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Agatha Raisin: Something Borrowed, Someone Dead

Written by M. C. Beaton

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Agatha Raisin



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CRIME

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Chapter One

The recession was biting deeper into private detective Agatha Raisin's finances. The bread-and-butter work of her agency, the divorces, missing teenagers, even missing dogs and cats, was drying up as people preferred to go to the police for free help, and men and women in unhappy marriages opted to wait before paying Agatha to find proof of evidence for divorce.

Her agency staff consisted of two young people, Toni Gilmour and Simon Black, as well as retired policeman, Patrick Mulligan, elderly Phil Marshall and secretary Mrs Freedman.

Despite the hard times, Agatha could not bring herself to lay any of them off. She spent more time at her cottage in the village of Carsely in the Cotswolds, smoking, drinking gin and tonic and playing with her cats, Hodge and Boswell. Her ex-husband, James Lacey, who had the cottage next door, wrote travel books and was often absent, her police detective, Bill Wong, was too busy to call, and her other friend, Sir Charles Fraith, had not called on her for over a month.

So one sunny morning, instead of going into the office, she trudged up the road to the vicarage to pay a call on her closest friend, Mrs Bloxby, the vicar's wife. The two women were in sharp contrast. Mrs Bloxby wore old-fashioned 'lady' clothes: drooping skirts and blouses in summer and washed-out woollens in winter. She had brown hair, mild eyes, and very beautiful hands. Agatha

had bearlike eyes in a round face. She had very good skin and glossy brown hair worn short. Her figure was quite good apart from a rather thick waistline and her legs were excellent.

'Come in, Mrs Raisin,' she said. 'I've just made some coffee. We can have it in the garden.' Both women addressed each other by their second names, a practice once used by the now defunct Ladies Society.

Agatha sat in a chair in the sunny vicarage garden. Behind the garden wall lay the church graveyard, old mossy tombstones reminding one detective in her early fifties that life was fleeting.

Mrs Bloxby came out to join her, carrying a tray with the coffee and a plate of Eccles cakes.

'I made these this morning,' said the vicar's wife.

'I'd love one but I can't,' said Agatha gloomily. 'All this inactivity is going straight to my waistline. Oh, what the hell!'

She picked up a cake and bit into it.

Mrs Bloxby looked at her friend anxiously. She felt she could hardly pray to God to send down a case for Agatha, as that possibly would involve a lot of misery for some people. Her husband often complained that people shouldn't pray for specifics, but, thought Mrs Bloxby, there was often comfort in trying because the answer could be 'no' but, on the other hand, something might happen.

Scotland Yard once claimed that some people are murderees. Mrs Bloxby could not have imagined that in a village not far away from Carsely was a widow who would cause such hatred as to spur someone to murder her and give Agatha Raisin a new case.

Mrs Gloria French lived in the village of Piddlebury, a charming place of old cottages, nestling in the Cotswold hills. She was a jolly widow with dyed blonde hair, rosy cheeks and a raucous laugh. The perpetual smile on her

wide mouth never quite reached her prominent pale blue eyes. She had recently moved to the Cotswolds from London and had thrown herself into village life with great energy. She baked cakes for the Women's Institute. She delivered the *Church Times.* She organized parties to raise money to repair the old church. In short, she seemed indefatigable.

Gloria's cottage had a thatched roof and latticed windows. The latticed windows were a recent addition, Gloria thinking that plain glass was not, well, *cottagey* enough. Nestling among the profusion of flowers in her garden were plastic gnomes.

Inside, the living room and kitchen were decorated with many copper pans and fake horse brasses. Some bad watercolours hung on the walls, Gloria being an enthusiastic amateur artist. 'If you are very good,' she was fond of saying, 'I will give you one of my pictures,' but the ungrateful villagers hoped they were never going to be considered good enough.

