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As the Pig Turns

Written by M. C. Beaton

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Agatha Raisin

As the Pig Turns

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Chapter One

Agatha Raisin wearily turned on to the road leading down into her home village of Carsely in the Cotswolds and then came to an abrupt halt. Cars stretched out in front of her. She pulled on the handbrake.

It was the end of January and a very cold month, unusually cold. The tall trees on either side of the country road raised bare branches to a leaden sky as if pleading for the return of spring. Agatha prayed it would not snow. It seemed as if two centimetres of snow were enough to close down the roads, because the council complained they had run out of salt and all roads leading out of Carsely were very steep, making driving hazardous.

What on earth was going on? She gave an impatient blast on her horn, and the young man in the battered Ford in front gave her the finger.

Cursing, Agatha got out of her car and marched up to the Ford and rapped on the window. The sallow-faced youth opened the window and demanded, 'Wot?'

'What the hell's going on?' demanded Agatha.

The youth eyed her up and down, noting the expensively tailored coat and the beady, accusing eyes and marking the 'posh' accent. He scowled. 'Pot'oles,' he said with a shrug. 'They're repairing pot'oles.'

'And how long will it take?'

'Blessed if I know,' he said, and rolled up the window.

Agatha returned to the warmth of her car, fuming. She herself had complained bitterly to the council about the

state of the road. But there were two other roads into the village. They might at least have put up diversion notices until the road was repaired. She contemplated making a U-turn but knew, considering her lack of driving skills, it would take her an awful lot of manoeuvring on the narrow road to do so.

A drip began to appear on the end of her nose. She reached into the box of tissues on the seat beside her and blew her nose. Someone rapped at the window.

Agatha looked out. A policeman was bending down looking at her. He was squat and burly, with a squashed-looking nose in his open-pored face and piggy, accusing little eyes.

Lowering the window, Agatha asked, 'How long is this going to take, Officer?'

'It'll take as long as it takes, madam,' he said in a thick Gloucestershire accent. 'I am ticketing you for taking your hands off the wheel.'

'My, what? Are you mad? I was simply blowing my nose. The handbrake's on, I'm stuck here . . .'

'Sixty-pound fine.'

'I'll see you in hell first before I pay that,' howled Agatha.

He handed in a ticket. 'See you in court.'

Agatha sat for a moment, shaking with rage. Then she took a deep breath. She started to negotiate a U-turn, but cars piled up behind her had decided to do the same thing. At last she was clear, just in time to see in her rearview mirror that the line of cars she had just left had started to move.

By the time she reached her thatched cottage in Lilac Lane, it had begun to snow, fine little pellets of snow. Damn all pundits and their moaning about global warming, thought Agatha. As she opened the car door to get out, a gust of wind whipped the ticket the policeman had given her and sent it flying up over her cottage.

She let herself into her cottage. Her two cats, Hodge and Boswell, came running forward to give her the welcome they always gave her when they wanted something to eat.

Agatha fed them, poured herself a gin and tonic, and then phoned her friend Detective Sergeant Bill Wong. When he came on the phone, Agatha complained bitterly about the policeman who had given her a ticket for blowing her nose.

'That would be Gary Beech,' said Bill, 'the target fiend. You know we have to meet certain targets or we don't get promotion. He goes a bit mad. The other week, a nine-year-old's mother who lives in a cul-de-sac in Mircester chalked squares on the pavement for her little boy to play hopscotch. Beech arrested the kid and charged him with the crime of graffiti. And he charged a toddler with carrying a dangerous weapon even though the kid was holding a water pistol. An old-age pensioner was arrested under the Terrorism Act for carrying a placard saying, 'Get our boys out of Afghanistan.'

'What should I do?'

'It'll probably be thrown out of court. Or you could just pay the fine.'

'Never!'

'How's business?'

