

Agatha Christie

HALLOWE'EN PARTY



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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 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 Caribbean 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

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To P.G. Wodehouse
whose books and stories have brightened my
life for many years. Also to show my pleasure
in his having been kind enough to tell me
that he enjoys *my* books

Chapter 1

Mrs Ariadne Oliver had gone with the friend with whom she was staying, Judith Butler, to help with the preparations for a children's party which was to take place that same evening.

At the moment it was a scene of chaotic activity. Energetic women came in and out of doors moving chairs, small tables, flower vases, and carrying large quantities of yellow pumpkins which they disposed strategically in selected spots.

It was to be a Hallowe'en party for invited guests of an age group between ten and seventeen years old.

Mrs Oliver, removing herself from the main group, leant against a vacant background of wall and held up a large yellow pumpkin, looking at it critically – 'The last time I saw one of these,' she said, sweeping back her grey hair from her prominent forehead, 'was in the United States last year – hundreds of them. All over

the house. I've never seen so many pumpkins. As a matter of fact,' she added thoughtfully, 'I've never really known the difference between a pumpkin and a vegetable marrow. What's this one?'

'Sorry, dear,' said Mrs Butler, as she fell over her friend's feet.

Mrs Oliver pressed herself closer against the wall.

'My fault,' she said. 'I'm standing about and getting in the way. But it *was* rather remarkable, seeing so many pumpkins or vegetable marrows, whatever they are. They were everywhere, in the shops, and in people's houses, with candles or nightlights inside them or strung up. Very interesting really. But it wasn't for a Hallowe'en party, it was Thanksgiving. Now I've always associated pumpkins with Hallowe'en and that's the end of October. Thanksgiving comes much later, doesn't it? Isn't it November, about the third week in November? Anyway, here, Hallowe'en is definitely the 31st of October, isn't it? First Hallowe'en and then, what comes next? All Souls' Day? That's when in Paris you go to cemeteries and put flowers on graves. Not a sad sort of feast. I mean, all the children go too, and enjoy themselves. You go to flower markets first and buy lots and lots of lovely flowers. Flowers never look so lovely as they do in Paris in the market there.'

A lot of busy women were falling over Mrs Oliver occasionally, but they were not listening to her. They

were all too busy with what they were doing.

They consisted for the most part of mothers, one or two competent spinsters; there were useful teenagers, boys of sixteen and seventeen climbing up ladders or standing on chairs to put decorations, pumpkins or vegetable marrows or brightly coloured witchballs at a suitable elevation; girls from eleven to fifteen hung about in groups and giggled.

'And after All Souls' Day and cemeteries,' went on Mrs Oliver, lowering her bulk on to the arm of a settee, 'you have All Saints' Day. I think I'm right?'

Nobody responded to this question. Mrs Drake, a handsome middle-aged woman who was giving the party, made a pronouncement.

'I'm not calling this a Hallowe'en party, although of course it is one really. I'm calling it the Eleven Plus party. It's that sort of age group. Mostly people who are leaving the Elms and going on to other schools.'

'But that's not very accurate, Rowena, is it?' said Miss Whittaker, resetting her pince-nez on her nose disapprovingly.

Miss Whittaker as a local school-teacher was always firm on accuracy.

'Because we've abolished the eleven-plus some time ago.'

Mrs Oliver rose from the settee apologetically. 'I haven't been making myself useful. I've just been

sitting here saying silly things about pumpkins and vegetable marrows' – And resting my feet, she thought, with a slight pang of conscience, but without sufficient feeling of guilt to say it aloud.

'Now what can I do next?' she asked, and added, 'What lovely apples!'

Someone had just brought a large bowl of apples into the room. Mrs Oliver was partial to apples.

'Lovely red ones,' she added.

'They're not really very good,' said Rowena Drake. 'But they look nice and partified. That's for bobbing for apples. They're rather soft apples, so people will be able to get their teeth into them better. Take them into the library, will you, Beatrice? Bobbing for apples always makes a mess with the water slopping over, but that doesn't matter with the library carpet, it's so old. Oh! Thank you, Joyce.'

Joyce, a sturdy thirteen-year-old, seized the bowl of apples. Two rolled off it and stopped, as though arrested by a witch's wand, at Mrs Oliver's feet.

'You like apples, don't you,' said Joyce. 'I read you did, or perhaps I heard it on the telly. You're the one who writes murder stories, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Oliver.

'We ought to have made you do something connected with murders. Have a murder at the party tonight and make people solve it.'

'No, thank you,' said Mrs Oliver. 'Never again.'

'What do you mean, never again?'

'Well, I did once, and it didn't turn out much of a success,' said Mrs Oliver.

'But you've written lots of books,' said Joyce, 'you make a lot of money out of them, don't you?'

'In a way,' said Mrs Oliver, her thoughts flying to the Inland Revenue.

'And you've got a detective who's a Finn.'

Mrs Oliver admitted the fact. A small stolid boy not yet, Mrs Oliver would have thought, arrived at the seniority of the eleven-plus, said sternly, 'Why a Finn?'

'I've often wondered,' said Mrs Oliver truthfully.

Mrs Hargreaves, the organist's wife, came into the room breathing heavily, and bearing a large green plastic pail.

'What about this,' she said, 'for the apple bobbing? Kind of gay, I thought.'

Miss Lee, the doctor's dispenser, said, 'Galvanized bucket's better. Won't tip over so easily. Where are you going to have it, Mrs Drake?'

'I thought the bobbing for apples had better be in the library. The carpet's old there and a lot of water always gets spilt, anyway.'

'All right. We'll take them along. Rowena, here's another basket of apples.'

‘Let me help,’ said Mrs Oliver.

