

Agatha Christie



spider's web

Adapted as a novel by CHARLES OSBORNE

Spider's Web

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, 19 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 1920, 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

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Spider's Web *
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While the Light Lasts

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* novelised by Charles Osborne

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The Mousetrap and Selected Plays
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novelised by

Charles Osborne

 **HarperCollins** *Publishers*

HarperCollinsPublishers
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.fireandwater.com

This *Agatha Christie Signature Edition* published 2003

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First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollinsPublishers 2001

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ISBN 0 00 715486 0

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Chapter 1

Copplestone Court, the elegant, eighteenth-century country home of Henry and Clarissa Hailsham-Brown, set in gently undulating hilly country in Kent, looked handsome even at the close of a rainy March afternoon. In the tastefully furnished ground-floor drawing-room, with French windows onto the garden, two men stood near a console table on which there was a tray with three glasses of port, each marked with a sticky label, one, two and three. Also on the table was a pencil and sheet of paper.

Sir Rowland Delahaye, a distinguished-looking man in his early fifties with a charming and cultivated manner, seated himself on the arm of a comfortable chair and allowed his companion to blindfold him. Hugo Birch, a man of about sixty and inclined to be somewhat irascible in manner, then placed in Sir Rowland's hand one of the glasses from the table. Sir

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Rowland sipped, considered for a moment, and then said, 'I should think – yes – definitely – yes, this is the Dow 'forty-two.'

Hugo replaced the glass on the table, murmuring 'Dow 'forty-two', made a note on the paper, and handed over the next glass. Again Sir Rowland sipped the wine. He paused, took another sip, and then nodded affirmatively. 'Ah, yes,' he declared with conviction. 'Now, this is a very fine port indeed.' He took another sip. 'No doubt about it. Cockburn 'twenty-seven.'

He handed the glass back to Hugo as he continued, 'Fancy Clarissa wasting a bottle of Cockburn 'twenty-seven on a silly experiment like this. It's positively sacrilegious. But then women just don't understand port at all.'

Hugo took the glass from him, noted his verdict on the piece of paper on the table, and handed him the third glass. After a quick sip, Sir Rowland's reaction was immediate and violent. 'Ugh!' he exclaimed in disgust. 'Rich Ruby port-type wine. I can't imagine why Clarissa has such a thing in the house.'

His opinion duly noted, he removed the blindfold. 'Now it's ~~your~~ turn,' he told Hugo.

Taking off his horn-rimmed spectacles, Hugo allowed Sir Rowland to blindfold him. 'Well, I imagine she uses the cheap port for jugged hare or for flavouring soup,'

he suggested. 'I don't imagine Henry would allow her to offer it to guests.'

'There you are, Hugo,' Sir Rowland declared as he finished tying the blindfold over his companion's eyes. 'Perhaps I ought to turn you around three times like they do in Blind Man's Buff,' he added as he led Hugo to the armchair and turned him around to sit in it.

'Here, steady on,' Hugo protested. He felt behind him for the chair.

'Got it?' asked Sir Rowland.

'Yes.'

'Then I'll swivel the glasses around instead,' Sir Rowland said as he moved the glasses on the table slightly.

'There's no need to,' Hugo told him. 'Do you think I'm likely to be influenced by what you said? I'm as good a judge of port as you are any day, Roly, my boy.'

'Don't be too sure of that. In any case, one can't be too careful,' Sir Rowland insisted.

Just as he was about to take one of the glasses across to Hugo, the third of the Hailsham-Browns' guests came in from the garden. Jeremy Warrender, an attractive young man in his twenties, was wearing a raincoat over his suit. Panting, and obviously out of breath, he headed for the sofa and was about to flop into it when he noticed what was going on.

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'What on earth are you two up to?' he asked, as he removed his raincoat and jacket. 'The three-card trick with glasses?'

'What's that?' the blindfolded Hugo wanted to know. 'It sounds as though someone's brought a dog into the room.'

'It's only young Warrender,' Sir Rowland assured him. 'Behave yourself.'

'Oh, I thought it sounded like a dog that's been chasing a rabbit,' Hugo declared.

'I've been three times to the lodge gates and back, wearing a mackintosh over my clothes,' Jeremy explained as he fell heavily onto the sofa. 'Apparently the Herzoslovakian Minister did it in four minutes fifty-three seconds, weighed down by his mackintosh. I went all out, but I couldn't do any better than six minutes ten seconds. And I don't believe he did, either. Only Chris Chattaway himself could do it in that time, with or without a mackintosh.'