'Not good. The recession is really biting. People just don't have the money.' Agatha looked out of her kitchen window. 'Blast! The snow's getting thicker. I wish I'd invested in snow tyres or a four-wheel drive. Roy Silver's coming down for the weekend. I hope the roads clear by then.'

Roy had worked for Agatha when she had run a successful public relations business in London. She had taken early retirement and had sold up to move to the Cotswolds. But after solving several murders, she had decided to set up her own detective agency.

Bill said he would try to get down to see her at the weekend and rang off.

Agatha then phoned her agency. She had a small staff: Patrick Mulligan, a retired policeman, Phil Marshall, an elderly man from Carsely, young Toni Gilmour and a secretary, Mrs Freedman. A shrewd businesswoman, Agatha had seen the recession coming long before most people and so had decided not to employ any more staff. But there was one absence from her staff jabbing at her conscience. A bright young detective, Simon Black, employed by Agatha until a few months earlier, had shown signs of falling in love with Toni. Persuading herself that she was acting in their best interests, Agatha had told Simon that Toni was too young and to wait three years. But Toni had turned against Simon, feeling he was snubbing her at every turn, and to Agatha's horror, Simon had gone off and enlisted in the army and was now fighting in Afghanistan.

Toni answered the phone and said that Mrs Freedman and Phil had gone home, not wanting to wait any longer in case the snow got thicker. Toni, young, blonde and beautiful, often gave Agatha pangs of envy, but she had to admit that the girl was a brilliant detective.

'What have we got outstanding?' asked Agatha.

'Two adulteries, four missing pets and two missing teenagers.'

Agatha sighed. 'It seems not so long ago that I swore I would never take on another missing pet. Now we need the money.'

'It's easy money,' said Toni. 'They hardly ever think of checking the animal shelter. I just go along there with the photos they've given me of Tiddles or whatever, collect the beasts and phone the happy owners and then say, "Pay up".'

'Roy's coming down for the weekend,' said Agatha, 'and maybe Bill will come over. Why don't you join us and maybe I'll find something interesting for us to do?'

'I've got a date.'

'Who is he?'

'Paul Finlay.'

'How did you meet him?'

Toni longed to tell the ever-curious Agatha to mind her own business, but she said reluctantly, 'I've been taking French classes in the evenings, now that it's quiet at work. He's the lecturer.'

'How old is he?'

'I've got to go. The other phone's ringing.'

After she had rung off, Agatha sat and worried. Toni had a weakness for older men and had run into trouble before.

Agatha's cleaner, Doris Simpson, had left a local newspaper on the kitchen table. She began to search through it to see if there were any weekend amusements, and then her eye fell on an event in Winter Parva, a village some twenty miles away. Agatha had been to Winter Parva only once. It was a touristy Cotswold village with gift shops, a mediaeval market hall and thatched cottages. The article said that as the local shops had not fared as well as usual over the Christmas period, the parish council had planned to generate interest in the village with a special January event. There was to be a pig roast on Saturday on the village green. The villagers were urged to dress in old-fashioned costumes. The Winter Parva morris dancers would perform along with the local brass band and the village choir. Two busloads of Chinese tourists were expected to arrive for the event.

That'll do, thought Agatha, as long as I'm not blocked in the village by the snow.

Feeling hungry, she rummaged in her deep freezer to find something to microwave. Suddenly all the lights went out. A power cut.

She remembered the pub, the Red Lion, had a generator. Agatha changed into trousers, boots and a hooded parka and set out in the hunt for dinner.

The pub was crowded with locals. Agatha went to the bar and ordered lasagne and chips and a half of lager and looked around for a vacant table. Then, to her amazement,

she saw her friend the vicar's wife, Mrs Bloxby, sitting by herself in a corner, looking down dismally at a small glass of sherry.

