

Chapter One

'Fee, fie, fo, fum. I smell the blood of an Englishman.' As the giant ogre in the Winter Parva pantomime strutted across the stage, uttering the old familiar words, Agatha Raisin stifled a yawn. She loathed amateur dramatics, but had been persuaded to support the pantomime by her friend, Mrs Bloxby, the vicar's wife. The two women were in odd contrast: Agatha with her smart clothes and glossy brown hair, Mrs Bloxby in faded tweeds and wispy brown hair streaked with grey surrounding her gentle face.

Agatha began to feel sulky and trapped. Why was she, a private detective of some fame, wasting her sweetness on the desert air of the Winter Parva village hall?

The pantomime was *Babes in the Woods*, but there were also characters from other pantomimes from *Old Mother Hubbard* to *Puss in Boots*.

At last the interval arrived. There was no theatre bar but mulled wine was being served in the entrance hall. Agatha grabbed a glass and said, 'Going outside for a cigarette.'

Fog lay heavily on the car park and water dripped mournfully from the trees surrounding it. 'Still smoking? Dear me,' said a voice behind Agatha. She swung round and found herself looking down at the gossip of her home village, Carsely, Mrs Arnold.

'Yes,' said Agatha curtly.

'Do you know that only twenty percent of the people in Britain now smoke?' said Mrs Arnold.

'I never believe in statistics,' said Agatha. 'Have they asked everyone?' She surveyed Mrs Arnold's small round figure. 'Anyway, what about overeating? What about a ban on *fat* people?'

A tall man loomed up out of the mist. 'What do you think of the show?'

Agatha bit back the word *hellish* that had risen to her lips and said instead, 'I think the chap playing the ogre is very good. Who is he?'

'That's our local baker, Bert Simple. I haven't introduced myself. I recognize you. I'm Gareth Craven, producer of the show. That's the end of the interval. I'd better get backstage.'

'I'm Agatha Raisin,' Agatha called after him.

Quite tasty, thought Agatha, watching his tall figure disappear into the fog. Well, hello hormones, I thought you had laid down and died.

She shuffled along her seat beside Mrs Bloxby. The hall smelled of damp people, mulled wine, and chocolates. A

surprising number had brought boxes of chocolates. Pen lights flickered, voices murmured things like, 'I don't want a hard one. Are those liqueur chocolates, you naughty man!' Children, used to slumping on comfortable sofas in front of the television, screamed and hit each other.

The curtains were drawn back and the comedian came on. 'Hello, hello, hello!' he yelled.

'Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye,' muttered Agatha.

The comedian was a local man, George Southern, who owned a gift shop in the village.

He was slightly built and rather camp with thin brown hair and a large nose that overshadowed his small mouth.

'I hope you're in good voice tonight, folks,' he said. A screen came down behind him. It's the compulsory sing-along, thought Agatha bleakly.

Sure enough, the words of 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' appeared on the screen. Why an old First World War song, wondered Agatha, and then came to the conclusion that they were possibly frightened that anything more modern would incur royalties. From previous experience, she knew that amateur dramatic companies seemed to think the eyes of the world were on them. It seemed to go on forever. He got the men to sing, then the women, then the children. 'Follow the bouncing ball,' he yelled, strutting about the stage in his moment of glory.

The curtains were drawn again and opened to reveal a cardboard cottage. The Babes were played by two ill-favoured children, who turned out to be the son and daughter of the head of the parish council, which was why they had landed the parts.

'Here comes the ogre again,' said Mrs Bloxby.

'Isn't there supposed to be a witch?' said Agatha.

'Shhh!' admonished a voice behind them.

'Fee! Fie! Fo! Fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman,' roared Bert. 'Be he alive, or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread.'

He was a burly man with a big round head and small glittering eyes, wearing built-up boots to make him look like a giant.

Slowly descending on a creaking wire came the Good Fairy. It broke when she was nearly down and she fell in a heap on the stage. 'Can't you bloody bastards do anything properly?' she yelled. The children whistled and cheered.

'Shame!' called a voice from the audience. 'Remember the children.'

The Good Fairy rallied, picked up her bent wand and faced the ogre. 'I am banishing you to the pit from whence you came,' she said.