'Who told you that about the Herzoslovakian Minister?' Sir Rowland enquired.

'Clarissa.'

'Clarissa!' exclaimed Sir Rowland, chuckling.

'Oh, Clarissa,' Hugo snorted. 'You shouldn't pay any attention to what Clarissa tells you.'

Still chuckling, Sir Rowland continued, 'I'm afraid you don't know your hostess very well, Warrender.'

She's a young lady with a very vivid imagination.'

Jeremy rose to his feet. 'Do you mean she made the whole thing up?' he asked, indignantly.

'Well, I wouldn't put it past her,' Sir Rowland answered as he handed one of the three glasses to the still blindfolded Hugo. 'And it certainly sounds like her idea of a joke.'

'Does it, indeed? You just wait till I see that young woman,' Jeremy promised. 'I'll certainly have something to say to her. Gosh, I'm exhausted.' He stalked out to the hall carrying his raincoat.

'Stop puffing like a walrus,' Hugo complained. 'I'm trying to concentrate. There's a fiver at stake. Roly and I have got a bet on.'

'Oh, what is it?' Jeremy enquired, returning to perch on an arm of the sofa.

'It's to decide who's the best judge of port,' Hugo told him. 'We've got Cockburn 'twenty-seven, Dow 'forty-two, and the local grocer's special. Quiet now. This is important.' He sipped from the glass he was holding, and then murmured rather non-committally, 'Mmm-ah.'

'Well?' Sir Roland queried. 'Have you decided what the first one is?'

'Don't hustle me, Roly,' Hugo exclaimed. 'I'm not going to rush my fences. Where's the next one?'

He held on to the glass as he was handed another.

He sipped and then announced, 'Yes, I'm pretty sure about those two.' He sniffed at both glasses again. 'This first one's the Dow,' he decided as he held out one glass. 'The second was the Cockburn,' he continued, handing the other glass back as Sir Rowland repeated, 'Number three glass the Dow, number one the Cockburn', writing as he spoke.

'Well, it's hardly necessary to taste the third,' Hugo declared, 'but I suppose I'd better go through with it.'

'Here you are,' said Sir Rowland, handing over the final glass.

After sipping from it, Hugo made an exclamation of extreme distaste. 'Tschah! Ugh! What unspeakable muck.' He returned the glass to Sir Rowland, then took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his lips to get rid of the offending taste. 'It'll take me an hour to get the taste of that stuff out of my mouth,' he complained. 'Get me out of this, Roly.'

'Here, I'll do it,' Jeremy offered, rising and moving behind Hugo to remove his blindfold while Sir Rowland thoughtfully sipped the last of the three glasses before putting it back on the table.

'So that's what you think, Hugo, is it? Glass number two, grocer's special?' He shook his head. 'Rubbish! That's the Dow 'forty-two, not a doubt of it.'

Hugo put the blindfold in his pocket. 'Pah! You've lost your palate, Roly,' he declared.

'Let me try,' Jeremy suggested. Going to the table, he took a quick sip from each glass. He paused for a moment, sipped each of them again, and then admitted, 'Well, they all taste the same to me.'

'You young people!' Hugo admonished him. 'It's all this confounded gin you keep on drinking. Completely ruins your palate. It's not just women who don't appreciate port. Nowadays, no man under forty does, either.'

Before Jeremy had a chance to reply to this, the door leading to the library opened, and Clarissa Hailsham-Brown, a beautiful dark-haired woman in her late twenties, entered. 'Hello, my darlings,' she greeted Sir Rowland and Hugo. 'Have you settled it yet?'

'Yes, Clarissa,' Sir Rowland assured her. 'We're ready for you.'

'I know I'm right,' said Hugo. 'Number one's the Cockburn, number two's the port-type stuff, and three's the Dow. Right?'

'Nonsense,' Sir Rowland exclaimed before Clarissa could answer. 'Number one's the Dow, two's the Cockburn, and three's the port-type stuff. I'm right, aren't I?'

'Darlings!' was Clarissa's only immediate response. She kissed first Hugo and then Sir Rowland, and continued, 'Now one of you take the tray back to the dining-room. You'll find the decanter on the

sideboard.' Smiling to herself, she selected a chocolate from a box on an occasional table.

Sir Rowland had picked up the tray with the glasses on it, and was about to leave with them. He stopped. 'The decanter?' he asked, warily.

