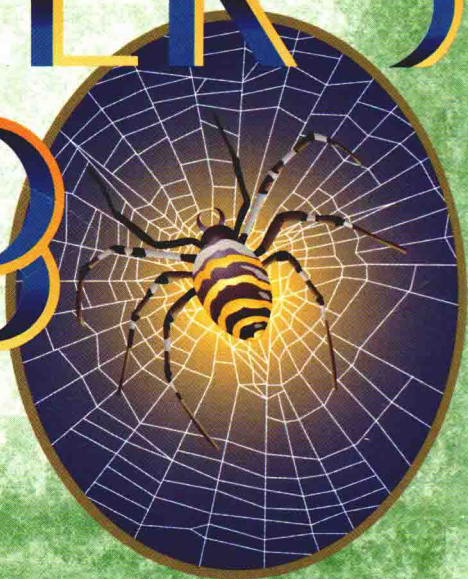


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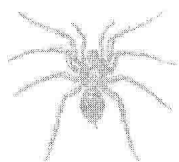
A NOVEL

SPIDER'S WEB



ADAPTED AS A NOVEL BY CHARLES OSBORNE

SPIDER'S WEB



by

Agatha Christie

Adapted as a novel by
Charles Osborne



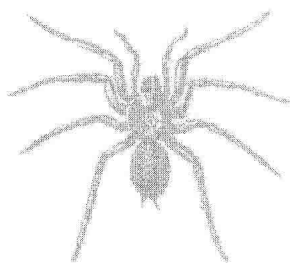
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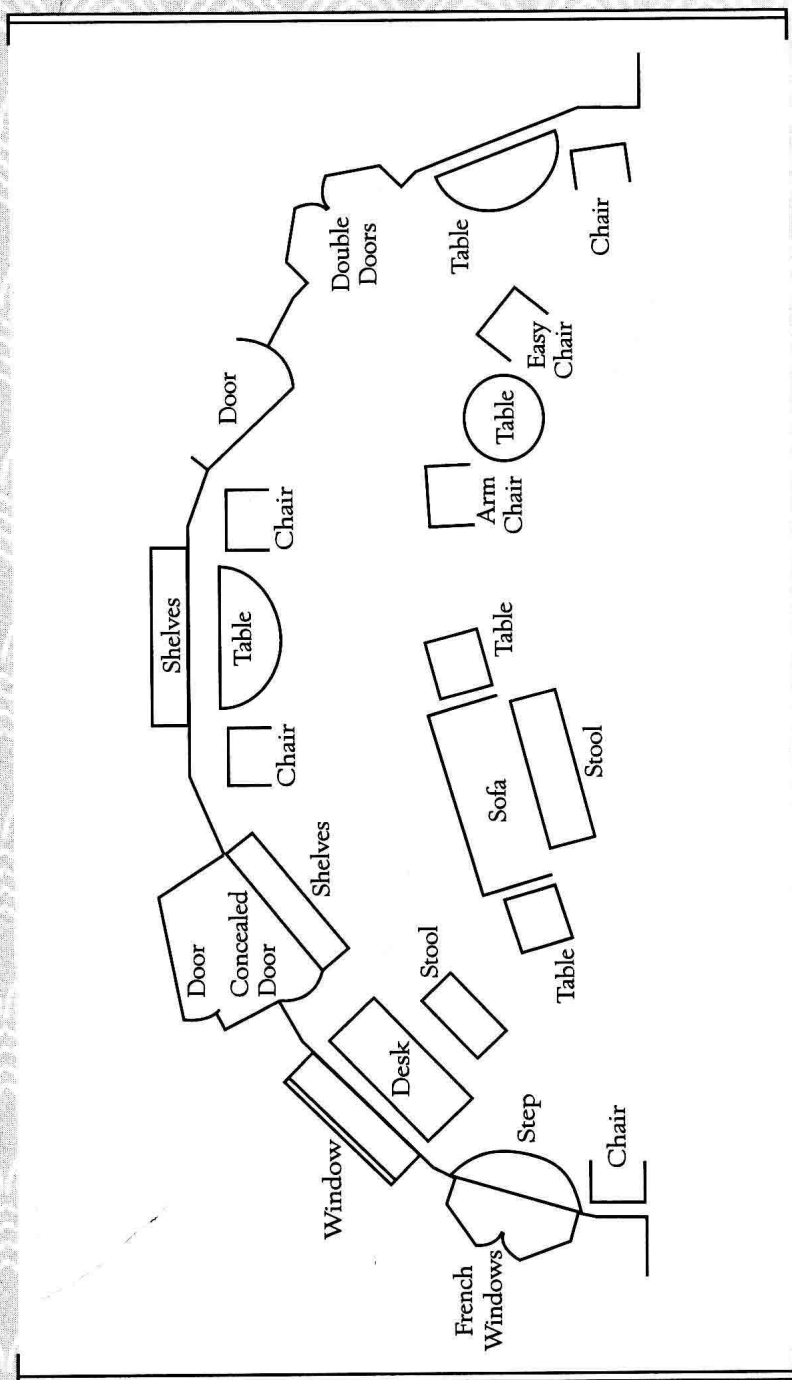
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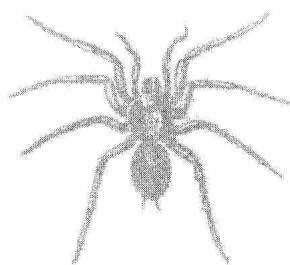
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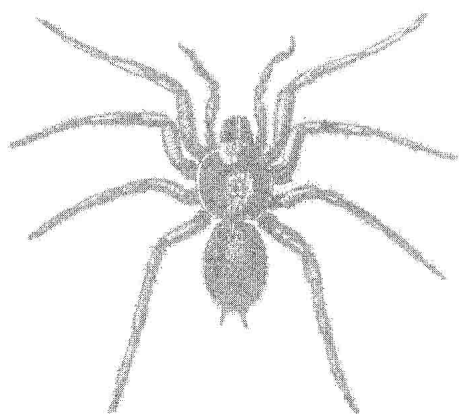
Also by Agatha Christie,
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BLACK COFFEE
THE UNEXPECTED GUEST



