



AGATHA
RAISIN *and the*
MURDEROUS
MARRIAGE

"Among writers of cozy
village mystery series, count
M. C. Beaton as one who
creates a nice tea party."

—Associated Press

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AND THE

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Speak now or forever rest in peace...

M.C. Beaton

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Agatha Raisin

The Murderous Marriage

The fifth book in the *Agatha Raisin* series

1996

The morning of Agatha Raisin's long-awaited marriage to her attractive and elusive neighbor, James Lacey, dawns bright and clear. But the storm clouds of the day before would have been more appropriate. A new anti-wrinkle cream turns Agatha's face into one large red rash, James refuses to discuss his feelings for her, and then Agatha's first husband, Jimmy Raisin, reappears just in time to keep her from committing bigamy. The ensuing brouhaha—Agatha tries to strangle Jimmy, whom she had thought long dead—humiliates and embarrasses James Lacey, who abruptly breaks his engagement to Agatha. When Jimmy is found murdered the next morning, Agatha and James are the prime suspects. Since the easiest way to clear their names is to find the real murderer, Agatha convinces James to help her investigate. But will their subsequent close proximity—which has them, ironically, pretending to be man and wife—be enough to soothe James's bruised pride?

ONE

IT was a week before the wedding of Agatha Raisin to James Lacey. The villagers of Carsely in the English Cotswolds were disappointed that Agatha was not to be married in the village church but in the registry office in Mircester, and Mrs. Bloxby, the vicar's wife, was puzzled and hurt.

Only Agatha knew that she had no proof that her husband was dead. Only Agatha knew that she might be about to commit bigamy. But Agatha was obsessed with her handsome and attractive neighbour, James Lacey, and terrified that if she put off the wedding until she found that proof that she would lose him. She had not seen her drunken husband, Jimmy Raisin, in years. He *must* be dead.

She had chosen the registry office in Mircester because the clerk was old and deaf and totally incurious and she simply had to make statements and fill forms without providing any actual proof, except that of her passport which was still in her maiden name of Agatha Styles. The wedding reception was to be held in the village hall and pretty much everyone in Carsely had been invited.

But unknown to Agatha, forces were already working against her. Her young, erstwhile friend, Roy Silver, in a fit of malicious pique because he felt Agatha had snubbed him over a good public relations opportunity – Roy once worked for Agatha's public relations firm and had moved to the company which had bought Agatha out when she took early retirement – had hired a detective to see if Agatha's husband could be found. Roy was possibly as fond of Agatha as he could be of anyone, but when she had solved her last murder case and he had hoped to gain some personal publicity by being associated with it, Agatha had snubbed him, and such as Roy always felt it necessary to get revenge.

But blissfully unaware of all this, Agatha put her cottage on the market, all ready to move next door into James's cottage after the wedding. From time to time, little stabs of anxiety marred her happiness. Although James made love to her, although they were frequently in each other's company, she felt she did not really know him. He was a retired army colonel, living in the Cotswold village to write military history. There was a privacy and remoteness about him. They talked about murder cases they had solved together, they talked about politics, about people in the village, but never about their feelings for each other, and James was a silent lover.

Agatha was a middle-aged woman, blunt, sometimes coarse, who had risen from poor beginnings to become a wealthy business woman. Until she retired to Carsely, she had had no real friends, her work being, she thought at the time, the only friend she needed. So, though possessed with a good deal of common sense and self-honesty, when it came to James she was blind – blinded not only by love but by the fact that, as she had never been able to let anyone get close to her, his singular lack of communication seemed to her possibly normal.

She had picked out a white wool suit to be wed in. With it she would wear a shady hat of straw with a wide brim, a green silk blouse, high-heeled black shoes, and a spray of flowers on her lapel instead of a wedding bouquet. At times, she did wish she were young again so that she could be married in white. She wished she had never married Jimmy Raisin so that she could be married in church. She tried on the white suit again and then peered closely in the mirror at her face. Her bearlike eyes were too small but could be made to look larger on the great day with a little judicious application of mascara and eye-shadow. There were those nasty little wrinkles around her mouth, and to her horror she saw a long hair sprouting from her upper lip and seized the tweezers and wrenched it out. She took off the precious suit, put on a blouse and trousers and then vigorously slapped anti-wrinkle cream all over her face. She had been dieting and that seemed to have taken care of that former double chin. Her brown hair cut in a Dutch bob gleamed with health.