She favoured tight dresses of shiny material over a body stocking, giving her figure a sausage-like appearance. Gloria was determined to marry again. She ruthlessly pursued the few eligible men in the village with the exception of Jerry Tarrant, head of the parish council, who had complained about the amount of scent she wore by saying, 'We're supposed to get a whiff as we walk past you, not when we drive past you at sixty miles an hour,' for Gloria sprayed herself daily from top to bottom in L'Air Du Temps.

Everyone hoped she would settle down, as they were used to newcomers trying to take over and immersing themselves in what they believed was village life.

The vicar, Guy Enderbury, however, was delighted with her efforts. Not only had Gloria raised a healthy sum of money for the church restoration but also she read to the elderly and took them on shopping trips.

He found it hard to understand why she was becoming so unpopular, and appealed to his wife, Clarice.

Said Clarice, 'She's pushy, but it's not only that. She borrows things and doesn't give them back. When people ask for their belongings, she swears blind the items are her own property.'

Such was the case. The items were hardly ever very expensive, a teapot here, a set of knives there, things like that.

Had she not been such a formidable character, people would have stopped lending her things, but when she loomed up on their doorsteps, they often weakly gave in, just wanting to be rid of her.

As Agatha was drinking coffee with Mrs Bloxby, Gloria applied another slash of red lipstick to her large mouth and headed for the cottage of Peter Suncliff. Peter was a retired engineer and a widower. He was a tall powerful man in his early sixties with a good head of white hair and a craggy face. Gloria considered him top of her list as husband material.

He opened the door and looked down at Gloria. 'What?' he demanded curtly.

'The vicar's calling round and I am out of sherry,' said Gloria. She tried to move past him, into his cottage, but he barred the way. 'I wondered if I could borrow a bottle.'

'There's no need for that,' said Peter. 'The village store is still open, or had you forgotten? They sell sherry. Or had you forgotten that as well?' And, with that, he slammed the door in her face.

Gloria turned away, baffled. Then she thought he was probably shy and was frightened of betraying his real feelings.

She was just leaving when she was accosted by Jenny Soper. Jenny was also a widow, small and dainty, with a good figure and a round face with dimples under a head of curly black hair. 'Oh, Gloria,' she said. 'Do you remember

you borrowed a bag of flour from me? Do you mind replacing it?'

'What? Oh, that? What's a bag of flour between friends?'

'We are not friends,' said Jenny.

Gloria ignored her and strode on to the village stores. Jenny followed her. 'I'm telling you,' shouted Jenny, 'I want you to replace that bag of flour. Buy one now and give it to me.'

'No, I haven't enough money on me at the moment,' said Gloria. 'Really, Jenny! You're all flushed. What a lot of fuss over a mere bag of flour.'

'You're a greedy cow!' said Jenny. 'I wish someone would kill you!' She stomped off.

Gloria beamed round at the startled villagers in the shop. 'Dear Jenny,' she said, shaking her head. 'But there you are, the menopause takes women in odd ways.'

'Her be too young,' said old Mrs Tripp. 'Menopause, indeed. And don't you come reading to me no more. Hear?'

Gloria looked at her, aghast. All the hours she had spent reading to that smelly old woman. 'What's more,' said Mrs Tripp, shuffling forward with the aid of two sticks, 'you're long past the change yourself, I does reckon.'

Gloria could hardly believe her ears. She was in her early fifties and prided herself on looking at least ten years younger.

She smiled at the watching villagers. 'The heat does seem to be getting to everyone this morning.'

They all turned their backs on her. Gloria was not sensitive, but even such as she felt an air of menace around her, a sort of menace that was as old as the Cotswold hills.

Unlike most Cotswold villages these days, which abound with outsiders, nearly all of the residents were from families who had lived in Piddlebury for generations.

Gloria hurriedly purchased a bottle of the cheapest sherry she could find and made her way home.

The phone was ringing when she entered her cottage and she rushed to answer it.

It was the vicar. 'My dear Mrs French,' he said, 'I am afraid I cannot join you this morning. Something has come up.'