She picked up the two apples at her feet. Almost without noticing what she was doing, she sank her teeth into one of them and began to crunch it. Mrs Drake abstracted the second apple from her firmly and restored it to the basket. A buzz of conversation broke out.

‘Yes, but where are we going to have the Snapdragon?’

‘You ought to have the Snapdragon in the library, it’s much the darkest room.’

‘No, we’re going to have that in the dining-room.’

‘We’ll have to put something on the table first.’

‘There’s a green baize to put on that and then the rubber sheet over it.’

‘What about the looking-glasses? Shall we really see our husbands in them?’

Surreptitiously removing her shoes and still quietly champing at her apple, Mrs Oliver lowered herself once more on to the settee and surveyed the room full of people critically. She was thinking in her authoress’s mind: ‘Now, if I was going to make a book about all these people, how should I do it? They’re nice people, I should think, on the whole, but who knows?’

In a way, she felt, it was rather fascinating *not* to know anything about them. They all lived in Woodleigh Common, some of them had faint tags attached to

them in her memory because of what Judith had told her. Miss Johnson – something to do with the church, not the vicar's sister. Oh no, it was the organist's sister, of course. Rowena Drake, who seemed to run things in Woodleigh Common. The puffing woman who had brought in the pail, a particularly hideous plastic pail. But then Mrs Oliver had never been fond of plastic things. And then the children, the teenage girls and boys.

So far they were really only names to Mrs Oliver. There was a Nan and a Beatrice and a Cathie, a Diana and a Joyce, who was boastful and asked questions. I don't like Joyce much, thought Mrs Oliver. A girl called Ann, who looked tall and superior. There were two adolescent boys who appeared to have just got used to trying out different hair styles, with rather unfortunate results.

A smallish boy entered in some condition of shyness.

'Mummy sent these mirrors to see if they'd do,' he said in a slightly breathless voice.

Mrs Drake took them from him.

'Thank you so much, Eddy,' she said.

'They're just ordinary looking hand-mirrors,' said the girl called Ann. 'Shall we really see our future husbands' faces in them?'

'Some of you may and some may not,' said Judith Butler.

‘Did you ever see your husband’s face when you went to a party – I mean this kind of a party?’

‘Of course she didn’t,’ said Joyce.

‘She might have,’ said the superior Beatrice. ‘E.S.P. they call it. Extra sensory perception,’ she added in the tone of one pleased with being thoroughly conversant with the terms of the times.

‘I read one of your books,’ said Ann to Mrs Oliver. ‘*The Dying Goldfish*. It was quite good,’ she said kindly.

‘I didn’t like that one,’ said Joyce. ‘There wasn’t enough blood in it. I like murders to have lots of blood.’

‘A bit messy,’ said Mrs Oliver, ‘don’t you think?’

‘But exciting,’ said Joyce.

‘Not necessarily,’ said Mrs Oliver.

‘I *saw* a murder once,’ said Joyce.

‘Don’t be silly, Joyce,’ said Miss Whittaker, the school-teacher.

‘I did,’ said Joyce.

‘Did you really?’ asked Cathie, gazing at Joyce with wide eyes, ‘really and truly see a murder?’

‘Of course she didn’t,’ said Mrs Drake. ‘Don’t say silly things, Joyce.’

‘I did see a murder,’ said Joyce. ‘I did. I did. I did.’

A seventeen-year-old boy poised on a ladder looked down interestedly.

'What kind of a murder?' he asked.

'I don't believe it,' said Beatrice.

'Of course not,' said Cathie's mother. 'She's just making it up.'

'I'm *not*. I *saw* it.'

'Why didn't you go to the police about it?' asked Cathie.

'Because I didn't know it *was* a murder when I saw it. It wasn't really till a long time afterwards, I mean, that I began to know that it was a murder. Something that somebody said only about a month or two ago suddenly made me think: Of course, that was a *murder* I saw.'

'You see,' said Ann, 'she's making it all up. It's nonsense.'

'When did it happen?' asked Beatrice.

'Years ago,' said Joyce. 'I was quite young at the time,' she added.

'Who murdered who?' said Beatrice.

'I shan't tell any of you,' said Joyce. 'You're all so horrid about it.'

Miss Lee came in with another kind of bucket. Conversation shifted to a comparison of buckets or plastic pails as most suitable for the sport of bobbing for apples. The majority of the helpers repaired to the library for an appraisal on the spot. Some of the younger members, it may be said, were anxious to demonstrate, by a rehearsal of the difficulties and

their own accomplishment in the sport. Hair got wet, water got spilt, towels were sent for to mop it up. In the end it was decided that a galvanized bucket was preferable to the more meretricious charms of a plastic pail which overturned rather too easily.

Mrs Oliver, setting down a bowl of apples which she had carried in to replenish the store required for tomorrow, once more helped herself to one.

‘I read in the paper that you were fond of eating apples,’ the accusing voice of Ann or Susan – she was not quite sure which – spoke to her.

‘It’s my besetting sin,’ said Mrs Oliver.

‘It would be more fun if it was melons,’ objected one of the boys. ‘They’re so juicy. Think of the mess it would make,’ he said, surveying the carpet with pleasurable anticipation.

Mrs Oliver, feeling a little guilty at the public arraignment of greediness, left the room in search of a particular apartment, the geography of which is usually fairly easily identified. She went up the staircase and, turning the corner on the half landing, cannoned into a pair, a girl and a boy, clasped in each other’s arms and leaning against the door which Mrs Oliver felt fairly certain was the door to the room to which she herself was anxious to gain access. The couple paid no attention to her. They sighed and they snuggled. Mrs Oliver wondered how old they were. The boy