# **Hallowe'en Party**
# **1969**

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but not for other novels]

*Hallowe'en Party* is dedicated to the great comic writer, P.G. Wodehouse, whose creation, Jeeves, is as enduring as Christie's Poirot. In the late 1940s, Wodehouse contested the amount of tax paid on his American earnings and pursued the matter in the courts. Christie, at the time, needed her American earnings to help pay her British tax, but the American authorities withheld the money until the question of the amount of tax to be paid had been settled. Both authors shared a common interest in wishing to reduce their American tax liabilities, and more importantly, in clarifying exactly where they stood. Twenty years later, in 1969, Christie's dedication reads: *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.* Wodehouse had written to Christie: 'I don't find it spoils an Agatha Christie a bit knowing the end because the characters are so interesting.'

In pursuing our interest in the novels of Agatha Christie we have re-read many of her books and have sometimes enjoyed them more the second or third time than on first reading. We would add to Wodehouse's reason that re-reading can be a pleasure because it heightens the appreciation of Christie's art: her plots, her clues, her red-herrings and her misdirections.  When we discuss Christie novels with our friends a common complaint is that the characterisation is poor. We agree, however, with Wodehouse. Characters in Christie's novels can be interesting and vivid, and can remain incubating in the reader's imagination, even when they lack those attributes that are often considered necessary in 'serious' literature: depth and development.

One of Christie's interesting characters is her *alter ego* Mrs Ariadne Oliver, a friend of Poirot's and a writer of successful murder mysteries. The first novel in which she appeared was *Cards on the Table*, published in 1936 (although she was a minor character in a couple of short stories before that). She reappeared in *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952) and thereafter with increasing frequency. In *Dead Man's Folly* (1956) she attends a summer fête, writes a murder hunt, and a girl guide is found dead. In *Hallowe'en Party* Ariadne Oliver is, once again, a guest at an event. Because of her presence the conversation turns to murder. A girl of twelve or thirteen claims to have witnessed a murder and later that day she is found dead – drowned in a bucket of water that had been used for the game of bobbing apples. Mrs Oliver calls in Poirot to solve the case.

Christie often makes use of Ariadne Oliver to pass wry comments on her own experiences in writing detective fiction. At one point Poirot, with unusual insight into the mind of a novelist, suggests that she puts people she meets into novels but not people she knows. Mrs Oliver responds, presumably reflecting Christie's own thoughts: 'It does happen that way. I mean, you see a fat woman sitting in a bus eating a currant bun and her lips are moving as well as eating, and you can see she's either saying something to someone or thinking up a telephone call that she's going to make .. and you study her shoes and the skirt she's got on and her hat and guess her age and whether she's got a wedding ring on …And then you get out of the bus. You don't want to see her again, but you've got a story in your

mind about somebody called Mrs Carnaby who is going home in a bus, having had a very strange interview somewhere where she saw someone in a pastry cook's and was reminded of someone she'd only met once and who she had heard was dead and apparently isn't dead …'

Again, Christie was probably thinking of herself when she wrote: 'Ariadne Oliver. A best seller. People wish to interview her, to know what she thinks about such subjects as student unrest, socialism, girls' clothing, should sex be permissive, and many other things that are no concern of hers.'

Poirot is not quite his old self, perhaps reflecting his, and his author's, age. He says to Mrs Oliver: ' .. again and again you indicate to me the path, the how do you say, the *chemin* that I should take ..' Does he think that Ariadne Oliver is French, and has he become now so very English that he hesitates whilst searching for the correct French expression? He has softened and become more pliable than his younger self. When offered the choice of beer, tea, shandy, Coca-Cola or cocoa, he does not show his displeasure with what is on offer but replies meekly: 'You are very kind. For me, I think a shandy. The ginger beer and the beer? That is right, is it not?' Even in *The Third Girl*, three years previously, Poirot insisted on his usual range of drinks and shuddered at the thought of decaffeinated coffee. One wonders whether he has since suffered a small stroke. His speech too has become a little cruder than in earlier years. He seems less often to use that precise, slightly pedantic, English with its charming touch of Gallic phrasing and vocabulary. When Mrs Oliver is describing Joyce – the murdered girl, aged twelve or thirteen - Poirot asks whether she was small for her age. 'No, no, I should think rather mature, perhaps. Lumpy.' To which Poirot replies: 'Well developed? You mean sexy-looking.'