'What?' demanded Gloria.

'Parish business.'

'What kind of parish business?'

Then clear as a bell, she could hear the vicar's wife shouting, 'Have you managed to put her off?'

'I'll tell you next time I see you,' said Guy Enderbury. 'Got to rush.'

And then he rang off.

Gloria slowly replaced the receiver. She needed a drink. But not this filthy cheap sherry. She had the very thing down in the cellar. She went down the narrow stairs. On the floor lay a crate containing a few bottles of elderberry wine. She had organized the refreshments at a Bring & Buy sale at the church hall a month ago. A local farmer's wife, Mrs Ada White, had contributed the wine to be sold. Gloria, knowing the homemade wine to be especially good, had stolen the crate that Ada had put under the table as a reserve. One bottle at the corner of the crate had a printed label on it she had not noticed before. It read: Very Special.

That'll do, thought Gloria. She lifted out a bottle and took it upstairs.

Pouring a large glass, she swallowed a greedy gulp and then gasped. She thought it must have gone off. Her body was racked with convulsions and she vomited violently. Then her bowels gave. She tried to get out of her armchair and reach the phone. But when she stood up, her legs gave out from under her and she fell to the ground. Her vision blurred and the room grew dark as she dragged herself into her small hallway. She made one last effort to raise herself up, but she slipped into a coma.

Three hours later, Jenny met Peter Suncliff in the main street. The village was really only made up of this one

street. There were only two lanes leading off it. The cottages fronted straight on to the street without gardens.

'How are you this morning, Jenny?' asked Peter.

'Still angry. That wretched French woman. She borrowed a bag of flour from me and won't give one back. She goes round the village, borrowing one thing or another, except it isn't borrowing, it's stealing. She never gives anything back. I mean, it's only a bag of flour but someone has to stand up to her.'

'I'll come with you,' said Peter, who had a soft spot for pretty Jenny.

They walked together to Gloria's cottage and rang the bell. Mrs Ada White stopped beside them, a shopping basket over her arm. 'She often doesn't answer,' she said. 'I know she stole my elderberry wine but when I went to see her, she wouldn't answer the door although I'd seen her going in a few minutes before I rang the bell.'

'Let's just leave it,' said Jenny.

'No. It's time she got a real lecture.' Peter bent down and shouted through the letterbox. 'Open up! We know you're in there.'

Then he straightened up, a worried frown on his face. 'What's up?' asked Jenny.

He didn't answer but bent down again and this time looked through the letterbox.

He tried the door but it was locked. 'Call for an ambulance, Jenny,' he said. 'She's had a turn. I'll try to break in.'

The front door had a glass panel. While Jenny dialled 999 on her mobile, Peter picked up a stone from the street and smashed the glass of the door. He gingerly put his arm through the hole he had made, found the lock and opened it.

Gloria's make-up stood out starkly against the clay of her face. He felt for a pulse but could not find one.

The ambulance took half an hour to arrive. People began to gather outside the cottages.

Two paramedics rushed in while Peter and Jenny waited nervously outside.

One of the paramedics came outside and said, 'We've called the police.'

'Why?' asked Peter.

'It looks like poisoning. Nothing must be touched.'

Agatha read about it the following day in a local newspaper. Her interest quickened and then died. She could not afford to investigate any case where she could not earn any money.

At the weekend, she was morosely looking at her garden, feeling that she should try to weed some of the flowerbeds, and deciding to sit down and have a gin and tonic and a cigarette instead, when her doorbell rang.

When she opened the door, she found her friend Detective Sergeant Bill Wong on the doorstep. 'Come in!' cried Agatha. 'I thought all my friends had forgotten me.'

'Been very busy,' said Bill.

Bill Wong had been Agatha's first friend when she had newly arrived to stay in the Cotswolds. He was the product of a Chinese father and a Gloucestershire mother. He had a round face and almond-shaped eyes and a pleasant local accent.