There was an impressive puff of green smoke. A trap-door opened and Bert disappeared. The small orchestra started to play a jolly tune. A chorus lineup of ill-assorted tap dancers thudded their way across the stage.

The pantomime dragged on to the close. At the final curtain, there was no sign of Bert.

‘It was all right, considering it was an amateur show,’ ventured Mrs Bloxby.

Agatha bit back the nasty remark that was rising to her lips. The two women had come in their separate cars. She said goodnight to her friend, warning her to drive carefully, because the fog was even thicker.

As Agatha was nearing Carsely, police cars heading for Winter Parva raced past on the other side of the road. Agatha did a U-turn and followed them. ‘Something’s up,’ she muttered. ‘Maybe someone’s murdered that dreadful comedian.’

Soon she could see flashing blue lights outside the village hall.

The thick mist meant she was able to get into the car park before the police taped off the area. Where was the stage door? That chap, Gareth, had left and gone round the side of the building.

She walked round the side of the building and found a small door, standing open. A policeman supporting Gareth Craven came along a corridor inside. ‘If I could just get some fresh air,’ said Gareth. His face was chalk white.

Agatha stepped boldly forward. ‘I’m a friend of Mr Craven,’ she said. ‘I’ll look after him. You can come out when you’re ready and take a statement. I have a Peugeot parked outside.’

‘Name?’

'Mrs Bloxby,' said Agatha, fearing that the sound of her own name would alert the policeman to the fact that she was a private detective.

'Registration number of your car?'

Agatha gave it to him and then put an arm around Gareth's waist. 'Come along,' she said. 'I've some brandy in the car.'

'I thought you were Agatha Raisin,' said Gareth.

'I am,' said Agatha, 'but I didn't want that policeman to know that. Here we are. In you go and I'll get the heater on.'

Once Gareth was settled in the passenger seat and had taken a few swigs of brandy from a flask Agatha kept in the car, Agatha said, 'What happened in there?'

'It was awful,' said Gareth. 'When Bert didn't appear for the curtain call, I went back to look for him. He wasn't in any of the dressing rooms. I went down under the platform and there he was. Oh, God!'

He buried his face in his hands. Agatha waited until she thought he had recovered and said, 'Go on. What happened to him?'

'He was standing there, very still, his mouth opened in a sort of awful silent scream. There was a big pool of blood at his feet. I couldn't find a pulse. I ran upstairs and phoned police, ambulance and fire brigade. The lot. I couldn't bear any more. That's it.'

There was a peremptory rap on the car window. Agatha lowered it and found Detective Sergeant Bill Wong staring accusingly at her. 'I'll speak to you later,'

he said. 'Mr Craven. Please come with me. We need a statement. And Mrs Raisin, please drive your car beyond the taped-off police area.'

Bill must be really cross to call me Mrs Raisin, thought Agatha. The young detective was the first friend she ever made when she came to the Cotswolds.

She decided to drive home and wait for the news the following day. Whatever had happened to Bert, it would be too late for the morning papers, but there might be something on television. But if it were an accident, then nothing would appear at all.

She was to get the news from an unexpected quarter.

The following day was Sunday. Agatha contemplated making one of her rare visits to morning service, thought better of it, turned over and went back to sleep.

She did not get up until midday. She rose, dressed and went down to feed her cats, Hodge and Boswell, and let them out into the garden. An icy wind was blowing. Both cats turned on the threshold and looked up at her.

'Go on,' urged Agatha. 'You've got fur coats on, haven't you?'

Just then, the front doorbell rang. When Agatha opened the door, it was to find a tired-looking Mrs Bloxby on the step.

'It's awful,' said the vicar's wife.

'Come in,' said Agatha. 'I'll put the coffee on.'

She waited until her friend was seated at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee, and asked, 'What's going on?'

'I've been out a good part of last night. Mrs Simple was in a terrible state. She asked to speak to Alf.' Alf was the vicar. 'We both went to Winter Parva. The doctor had been called and had given Mrs Simple a tranquillizer but she was still in a state. She said God was punishing her for being a bad wife.'