Agatha hurried to join her, wondering what could be wrong, because Mrs Bloxby never went to the pub unless it was some special fundraising occasion. The vicar's wife had grey hair escaping from an old-fashioned bun. Her normally kind face looked tired. She was wearing a shabby tweed coat over a washed-out sweater, cardigan and tweed skirt. It didn't matter what she wore, thought Agatha, not for the first time. Mrs Bloxby always had 'lady' stamped on her. Agatha and Mrs Bloxby always called each other by their second names, a tradition in the local Ladies' Society, of which both were members.

'How odd to see you here,' said Agatha. 'Where's your husband?'

'I neither know nor care,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'Do sit down, Mrs Raisin.'

Agatha sat down opposite her. 'What is the matter?'

Mrs Bloxby seemed to rally. She gave a weak smile. 'It's nothing, really. Do you really mean to eat that?'

The waitress had placed a dish of lasagne and chips in front of Agatha. 'Sure. What's up with it?' Agatha dug her fork in and took a mouthful.

Mrs Bloxby reflected that her friend had the taste buds of a vulture.

Yet Agatha sometimes managed to make her feel diminished. Although in her early fifties, Agatha glowed with health, and her glossy brown hair, although expertly dyed, gleamed like silk.

'It can't be nothing,' said Agatha, reaching for the ketchup bottle, opening it and dousing her chips.

'Probably my imagination,' said Mrs Bloxby wearily.

'You always did have good instincts. Out with it,' commanded Agatha.

Mrs Bloxby gave a heart-wrenching dry sob, the kind a

child gives after crying for a long time. 'It's just that I think Alf is having an affair. You're dribbling ketchup.'

'Oh, sorry.' Agatha put a chip, overloaded with ketchup, back on her plate. 'Your husband is having an affair? Rubbish!'

'You're right. I'm just being silly.'

'No, no, I shouldn't have said that. I mean, who would want him?' remarked Agatha with her usual lack of tact.

Her friend bristled. 'I will have you know that as vicar of this parish, Alf has often been the target of predatory ladies.'

'So what makes you think he's having an affair? Lipstick on his dog collar?'

'Nothing like that. It's just that he's taken to sneaking off without his dog collar on and he won't tell me where he's going.'

'Been buying any new underwear recently?'

'No, I buy his underwear.'

'Look, I'll find out for you and put your mind at rest. On the house.'

'Oh, don't do that. If he saw you tailing him, he would be furious.'

'He won't see me. I happen to be a very good detective.'

'You are to do nothing about it,' said Mrs Bloxby seriously. 'Promise?'

'Promise,' agreed Agatha, and surreptitiously and childishly crossed her fingers behind her back.

A warm wind from the west during the night melted the snow to slush, and then, when the wind changed round to the north, it froze the roads into skating rinks. Agatha awoke the next day in a bad temper. How on earth was she going to get out of the village? It seemed small consolation that the power was back on.

But as she was having her usual breakfast of black coffee and cigarettes, she faintly heard a sound from the end of

the lane, a sound she had not heard for some time. She put on her boots and coat and ran to the end of the lane. A gritter was making its lumbering way down through the village, spraying the road with grit and salt.

Agatha hurried back to put on her make-up and get dressed for the office.

She was just driving out of Lilac Lane when she recognized the vicar's car on the road ahead of her. 'Just a little look wouldn't hurt,' she assured herself. She let the car behind her pass her and then followed, keeping the vicar's car in view. He drove to the nearby village of Ancombe and parked in the courtyard of St Mary's, a large Catholic church. The village of Ancombe had remained loyal to Charles I when, all about, the Puritans supported Cromwell.

Driven by curiosity, Agatha parked out on the road and went up the drive past the gravestones and into the church.

In the dimness of the church, she could just make out the thin figure of Mr Bloxby going into a confessional box and closing the door. She ducked down in a pew as a priest appeared and went into the confessional.

I must know what he is saying, fretted Agatha. She took off her shoes and tiptoed towards the confessional box into which the vicar had disappeared, put her ear against it and listened hard.