'Drink?' suggested Agatha, leading the way into the garden where her two cats, Hodge and Boswell, chased shadows across the shaggy lawn.

'Too early for me and too early for you,' said Bill, settling himself down in a garden chair. The cats rushed to give him a welcome.

'It's eleven o' clock,' snapped Agatha, 'and the pubs are open. Don't be a Puritan.'

'I'll have a coffee.'

When Agatha returned with a mug of coffee, it was to find that Hodge had draped himself around Bill's neck while Boswell lay purring on his lap. Agatha looked sourly

at the scene. Her cats only seemed glad to see her when it was feeding time.

'What's new?' she asked, sitting down beside him.

'An odd case over at Piddlebury.'

'Oh, the suspected poisoning. Is it poisoning?'

'Seems like it. Still waiting for the results of the autopsy. A preliminary search shows that she had been drinking elderberry wine just before she died.'

'Some of that homemade stuff is enough to poison anyone,' remarked Agatha.

'But there is no sign of a glass or a bottle. There are about four bottles of the stuff in a crate in the cellar. They've been taken away for analysis. The back door of the cottage was unlocked. Someone must have got in and removed the evidence.'

'Any suspects?'

'None so far. She appears to have been the saint of the village, raising money for the church and doing good works all round.'

'Give it time,' said Agatha cynically. 'At first, no one will speak ill of the dead. Was she rich?'

'Very comfortably off. Her house is worth at least half a million. She had a healthy amount of stock shares and a large bank balance. Her husband was owner of a company which manufactured Crispy Crisps, potato chips in all kinds of flavours.'

'So who inherits?'

'There's a son and daughter. But they both have alibis and were estranged from mother. Son Wayne was managing director of Crispy Crisps but when her husband died, Gloria sold off the whole business and left him without a job.'

'Aha!'

'Aha, nothing,' said Bill gloomily. 'He's got a good job as managing director of a rival company, Neat Nibbles. And he's only twenty-nine. On the day of her death, he was seen around the factory by hundreds of people.'

'What about the daughter?'

'Tracey Altrop is married to a wealthy farmer. On the morning of the murder she was down at the church in the village of Ancombe, doing the flowers.'

'Could someone have poisoned one of the bottles, knowing she would get around to drinking it eventually?'

'We've thought of that. The wine was made by Mrs Ada White. Gloria nicked it from a Bring & Buy sale at the church a week ago. When challenged, Gloria swore blind she hadn't seen it.'

'So there's a crack in her impeccable do-good character,' said Agatha. 'If she stole the wine, maybe she stole other things.'

Bill smiled. 'Wish you were on the case?'

'It would be more interesting than the rubbish I've got to deal with,' said Agatha. 'I wish someone would pay me to look into it.'

'Cheer up. The son and daughter are rich. Maybe they'll ask for your help.'

A week went by and Agatha had almost forgotten about the case when she received a visit in her office from Jerry Tarrant, head of the Piddlebury parish council. He was an incredibly neat-looking man, wearing a blue shirt and silk tie with jeans which had been pressed into knife-edged creases over a pair of gleaming white trainers. He looked as if he had tried to dress casually but couldn't quite make it. His thin brown hair was combed in strips over a bald patch on his head. His features were small: small brown eyes, small button of a nose and a little mouth.

He introduced himself, sitting down opposite Agatha and arranging the creases in his jeans so that they fell vertically. He introduced himself. Agatha brightened and slammed shut a folder of missing pets.

'How can I help you?' she asked. 'Is it about the recent murder in your village?'

'It is indeed.' His voice was high and fluting. 'Normally we would leave matters to the police, but we need the case solved quickly. We have been, up till now, a happy village. Now, everyone seems to suspect everyone else.'

'What kind of person was Gloria French?' asked Agatha. 'And please do speak ill of the dead if necessary.'