SPIDER'S WEB





CHAPTER ONE

COPPLESTONE COURT, the elegant, eighteenth-century country home of Henry and Clarissa Hailsham-Brown, set in gently undulating hilly country in Kent, looked especially attractive in the moonlight which illuminated its façade on a clear, chilly evening in March. Inside the house, in a tastefully furnished ground-floor drawing-room whose french windows overlooked 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 were a pencil and sheet of paper.

Sir Rowland Delahaye, a distinguished-looking man in his early fifties with a charming and cultivated manner, moved away to sit on the arm of a comfortable chair, and allowed his companion, Hugo Birch, to blindfold him. 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. Raising the glass to his lips,

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

Taking the glass from him, Hugo replaced it on the table, murmured, "Dow 'forty-two" as he jotted down on the piece of paper Sir Rowland's opinion, and then handed him 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 opinion of the wine 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 was duly noted, after which he removed his blindfold and put it on the back of the armchair. "Now it's your turn," he told Hugo.

Removing the horn-rimmed spectacles he habitually wore, Hugo allowed Sir Rowland to blindfold him. "Well, I imagine Clarissa 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," replied Hugo as he sat. "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 bring one of the glasses across to Hugo, the third of the Hailsham-Browns' guests entered the room by the french windows. 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. "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 Chataway himself could do it in that time, with or without a mackintosh."

"Who told you that about the Herzoslovakian Minister?" Sir Rowland inquired.

"Clarissa," Jeremy replied.

"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 an-

swered 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 got up, walked across to a door leading to the hall, went out momentarily to put his raincoat on the staircase in the hallway, and came back into the room.

"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 as he went to sit 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 still held one glass in his right hand as he was handed another, which he took in his left hand. He sipped from it, 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 handed one glass to Sir Rowland. "The second was the Cockburn," he continued, handing the other glass back to Sir Rowland, who repeated, "Number-three glass the Dow, number one the Cockburn" as he wrote them down.

"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 port-type stuff, two's the Dow, and three's the Cockburn. 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 took a chocolate from a box on an occasional table, and went across to the sofa.