'*What do you think you are doing?*' roared a stentorian voice.

Agatha caught a frightened glimpse of a man who had just entered the church. She quickly closed her eyes and slumped to the floor. The confessional opened and Mr Bloxby and the priest came out.

'What is going on?' demanded the reedy voice of the priest.

Agatha opened her eyes. 'What happened?' she demanded weakly. 'I felt dizzy and saw Mr Bloxby coming in here and wanted to ask him for help.'

'She was listening!' said a thin, acidulous man.

'I know this woman,' said Mr Bloxby. 'Mrs Raisin, step outside the church with me.'

Agatha got to her feet. No one helped her. She put on her shoes. Mr Bloxby marched ahead, and Agatha trailed after him, miserably.

Outside the church, Mr Bloxby snapped, 'Get in my car, Mrs Raisin. You have some explaining to do.'

Agatha got into the passenger seat of the vicar's car. It had begun to rain: soft, weeping rain.

'Now,' said Mr Bloxby, 'explain yourself, you horrible woman.' The vicar had never liked Agatha and could not understand his wife's affection for her.

She'll never speak to me again, thought Agatha sadly as she realized she would have to tell the truth.

'It's like this, Alf . . . may I call you Alf?'

'No.'

'Okay, what happened, I met your wife in the pub last night and she had been crying. She thinks you're having an affair.'

'How ridiculous . . . although come to think of it, I have had to ward off a few amorous parishioners over the years.'

'I promised not to snoop,' said Agatha.

'Which in your case is like promising not to breathe.'

'Right! I'm fed up feeling guilty,' said Agatha. 'What the hell were you doing in the confessional box of a Catholic church?'

'I needed spiritual guidance.'

'Don't tell me you've lost your faith?' demanded Agatha.

'Nothing like that. You know that we use the old Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible?'

Agatha hadn't noticed, but she said, 'Yes.'

'It is the most beautiful writing, on a par with Shakespeare. The bishop has ordered me to change to modern translations of both. I can't, I just can't. I felt I had to unburden myself to a priest of a different faith.'

'Why on earth didn't you tell your wife?'

'I had to wrestle with my conscience. I even thought of entering the Catholic Church.'

'And taking a vow of celibacy?'

'The Vatican is proposing making provisions for people like myself.'

'Don't you *talk* to your wife?'

'I prefer to wrestle with spiritual matters on my own.'

Agatha saw a way out of her predicament. She threw him a cunning look out of her small, bearlike eyes. 'I could fix it for you.'

'You! Do me a favour.'

'I will, if you'll shut up and listen. The bishop will not go against the wishes of the parishioners. The whole village will sign a petition to keep things as they are and send it to the bishop. Easy. I'll fix it for you if you promise not to tell Mrs Bloxby I had anything to do with it. I'll fix it up with the local shop. Everyone shops there in the bad weather. I'll get Mrs Tutchell, the new owner, to say it's her idea. You start talking about it now, all round the village, starting with your wife. Of course, if I find you have breathed a word about my involvement in this, you're on your own, mate. Of all the silly vicars . . .'

'Why didn't you tell me before?' asked Mrs Bloxby plaintively half an hour later, after having heard her husband's explanation.

'At first, I wanted to wrestle with the problem on my own, but I called in at the village store and happened to mention it on my way home. The villagers have been very supportive and are sending a petition to the bishop.'

'Did Mrs Raisin have anything to do with this?'

'Of course not,' said the vicar, addressing the sitting-room fire. Just a white lie, God, he assured his Maker. 'Can you imagine me asking her for help?'

* * *

Agatha busied herself for most of the rest of the day by going door-to-door in the village, raising support for the vicar and urging everyone to sign the petition at the village store. A good proportion of the villagers were incomers who only went to church at Easter and Christmas but were anxious to do the right 'village thingie', as one overweight matron put it. Agatha headed to the office in the late afternoon to find Toni just leaving on the arm of a tall, tweedy man who sported a beard.