'She bought a house in the village a year ago and at first she seemed an exemplary woman. She read to the elderly and did their shopping for them, she raised money to restore the church, things like that. And then she developed a habit of borrowing things and refusing to give them back. Never anything very valuable, wine glasses for a party she was giving, scissors, a teapot and all sorts of bits and pieces. On her last day, she tried to borrow a bottle of sherry from one of the villagers.'

'Who will fund this?' asked Agatha. 'My rates are quite high.'

'I shall pay your rates myself,' said Jerry. 'I want my tranquil village back. If you discover the identity of the murderer, I will pay you a generous bonus. I am not a poor man.'

Agatha told Mrs Freedman to draw up a contract. After she had finished discussing her fee and expenses, Agatha asked, 'Have you any idea who might have committed this murder?'

'We do not have incomers in our village. Well, Gloria was one and Peter Suncliff, a retired engineer, the other. But I can't think of anyone else.'

'But they are accusing each other. Is one person the favourite?'

'There is one ridiculous suggestion from some that it might be Jenny Soper, because Jenny was heard threatening to kill her. But Jenny is a sweet little thing and wouldn't harm a fly.'

'I have never been to Piddlebury,' said Agatha. 'What's it like?'

'Very small. More of a hamlet than a village. There's one main street with a church at one end and a pub at the other.'

At that moment, Toni Gilmour walked into the office. With old-fashioned courtesy, Jerry jumped to his feet. Agatha introduced him and said that Toni would be one of her staff helping with the investigation.

Toni was young and beautiful with blonde hair, wide blue eyes and a perfect figure. Jerry beamed at her. Men always beamed at Toni, reflected Agatha with a little sour stab of jealousy. I probably won't live long enough to see her lose her looks, she thought miserably, and immediately wanted a cigarette. But she fought against the urge. She was, once more, desperately trying to give up.

Jerry opened a briefcase and pulled out a selection of photographs. 'These were taken at the last church fete,' he said. 'I have written the names on the back. I have also here a typed list of the names of most of the villagers and a short description of each person.'

A man after my own heart, thought Agatha.

'When do you plan to start?' asked Jerry.

'Oh, I think we can begin today,' said Agatha, planning to inflict the folder of lost pets on Simon Black.

Jerry signed the contract and took his leave. Five minutes later, Patrick Mulligan walked in. Agatha thought, not for the first time, that Patrick's appearance always seemed to scream policeman, from his lugubrious face to his grey suit and highly polished black shoes.

After she had briefed Patrick and told him to get in touch with some of his old police contacts to find out what he could about the case, she asked, 'Any idea yet what poisoned her?'

'Rhubarb.'

'Rhubarb! But I had rhubarb tart last week and I'm fine.'

'Rhubarb leaves are highly poisonous, particularly when they're cooked up with soda. It turns out she had a weak heart or she might just have survived. I was talking to an

old pal down at police headquarters about it. He said the kitchen door at the back was unlocked because someone came in and took the bottle and glass away. There were bottles of the wine in a crate in the cellar. There were footprints going down to the cellar, some appear to be from Gloria herself and then a set of larger prints, and they were recent footprints. So what is puzzling the police is that although it looks as if the murderer just popped a bottle of the poisoned stuff in with the others and sat back and waited, how would the murderer know that Gloria would drink out of that bottle and when, so as to be on hand to remove the evidence? Also the vicar says that Gloria often entertained him, supplying the cheapest drink possible, and recently she had offered him elderberry wine. It looks as if our murderer didn't care who he or she bumped off as long as one of the people was Gloria.'

'Keep at it, Patrick,' said Agatha, rapidly taking notes. 'Toni and I will pop over there and suss the place out.'

As Agatha and Toni got out of Agatha's car in the main street of Piddlebury, Toni thought it looked like a picture postcard. A few thatched houses crouched on either side of the street intermingled with slate-roofed ones of a more recent date, probably Georgian, thought Toni, unlike their Tudor neighbours. The steeple of the church at one end of the village, like one enormous sundial, cast a shadow as the sun moved behind it.