'Was Bert's death murder? Was she saying she killed him?' asked Agatha.

'No, not at all. But it appears to have been a particularly vicious murder. And well thought out, too. A small square had been cut out of the elevator platform. Evidently it always descended a bit too quickly and landed with a bump. Well, when Mr Simple descended, a long steel spike had been embedded in the floor so that it went up through the hole in the platform, right between his legs and up into his body. Alf and I managed to persuade Mrs Simple to go to bed and we sat and talked quietly to her until she fell asleep.'

'Doesn't Winter Parva have a vicar?'

'No, Alf takes services there twice a month.'

'Wait a bit,' said Agatha. 'I don't get this. How on earth would anyone have time to fix that spike and not be discovered?'

'Mr Simple was killed the first time he descended. That was towards the end of the pantomime. Evidently

he had been complaining about the speed it went down and said he would only do it the once.'

'But there would be a dress rehearsal!'

'I suppose so. His son, Walt, told us that no one goes down there except the blacksmith.'

'Do we have blacksmiths in this day and age?'

'Yes, of course. We have three hunts around here. And Mr Crosswith, the blacksmith, also does wrought-iron gates and things. Bert had been complaining that the trap was a bit dangerous. Mr Crosswith designed a star trap from some old Victorian drawings.'

'What is a star trap?' asked Agatha.

'Star traps consist of a permanent stage floor, made up of several triangular sections of flooring meeting at the centre, which may be lifted but which naturally fall flat. Under the stage is an elevator using counterweights that are heavier than the weight of the performer.

'To make an impressive entrance, the elevator platform is first lowered, at which point a brake is applied, to stop the counterweight falling. The performer steps on to the platform. On cue, the brake is removed allowing the counterweights to fall. The performer is thrust through the star trap door. When the platform hits the highest point the performer leaps upward clearing the trapdoor sections, which then fall back into position at floor level. With a puff of smoke, the illusion is complete. Then in reverse, the flats open and Mr Simple descends. Do you understand all that?'

'Sort of,' said Agatha cautiously. 'How do you know all this?'

'The Mother's Union was given a tour of the hall earlier this year to show how it had been used back in the Victorian days. The blacksmith gave us a lecture on the trap.'

'Do you think someone tampered with the brakes so that the platform would go down extra fast?'

'Maybe. But it went down pretty fast anyway.'

'How does anyone get in under the stage? Is there an outside door?'

'You can get through under the platform at the front. I know that. But whether there is another entrance, I can't say. I know Bert only made one entrance through the trap, so it could have been tampered with any time earlier.'

Agatha lit a cigarette and watched the smoke drift up towards the kitchen ceiling. 'Wait a minute. In order for Bert to disappear, someone below the stage must have operated the elevator.'

'I gather that the stage manager pressed a button at the side of the stage, which opened the trap and sent the green smoke up.'

'But the stage manager, or Gareth Craven, the producer, surely checked on the apparatus before the show.'

'If things went all right at the dress rehearsal, Mrs Raisin, maybe a check wasn't considered necessary,' said Mrs Bloxby.

We really should start to call each other by our first names, thought Agatha. We called each other by our second names in the Ladies Society. But the society is long gone.

‘What about the spike, or whatever it was that killed Bert?’

‘I don’t know about that. Someone must have really hated him,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘Such an elaborate way of killing him!’

‘The blacksmith must be the obvious culprit,’ said Agatha.

‘I believe he is a quiet, sensitive man,’ said Mrs Bloxby.

‘Oh, well,’ said Agatha. ‘I’ll need to leave this one to the police. I’ve got my own business to run and I can’t see anyone in Winter Parva wanting to pay me to investigate the murder of a baker.’

On a Monday morning, a week later, Agatha, as usual, greeted her staff before settling down to have her usual breakfast at her desk – one cup of strong black coffee and two cigarettes. Her staff consisted of young, blonde and beautiful Toni Gilmour; white-haired gentle Phil Marshall; lugubrious ex-policeman Patrick Mulligan; young Simon Black with his jester’s face; and secretary, Mrs Freedman. Simon had left briefly to work for another agency when he thought Toni had resigned. But when he heard Toni had returned, he had promptly

asked for his job back. Agatha did not like Simon much, but had rehired him in a weak moment.