'This is Paul Finlay,' said Toni.

'Ah, the great detective,' said Paul. He was in his late thirties, Agatha guessed, with an infuriatingly patronizing air. He had a craggy face and the sort of twinkling humorous eyes that belie the fact that the owner has no sense of humour whatsoever.

'We're off out for the evening,' said Toni quickly. 'Bye.'

'Wait a bit,' said Agatha. 'Roy's coming on Friday night, and on Saturday we're going to a pig roast in Winter Parva. Why don't you and Paul come along? Come to my cottage and I'll take you over because the parking's going to be awful.'

'A pig roast?' cackled Paul. 'How quaint. Of course we'll come.'

'Good. The pig roast starts at six, but I'd like to get there a bit earlier,' said Agatha. 'See you around four o'clock for drinks and then we'll all go.'

Agatha stood and watched them as they walked away. Toni's slim young figure looked dwarfed and vulnerable beside the tall figure of Paul.

'Not suitable at all. What a prick,' said Agatha, and a passing woman gave her a nervous look.

Agatha checked business in the office before heading home again. She was just approaching Lilac Lane when a police car swung in front of her, blocking her.

Agatha jammed on the brakes and looked in her rearview mirror. She saw the lumbering figure of the policeman who had ticketed her for blowing her nose. She rolled down the window as he approached. 'Now what?' she demanded.

'I had a speed camera in me 'and up in that there road,' he said, 'and you was doing thirty-two miles an hour. So that's three points off your licence and a speeding fine.'

Agatha opened her mouth to blast him but quickly realized he would probably fine her for abusing a police officer. He proceeded to give her a lecture on the dangers of speeding, and Agatha knew he was trying to get her to lose her temper, so she listened quietly until he gave up.

When he had finally gone, she swung the car round and went into the village store, where she informed an interested audience about the iniquities of the police in general and one policeman in particular. 'I'd like to kill him,' she shouted. 'May he roast slowly over a spit in hell.'

It was a frosty Friday evening when Agatha met Roy Silver at Moreton-in-Marsh station. He was dressed in black trousers and a black sweater, over which he was wearing a scarlet jacket with little flecks of gold in the weave. He had shaved his head bald, and Agatha thought dismally that her friend looked like a cross between a plucked chicken and someone auditioning for a job as a Red Coat entertainer at a Butlin's holiday camp.

'Turn on the heater,' said Roy as he got in the car. 'I'm freezing.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Agatha. 'What's with the bald head?'

'It's fashionable,' said Roy petulantly, 'and it strengthens the hair. It's only temporary.'

'I'll lend you some warm clothes,' said Agatha.

'Your clothes on me, babes?' said Roy waspishly. 'I'd

look as if I were wearing a tent. I mean, you could put two of me inside one of you.'

'I'm not fat,' snarled Agatha. 'You're unhealthily thin. Charles has left some of his clothes in the spare room.' Sir Charles Fraith, a friend of Agatha's, often used her cottage as a hotel.

Roy said mutinously that his clothes were perfectly adequate, but when they got to Agatha's cottage, they found there had been another power cut and the house was cold.

While Agatha lit the fire in her living room, Roy hung away his precious jacket in the wardrobe in the spare room, wondering how anyone could not love such a creation. He found one of Charles's cashmere sweaters and put it on.

When he joined Agatha, the fire was blazing. 'How long do these power cuts last?' he asked.

'Not long, usually,' said Agatha. 'There's something up with the power station that serves this end of the village.'

'Anything planned for the weekend?'

'We're going to a pig roast at Winter Parva tomorrow.'

'No use. I'm vegetarian.'

'Since when?'

Roy looked shifty. 'A month ago.'

'You haven't been dieting. You've been starving yourself,' accused Agatha. 'I got steaks for dinner.'

'Couldn't touch one,' said Roy. 'A pig roast? Do you mean turned on a spit like in those historical films?'

