasons. For one thing, he drank. He drank excessively. For another, he was cruel. Unbearably cruel. I've hated him for years.' Catching the sharp look Starkwedder gave her at this, she continued angrily, 'Oh, what do you expect me to say?'

'You've hated him for years?' Starkwedder murmured as though to himself. He looked thoughtfully at the body. 'But something – something special – happened tonight, didn't it?' he asked.

'You're quite right,' Laura replied emphatically. 'Something special indeed happened tonight. And so – I took the gun off the table from where it was lying beside him, and – and I shot him. It was as simple as that.' She threw an impatient glance at Starkwedder as she continued, 'Oh, what's the good of talking about it? You'll only have to ring up the police in the end. There's no way out.' Her voice dropped as she repeated, 'No way out!'

Starkwedder looked at her from across the room. 'It's not quite as simple as you think,' he observed.

'Why isn't it simple?' asked Laura. Her voice sounded weary.

Agatha Christie

Approaching her, Starkwedder spoke slowly and deliberately. 'It isn't so easy to do what you're urging me to do,' he said. 'You're a woman. A very attractive woman.'

Laura looked up at him sharply. 'Does that make a difference?' she asked.

Starkwedder's voice sounded almost cheerful as he replied, 'Theoretically, certainly not. But in practical terms, yes.' He took his overcoat over to the recess, put it on the armchair, and returned to stand looking down at the body of Richard Warwick.

'Oh, you're talking about chivalry,' Laura observed listlessly.

'Well, call it curiosity if you prefer,' said Starkwedder. 'I'd like to know what this is all about.'

Laura paused before replying. Then, 'I've told you,' was all she said.

Starkwedder walked slowly around the wheelchair containing the body of Laura's husband, as though fascinated by it. 'You've told me the bare facts, perhaps,' he admitted. 'But nothing *more* than the bare facts.'

'And I've given you my excellent motive,' Laura replied. 'There's nothing more to tell. In any case, why should you believe what I tell you? I could make up any story I liked. You've only got my word for it that Richard was a cruel beast and that he drank