Clarissa sat on the sofa, tucking her feet up under her. 'Yes,' she replied. 'Just one decanter.' She giggled. 'It's all the same port, you know.'

Chapter 2

Clarissa's announcement produced a different reaction from each of her hearers. Jeremy burst into hoots of laughter, went across to his hostess and kissed her, while Sir Rowland stood gaping with astonishment, and Hugo seemed undecided what attitude to adopt to her having made fools of them both.

When Sir Rowland finally found words, they were, 'Clarissa, you unprincipled humbug.' But his tone was affectionate.

'Well,' Clarissa responded, 'it's been such a wet afternoon, and you weren't able to play golf. You must have some fun, and you have had fun over this, darlings, haven't you?'

'Upon my soul,' Sir Rowland exclaimed as he carried the tray to the door. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself, showing up your elders and betters. It turns out that only young Warrender here guessed they were

all the same.'

Hugo, who by now was laughing, accompanied him to the door. 'Who was it?' he asked, putting an arm around Sir Rowland's shoulder, 'Who was it who said that he'd know Cockburn 'twenty-seven anywhere?'

'Never mind, Hugo,' Sir Rowland replied resignedly, 'let's have some more of it later, whatever it is.' Talking as they went, the two men left by the door leading to the hall, Hugo closing the door behind them.

Jeremy confronted Clarissa on her sofa. 'Now then, Clarissa,' he said accusingly, 'what's all this about the Herzoslovakian Minister?'

Clarissa looked at him innocently. 'What about him?' she asked.

Pointing a finger at her, Jeremy spoke clearly and slowly. 'Did he ever run to the lodge gates and back, in a mackintosh, three times in four minutes fifty-three seconds?'

Clarissa smiled sweetly as she replied, 'The Herzoslovakian Minister is a dear, but he's well over sixty, and I doubt very much if he's run anywhere for years.'

'So you did make the whole thing up. They told me you probably did. But why?'

'Well,' Clarissa suggested, her smile even sweeter than before, 'you'd been complaining all day about not getting enough exercise. So I thought the only friendly thing to do was to help you get some. It

would have been no good ordering you to go for a brisk run through the woods, but I knew you'd respond to a challenge. So I invented someone for you to challenge.'

Jeremy gave a comical groan of exasperation. 'Clarissa,' he asked her, 'do you ever speak the truth?'

'Of course I do – sometimes,' Clarissa admitted. 'But when I am speaking the truth, nobody ever seems to believe me. It's very odd.' She thought for a moment, and then continued. 'I suppose when you're making things up, you get carried away and that makes it sound more convincing.' She drifted over to the French windows.

'I might have broken a blood vessel,' Jeremy complained. 'A fat lot you'd have cared about that.'

Clarissa laughed. Opening the window she observed, 'I do believe it's cleared up. It's going to be a lovely evening. How delicious the garden smells after rain.' She leaned out and sniffed. 'Narcissus.'

As she closed the window again, Jeremy came over to join her. 'Do you really like living down here in the country?' he asked.

'I love it.'

'But you must get bored to death,' he exclaimed. 'It's all so incongruous for you, Clarissa. You must miss the theatre terribly. I hear you were passionate about it when you were younger.'

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‘Yes, I was. But I manage to create my own theatre right here,’ said Clarissa with a laugh.

‘But you ought to be leading an exciting life in London.’

Clarissa laughed again. ‘What – parties and night clubs?’ she asked.

‘Parties, yes. You’d make a brilliant hostess,’ Jeremy told her, laughing.

She turned to face him. ‘It sounds like an Edwardian novel,’ she said. ‘Anyway, diplomatic parties are terribly dull.’

‘But it’s such a waste, your being tucked away down here,’ he persisted, moving close to her and attempting to take her hand.

‘A waste – of me?’ asked Clarissa, withdrawing her hand.

‘Yes,’ Jeremy responded fervently. ‘Then there’s Henry.’

‘What about Henry?’ Clarissa busied herself patting a cushion on an easy chair.

Jeremy looked at her steadily. ‘I can’t imagine why you ever married him,’ he replied, plucking up his courage. ‘He’s years older than you, with a daughter who’s a school-kid.’ He leaned on the armchair, still observing her closely. ‘He’s an excellent man, I have no doubt, but really, of all the pompous stuffed shirts. Going about looking like a boiled owl.’ He paused,