The most important changes in Poirot, however, are the weakening in his powers of reasoning and foresight. Joyce is murdered because she claims to have witnessed a previous murder. It becomes clear, certainly to Poirot, that Joyce did not witness a murder but that her friend, Miranda, witnessed a murder and told her about it. There is evidence that Joyce's younger brother, Leopold, snoops and listens to private conversations. The younger Poirot would have realised that Leopold may well have learned of the witnessed murder and be at risk. But Poirot does nothing to protect him. Poirot does realise that Miranda is at risk of being murdered. He asks Ariadne Oliver whether she has room in her London flat to put up Miranda and her mother, Judith Butler. Mrs Oliver asks whether Poirot wants her to invite them to London and he, incredibly, replies: Not yet until I am sure that one of my little ideas might be right.' Whatever 'little idea' this is, it does not require Miranda to remain in the village, vulnerable to being murdered. Even after Leopold is murdered, Poirot does not act swiftly but first visits his old friend Superintendent Spence, then the local headmistress, then goes back to London before finally sending a telegram to Ariadne Oliver saying: 'Please bring Mrs Butler and Miranda to your flat at once.' Owing to Poirot's negligence Miranda would have been murdered were it not that Christie, strangely, turns the end of the novel into an ancient Greek drama and Miranda is saved by a *deus ex machina* in the form of two teenage boys.

The central plot of this novel is simple. An ambitious woman, Rowena Drake, whom Poirot likens to Lady Macbeth, is due to inherit a fortune from her aunt. Her aunt changes her will

in favour of a foreign carer *au pair*. After the aunt dies, the change in the will is cleverly made to look like a forgery using the skills of a previously convicted forger. The carer and the forger are murdered. The forger's murder is not solved, and the carer's body hidden so that she is presumed to have returned to her home, and all is well with Rowena Drake. And then a girl claims to have witnessed a murder. Rowena Drake believes that the girl is referring to the murder of the carer and murders the girl. Three murders, one murderer.

What is odd about this novel is that there is a murderer too many: Rowena Drake has an accomplice. In most Agatha Christie novels there is one murderer. In a few there are two, and very occasionally more. In all previous novels in which there are two murderers the second person is key: he or she is crucial to the plot and provides alibis, or mechanisms for murder, that help conceal the solution. In this novel the second murderer, Michael Garfield, is unnecessary and only serves to make the solution less elegant and more arbitrary. Perhaps Christie thought that one woman would have had difficulty killing the forger and the carer and concealing the carer's body without the help of a man, but that is an insufficient reason for requiring the second murderer. There is another possible explanation: Iphigenia.

In the Greek myth, as Poirot tells Judith Butler, Iphigenia was sacrificed by her father, Agamemnon, to appease the goddess Artemis so that the Greek fleet could safely continue its journey to Troy. Christie referred briefly to this myth in *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945) and more recently in *The Third Girl* (1966). In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which probably inspired Christie to name her daughter Rosalind, there is, towards the end of the play, a magical intervention by the Greek goddess of marriage, Hymen. Towards the end of *Hallowe'en Party*, too, we seem to be transported to the world of Greek myths. Joyce's friend Miranda (whom Poirot thinks is similar to the Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) is being taken to 'Kilterbury Ring' – a kind of fictional poor man's Stonehenge – to be 'sacrificed', or in other words murdered. Miranda is allowing this, even encouraging it, because of the guilt she feels over her role in the death of her friend. The whole scene feels artificial. It gets worse. Christie seems to have been determined to put the myth of Iphigenia into the novel, and this required the novel's plot to be distorted in two ways. First, she needs an Agamemnon and so, improbably, and quite out of the blue, she makes Michael Garfield Miranda's biological father. Secondly, because Garfield must now have a motive for killing his daughter Miranda he must become an accomplice of Rowena Drake's. The second murderer, it seems, is needed only so that Christie can put the myth of Iphigenia into her plot.

There are other signs that in writing this novel Christie had slackened the usually tight grip that she keeps on her plots. We are told of a large number of deaths. A few serve the purpose of providing possible answers to which murder did Miranda witness. But the majority do not. We are told of a lorry driver who killed a pal of his, of a little girl buried in a gravel pit, of a child called Kitty who fell into a well (and may or may not have died), of a boy of 13 who killed a child of 9 and then killed again when he was adult. We learn that Judith Butler's husband was killed in a car crash. We never learn whether Rowena Drake's aunt, from whom she inherited the fortune, was murdered or died from natural causes, nor whether Rowena Drake's husband, who was killed by an unidentified hit and run driver, was killed by accident or murdered by Michael Garfield or Rowena Drake herself. In most earlier

novels, Christie would have edited out those deaths that were unnecessary and have clarified the causes of the ones that were necessary.