'Yes.'

'Yuck, and double yucky, yucky yuck, Aggie. It'll be disgusting.'

But the next day after Toni and Paul had arrived, and the erratic electricity had come on again, Roy decided that anything would be better than being left behind. Bill Wong had phoned to say he could not make it.

Just as they were having drinks, Charles Fraith arrived. He was as expensively dressed as usual in smart casual clothes. He had small, neat features and well-barbered hair.

Agatha never really knew what he thought of her. He helped himself to a whisky and then proceeded to put his foot in it. He asked Roy sympathetically if he had cancer. When Roy denied it, Charles said, 'I was about to forgive you for wearing one of my sweaters, but as you aren't suffering, I do feel you might have asked me first.'

'I told him he could borrow something,' said Agatha. 'I haven't introduced you to Paul Finlay.'

'Toni's uncle?'

'No, just a friend,' said Agatha.

Paul bristled. Charles's upper-class accent brought out the worst in him. His light Birmingham accent grew stronger as he suddenly treated them all to a rant about the unfairness of the British class system and about an aristocracy who lived on the backs of the poor.

Thank goodness for Charles, thought Agatha. Toni must see what a horror this man is.

But Toni was listening to Paul with shining eyes.

Charles waited until Paul had dried up, said calmly, 'What a lot of old-fashioned bollocks. When are we going?'

'Finish your drinks,' said Agatha. 'I want to be sure of getting a parking place. It'll be a bit of a crush in my car.'

'I'll take Roy,' said Charles.

'You'll need a coat,' said Agatha to Roy. 'You'll find my Barbour hanging in the hall. Use that.'

'I could wear my jacket,' said Roy.

'You'll freeze. Come along, everyone.'

Thin trails of fog wound their way through the trees as they drove to Winter Parva. They had to park outside the village because all the parking places in the village had been taken. Paul, anxious to get Toni to himself, said they would look at the shops and meet the others on the village green in time for the pig roast.

Agatha, Charles and Roy walked to the nearest pub and into the grateful warmth of the bar.

'Something will need to be done about Paul,' said Charles. 'I think Toni's still a virgin, and the thought of her losing it under the hairy thighs of that bore is horrible.'

'He might propose marriage,' said Roy.

'I think I'll do a bit of detective work,' said Agatha. 'I bet he's either married or been married. Why can't Toni see what a bore he is? How can she listen to that class nonsense?'

'Maybe it strikes a chord,' said Charles. 'You forget, she was brought up rough. Maybe she doesn't know where she belongs in the scheme of things. There can be something very seductive about that sort of propaganda. Where the hell did she meet him?'

'At evening classes in French,' said Agatha gloomily. 'He's the lecturer.'

Roy was looking round the bar at people dressed in mediaeval costume. 'We could have dressed up, Aggie,' he said plaintively.

Agatha looked at her watch. 'I think we'd better make our way to the village green. I want to see how they prepare this pig.'

The fog had thickened. If it hadn't been for the parked cars, you might have thought the village had reverted to the Middle Ages as the costumed villagers appeared and then disappeared in the fog.

Two men were bathing a huge pig in oil as it hung on a spit over a bed of blazing charcoal.

Some villagers were carrying flaming torches. As the fog lifted slightly, Agatha saw clearly on the haunch of the pig a tattoo of a heart with an arrow through it and the curly lettering 'Amy'. Her eyes flew down the length of the carcass to the chubby legs cut off above the knees.

'Stop!' she screamed at the top of her lungs.

The two men stopped turning the spit and stared at her. 'Pigs don't have tattoos,' said Agatha.

They peered at it. 'Reckon someone's been 'aving a bit o' a joke,' said one.

But Agatha had taken a powerful little torch out of her handbag and was examining the head.

'The head's been stitched on,' she said. 'Oh, God, I think this is the carcass of a man. Get the police.'