Agatha blew out a smoke ring. Mrs Freedman gave an admonitory cough and switched on an extractor fan she had insisted on having installed.

'Let's see,' said Agatha. 'Toni and Simon, you have Mrs Fairly's case. She wants proof of her husband's infidelity. Phil and Patrick, you've got two missing teenagers. You've got their details and photographs?'

Both nodded.

'Right,' said Agatha. 'I've got Berry's supermarket. Valuable goods have been disappearing from their electronics section and so far there's been nothing on their CCTV cameras. I'm going to spend the day there.'

'Someone's coming,' said Toni. 'Might be something interesting.' Toni hoped it might be a job that she could do on her own. She did not like working with Simon. He was constantly asking her out on dates and she found it all embarrassing.

The door opened and a man Agatha recognized as Gareth Craven walked in. He was even better looking than Agatha remembered. She did a frantic mental check. Did she have coffee-stained teeth? Had her lipstick faded? Why had she opted for trousers and flat shoes?

Gareth Craven was a tall man with thick brown hair, clear grey eyes, a firm mouth, and a handsome face which unfortunately ended in a rather weak chin.

'Please take a seat, Mr Craven,' said Agatha, thinking, nobody's perfect.

'I really need your help,' said Gareth. 'You see, the newspapers are after me already and they are making me feel guilty. You would think I had done it. I've stopped answering the door or the phone. Mrs Raisin, you have such a good reputation for solving cases. I wondered if I could employ you.'

'Certainly,' said Agatha. 'Mrs Freedman will draw up a contract for you. I will start on it right away. Toni, you take over Berry's supermarket for me.' Simon's face fell. He had been looking forward to a day with Toni.

Mrs Freedman came over with the contracts. Gareth barely looked at the price and quickly signed them.

'Now,' said Agatha to Gareth, 'we'll clear off somewhere for a coffee and you can give me all the details.'

In the old-fashioned gloom of the George Hotel lounge, after coffee had been served, Agatha asked, 'Who, in your opinion, would want to kill Bert?'

'That's the problem,' said Gareth. 'I don't know where to tell you to start.'

'Have you discussed it with your wife?' asked Agatha. 'I'm not married. Divorced.'

'Like me,' said Agatha cheerfully. 'What about the blacksmith?'

'Harry Crosswith is a pillar of the community. He's in a terrible state.'

'How could anyone guarantee that the spike would kill Bert? I mean, he could have been at the edge of the platform?'

'It's a small platform,' said Gareth, 'and Bert is – was – a big man. He complained that the lift went down too fast. In fact he and Harry had a bit of a row about it. Harry was very proud of that trap.'

'What about the nearest and dearest. How old is the son, Walt?'

'He's twenty. Works in the bakery. Quiet and reliable.'
'And Mrs Simple?'

Gareth's face softened. 'Gwen is a saint. She works serving in the shop. Everybody loves her.'

Not you, I hope, thought Agatha. Aloud she said, 'Perhaps I should start today by asking some of the locals. Who's the biggest gossip in the village?'

'Well, there's Marie Tench. But she can be spiteful.'

'Maybe just the sort of person I should talk to,' said Agatha. 'Have you her address?'

'She's got a flat above the newspaper shop opposite the old marketplace.'

'I'll start there. Tell me about yourself. How did you get involved with producing this pantomime?'

'I was a producer with BBC Radio 4 for years. Last year, I was suddenly made redundant. They're cutting jobs all round. It was a bit of a blow, but I'm lucky enough to have private means so I thought I would keep my hand in by producing this pantomime.'

‘But it wasn’t very professional, surely,’ said Agatha. ‘I mean, it was a sort of mishmash of all the pantomime characters.’

‘I know. Mrs Grant of the Women’s Institute wrote the script and was to produce it, but she died. I wanted to make changes but the cast protested and said it should be kept just the way it was, in her memory.’

‘Any friction amongst the cast?’

He sighed. ‘I think amateur productions are worse than professional ones for fragile egos. The Good Fairy, Pixie Turner, went on as if she had a leading role in a Shakespeare production. Then that so-called comedian was always groping the chorus girls.’