Gloria's cottage was recognizable because of the police tape outside it and the white tent erected over the door.

'Where do we start?' asked Toni.

'The pub,' said Agatha. 'I'm hungry.'

The pub, the Green Man, was a square building of mellow golden Cotswold stone. An old wisteria covered most of the front. The painting of the green man, that ancient

fertility symbol, had a singularly evil-looking face with vines sprouting from his nostrils.

Agatha and Toni entered the cool dark bar. 'I hope, since this village is not on the tourist map, that they have some real food,' whispered Agatha. She approached the bar. 'Do you serve lunches?'

The tall thin greying man behind the bar held out his hand. 'You'll be the detective ladies Mr Tarrant was telling us about.'

'Yes, that's us,' said Agatha. 'You are . . . ?'

'Moses Green, owner of this here establishment.'

'We're hungry. What do you have?'

He handed Agatha a menu. Agatha looked at it with a sinking heart. Lasagne and chips, egg and chips, sausage and chips, ham and chips, ploughmans and tomato soup. Her face fell.

'Haven't you any real food?'

'Seeing as it's you, you can have a bit of the wife's roast lamb, if you'd like that?'

'Great.' They ordered two halves of lager and retreated to a corner table.

'We're the only customers,' whispered Toni.

When Moses arrived with their food, Agatha asked, 'Is it always as quiet as this?'

'Oh, folks are here but they're out in the garden at the back. The smokers like it there.'

Agatha was about to suggest joining them, but remembering how hard she was trying to stop smoking, compromised by saying that they would take their coffee in the garden after they had eaten. After all, she reminded herself, she was here to interview the locals.

The lamb was excellent. After they had finished eating, they walked along a stone-flagged corridor and into the garden at the back. The hum of conversation stopped and the diners turned and looked at them.

'I am Agatha Raisin, private detective,' announced Agatha in a loud voice. A loud *hectoring* voice, thought Toni

uneasily. 'And I am here to investigate the murder of Gloria French. Can any of you help me?'

In that moment, Toni wished that someone of her own age, Simon Black, say, was investigating this case with her. Being with Agatha was like being towed along in the wake of a battleship.

Everyone bent their heads over their food and soon a murmur of conversation rose again. Hands on hips, Agatha viewed them with frustration.

'Let's sit down and have our coffee and I'll take it one table at a time,' said Toni. 'I think you frighten them.'

'I don't frighten people,' said Agatha crossly. 'People *warm* to me.'

'Not this lot,' said Toni. 'Sit down, drink coffee, have a cigarette and leave it to me.'

'You forget who's in charge here,' said Agatha crossly.

'Believe me, not for a moment.'

'Oh, do your best,' said Agatha sulkily.

As Toni approached the nearest table, Agatha opened her file of photographs. Toni was now talking to Peter Suncliff and Jenny Soper. She rather hoped they would give Toni the brush-off, but to her irritation she saw Peter pull out a chair for Toni and soon they were deep in conversation.

Agatha lit a cigarette, the first of the day, and felt her head swim. She cursed under her breath and stubbed it out, frightened by visions of having to walk around with a portable oxygen tank.

To her relief, she saw Toni waving to her. She rose and walked over.

Toni introduced them. 'We've been talking about Gloria. They can't help much,' she said.

'And I'd help you if I could,' said Jenny. 'I was heard hoping that someone would kill her. Of course I didn't mean it, but it was infuriating the way she would pretend to borrow things when she had no intention of ever handing them back or paying anyone for what she took. You'll

have a difficult job getting anyone else to talk to you. The police have questioned everyone in the village. All that's done is to stir up trouble. Everyone is pointing the finger at everyone else.'

'That's the trouble with the police,' said Agatha. 'They make everyone feel guilty. Don't worry. I'll find this killer if it's the last thing I do.'

Agatha was not to know that it would turn out to be nearly the very last thing she did do.