Christie's writing also shows a level of callousness that is unrealistic. In 'cosy crime', and the kind of whodunnit that Christie writes, the reader is not faced with the awfulness of murder. The murders are simply part of a puzzle to be solved. They play a vital role, but they are not realistic deaths. In this fictional world there are certain stylistic mechanisms that help to keep the deaths off stage, and keep the emotional engagement of the reader focussed on the puzzle. In *Hallowe'en Party* Christie does not judge this as well as she has generally done in earlier novels. In one chapter Poirot and Mrs Oliver visit the poor mother of the murdered Joyce. I found this chapter difficult to read without cringing at the callousness of Poirot and Oliver, and the completely unrealistic portrayal of the grieving mother. This is one of the few occasions in Christie when her skills at keeping the murders purely conventional, as moves in a puzzle rather than as actual deaths, seem to have deserted her.

There are some decent clues. Poirot comments that the person who killed Joyce would have got rather wet and much later we learn that Rowena Drake spilled water from a vase over herself on the night of the murder. There is also one aspect of the novel that is classic Christie: the forgery of the codicil to the will. Rowena Drake's aunt did write a codicil that left almost all her fortune to the *au pair* carer. Rowena Drake realises this. She cannot simply get rid of the codicil since the witnesses to it would be likely to give evidence that it existed. So she replaces it with a slightly imperfectly forged copy. After her aunt's death the forged copy is found, Rowena Drake contests it and an expert declares it a forgery. The *au pair* carer is then murdered and her body hidden. Since, in the end, Rowena Drake inherits the fortune she must be a prime suspect, but Christie skilfully uses the forged codicil plot to misdirect the reader to thinking that the carer must have been criminal. Few readers will realise that Rowena Drake had a motive for forging a codicil that disinherits herself.

In the 1960s many of those with psychiatric illness who had been living long-term in psychiatric hospitals and other institutions were enabled to live in the community, in part as a result of the effectiveness of the so-called *major tranquillisers* in treating psychotic symptoms. Several of the characters in this novel do not like this development. Superintendent Spence, Poirot's old friend, says:

> We had our mentally disturbed, or whatever they call them, but not so many as we have now. I expect there are more of them let out of the place they ought to be kept safe in. All our mental homes are too full; over-crowded so doctors say "Let him or her lead a normal life. Go back and live with his relatives, " etc. And then the nasty bit of goods, or the poor afflicted fellow, whichever way you look at it, gets the urge again and another young woman goes out walking and is found in a gravel pit ..

Mrs Drake makes a similar point, and the local doctor, Dr Ferguson, says:

> There are times when I get tired of hearing those words: "Remanded for a psychiatrist's report" after a lad has broken in somewhere, smashed the looking-glasses, pinched the bottles of whisky, stolen the silver, knocked an old woman on the head. Doesn't matter much what it is now. Remand them for a psychiatrist's report. …. Psychiatrist's report: Committed murder while mentally disturbed.

When the local solicitor, Mr Fullerton, is thinking about a previous case of child homicide, we are told:

> Words floated through his head. Mentally retarded. Psychiatrist's report. That's how the whole matter would end, no doubt. .. I have a few psychiatrist friends. Some of them are sensible chaps … some of them ought to be remanded for a psychiatrist's report themselves. This chap who killed Joyce probably had nice parents, ordinary manners, good appearance. Nobody'd dream anything was wrong with him. Ever had a bite at a nice red juicy apple and there, down by the core, something rather nasty rears itself up and wags its head at you? Plenty of human beings about like that. More than there used to be..

The sheer number of characters who express the view that too many mentally ill people are allowed out in the community and that such people are particularly prone to commit murder might suggest that these are also the views of the author. An author, however, is not her characters. We should not presume that a character's views represent the opinions of the author. Indeed, the solution in this novel, as in almost all her novels, does not involve mentally ill criminals. Joyce's killer is a sane woman who kills for money.

Just occasionally, however, thoughts are expressed that almost certainly reflect the author's own, and particularly when they are about levels of taxation. When Ariadne Oliver is asked whether she makes a lot of money from her books she replies: 'In a way'. And then, we are told: 'her thoughts flying to the Inland Revenue.'

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