‘Where does the chorus line come from?’

‘Winter Parva High School. They have tap dancing classes there.’

‘Any little Lolitas that Bert might have had his eye on?’

‘Oh, no! He was devoted to his wife.’

‘I think I’ve enough names to be going on with,’ said Agatha. ‘I’ll start with the village gossip and then maybe later on you can introduce me to the blacksmith if the police aren’t still grilling him.’

Agatha drove to Winter Parva and parked in the main street. The village was a mixture of old houses with high, sloping roofs. Seventeenth-century buildings rubbed shoulders with Georgian and Tudor. The market hall,

carefully preserved with its open arches and cobbled floor, was a fifteenth-century building. The village was situated down in a fold of the Cotswold hills. It was often misty. The River Oore ran under a bridge leading to the main street and this was blamed for the frequent fogs which plagued the place in winter. A pale sunlight was trying to permeate the mist as Agatha climbed the old stone stairs which led to Marie Tench's flat. Agatha rang the bell and waited. She had expected Marie Tench to be an old woman but the door was opened by a blonde with a quite enormous bust. She must have some sort of industrial-strength brassiere, thought Agatha, for the woman's breasts were hoisted up so far that it looked as if her head were peering over them.

'Mrs Tench?' asked Agatha.

'It's Miss. Who are you?'

Agatha handed over her card and said, 'Gareth Craven has asked me to investigate the murder of Bert Simple. He told me you knew a great deal about the village.'

'Come in.'

Agatha squeezed past her and found herself in a cluttered living room. Every surface was covered by some ornament. There were little glass animals along the mantelshelf, china figurines on the occasional tables, a collection of china coasters on the coffee table, and on a round table by the window, a large acid-green vase of silk flowers.

Above the fireplace was a bad painting in oils of what

appeared to be a naked Marie, those huge breasts painted in sulphur-yellow and red.

Marie sat down on a chintz-covered sofa and waved one plump arm to an armchair, indicating that Agatha should be seated.

A shaft of sunlight shone through the window, lighting up Marie's face. Agatha reflected that Marie was wearing so much make-up, you could skate on it. She had a small prissy mouth painted violent red, a button of a nose, and cold grey eyes. Her hair was so firmly lacquered that it looked like a bad wig.

'I wondered if you had any idea who might have murdered Bert Simple,' began Agatha.

'Pixie Turner, that's who.'

'The Good Fairy?'

'Good Fairy, my arse. More like the wicked witch.'

'But the murder of Bert Simple,' said Agatha, 'seemed to take a lot of knowledge of engineering and carpentry.'

'Hah! Not much by all accounts. Any fool could have sawn that hole in the trap and shoved a spike underneath.'

'How did you learn how the murder was done?'

'Molly Kite, her what works in the gift shop, told me. Her cousin's a policeman.'

'Apart from Pixie, who else might have hated him enough?'

Did Marie suddenly look guilty – or was it a trick of the light? But she flashed Agatha a smile. 'Apart from Pixie, we all loved Bert. No need to look anywhere else.'

‘And where does Pixie Turner live?’

‘Out on the housing estate at the end of the village. I forget the number, but it’s Church Road on the corner. Can’t miss it. The door’s painted bright blue.’

Agatha drove to the housing estate. She saw the house with the blue door and parked outside. Suddenly, she felt inexplicably weary. Her friend, Mrs Bloxby, could easily have diagnosed her trouble. Agatha Raisin, when she was not obsessed with some man or other, became de-energized. Sir Charles Fraith, with whom she had enjoyed an occasional fling, had disappeared out of her life as he did from time to time. Her ex-husband and next-door neighbour, James Lacey, was a travel writer and was currently abroad somewhere.

Agatha got slowly out of her car. She was wearing flat shoes and little make-up. Her brown hair was as glossy as ever but her bear-like eyes held a sad look. Her thoughts turned to Gareth Craven. Pity about that weak chin.

She squared her shoulders and marched up to Pixie’s door and rang the bell.

The letter box opened and a voice cried, ‘Go away!’

Agatha bent down. ‘I am Agatha Raisin and I am investigating the death of Bert Simple.’

‘Go away.’

Agatha had a sudden inspiration. ‘I can understand

you not wanting to be bothered. Those television crews will follow me around.'

'Television!' The door swung open to reveal Pixie in a tatty pink silk dressing gown. 'Come in quickly,' she hissed, 'and wait in the parlour until I get dressed.'

Agatha looked around the room into which Pixie had thrust her. There were framed photographs of Pixie everywhere. Her acting roles appeared to have been confined to the village productions of pantomimes. She had progressed from Cinderella when she had been young, then to the Principal Boy, and so on to older parts, ending up as the Good Fairy.

A joss stick was smoking in a vase in one corner. Film and television magazines were piled up on the coffee table and on the chairs and sofa. One wall was dominated by a large mirror surrounded by light bulbs.

I wonder what she does when she's not dreaming of fame, thought Agatha.

Agatha peered at her own reflection in the mirror. Was that a hair on her upper lip? 'Snakes and bastards,' she muttered, and began searching in her bag for a pair of tweezers. Not all that long ago, early fifties had been considered pretty old. Women let their figures sag and grew moustaches and didn't seem to bother. Ah, the good old days. She was still looking frantically for a pair of tweezers in her handbag when Pixie entered the room.

She had put on so much mascara that her lashes stuck straight out around her eyes like black spikes. She

was wearing a short, tight red leather skirt with fishnet stockings and high heels. Her white blouse was nearly transparent. Her face had a sort of withered prettiness under white make-up with pink circles of blusher on each cheek. Her dyed blonde hair was dressed in old-fashioned ringlets. She looked like a rather battered doll.

‘Have the TV people called?’ she asked anxiously.

Agatha was about to lie and say they would be along shortly in order to keep Pixie’s interest when there was a ring at the doorbell.

‘That’ll be them,’ said Pixie and sashayed to the door.

Agatha heard a man’s voice say, ‘Midlands Television.’ Well, I’ll be damned, she thought.

She walked into the small entrance hall to hear what Pixie was saying. ‘I was playing the part of the Good Fairy,’ said Pixie, ‘only don’t let that fool you. Little Pixie can be wick-ED.’ Then she let out a great laugh which actually sounded like Har! Har! Har!

‘Was there any friction amongst members of the cast?’ asked the reporter.

‘Oh, no. We got on great. Everyone loved Bert.’

‘Could anyone have got in under the stage to rig that murder device?’

‘Yes, but take it from little Pixie here, it was some maniac from outside.’

‘Thank you for your time, Miz Turner.’

‘Don’t you want to come in for a little drinkie?’

‘No, got to get on.’

Agatha retreated to the parlour. Pixie came in looking sulky and was about to sit down when the doorbell rang again.

'Maybe they're back,' she said eagerly. But this time, Agatha heard a voice say, '*Mircester Echo*.' Pixie tripped in followed by a reporter and cameraman. Agatha recognized the reporter, Chris Jenty.

'Why, Mrs Raisin,' he cried. 'What a bit of luck.'

'She's just leaving.' Pixie's eyes bored into Agatha's face.

'How right you are,' said Agatha with a smile. As she headed for the door, the reporter and cameraman followed her. 'Come back!' wailed Pixie.

The slamming of her front door was the only answer.

'Let's go for a drink,' said Chris. 'You show me yours, and I'll show you mine.'

When they were settled over drinks in a corner of the Jolly Beggar pub in the main street, Chris said, 'You first.'

Agatha told him what she had found out about the rigged trap, that the village gossip had suggested Pixie was the murderer, but that she hadn't got very far.

'Who's paying you to investigate this?' asked Chris.

'Can't tell you,' said Agatha. 'What have you got?'

'I've got a report of flaming rows between Bert Simple and Gareth Craven.'

Agatha stared at him while her mind worked furiously. Once, before she had made a name for herself as a detective, she had been hired by a murderer who

thought her incompetent and that the very act of hiring her might make him look innocent.

'That's interesting,' she said cautiously.

'All I can dig up at the moment. Have you seen Mrs Simple?'

'I might try,' said Agatha. 'I hope she's not too sedated.'