The doorbell rang. She cursed under her breath, wiped off the anti-wrinkle cream and went to answer it. Mrs. Bloxby, the vicar's wife, stood on the doorstep.

"Oh, do come in," said Agatha reluctantly. She was fond of Mrs. Bloxby, and yet the very sight of that good woman with her kind eyes and vague face sent a stab of guilt through Agatha. Mrs. Bloxby had asked Agatha what had happened to her husband and Agatha had said Jimmy was dead, but every time she saw the vicar's wife Agatha began to have an uneasy feeling that the wretched Jimmy, despite his rampant alcoholism as a young man, might have somehow survived.

Roy Silver faced the detective he had hired. She was a woman of thirty-something called Iris Harris. Ms. Harris -not miss, bite your tongue – was an ardent feminist and Roy had begun to wonder if she was any good at her job or if she specialized in haranguing clients on the rights of women. Therefore he was amazed when she said, "I've found Jimmy Raisin."

"Where?"

“Down under the arches in Waterloo.”

“I’d better see him,” said Roy. “Is he there now?”

“I don’t think he ever moves except to buy another bottle of meths.”

“You’re sure it’s him?”

Iris looked at him with contempt. “Just because I am a woman you think I cannot do my job. Just because...”

“Spare me!” said Roy. “I’ll see him myself. You’ve done well. Send me the bill.” And he fled the office before she could lecture him any more.

The light was fading from the sky when Roy paid off the taxi at Waterloo Station and then walked towards the arches. Then he realized the folly of not taking Iris with him. He should have at least asked for a description. There was a young fellow sitting outside his cardboard box. He appeared sober, although Roy found his tattooed arms and shaven head somewhat scary.

“Do you know a chap called Jimmy Raisin?” ventured Roy, suddenly timid. The light was almost gone and this was a side of London he usually preferred to ignore – the homeless, the drunks, the druggies.

Had the young man denied knowledge, then Roy would have decided to forget the whole thing. He was suddenly ashamed of his low behaviour. But Agatha’s stars were definitely in the descendent, so the young man said laconically, “Over there, guv.”

Roy peered into the darkness.

“Where?”

“Third box on the left.”

Roy walked slowly towards the cardboard indicated. At first he thought it was empty but then, bending down and peering into the gloom, he caught the shine of a pair of eyes.

“Jimmy Raisin?”

“Yes, what? You from the Social?”

“I’m a friend of Agatha – Agatha Raisin.”

There was a long silence and then a wheezy cackle. “Aggie? Thought she was dead.”

“Well, she isn’t. She’s being married next Wednesday. She lives in Carsely in the Costwolds. She thinks *you’re* dead.”

There was a scraping and shuffling from inside the huge box and then Jimmy Raisin emerged on his hands and knees and got unsteadily to his feet. Even in the dim light, Roy could see he was wasted with drink. He was filthy and stank abominably. His face was covered in angry pustules and his hair was long and tangled and unkempt.

“Got any money?” he asked.

Roy dug in the inside pocket of his jacket, produced his wallet, fished out a

twenty-pound note and handed it over. Now he was really ashamed of himself. Agatha did not deserve this. Nobody did, even a bitch from hell like Agatha.

“Look, forget what I said. It was a joke.” Roy took to his heels and ran.

Agatha awoke the next morning in James’s cottage, in James’s bed, and stretched and yawned. She turned in bed and, propping herself up on one elbow, surveyed her fiancé. His thick black hair streaked with grey was tousled. His good-looking face was firm and tanned, and once more Agatha felt that pang of unease. Such men as James Lacey were for other women, county women with solid county backgrounds, women in tweeds with dogs who could turn out cakes and jam for church fetes with one hand tied behind their backs. Such men were not for the Agatha Raisins of this world.

She would have liked to wake him up and make love again. But James never made love in the mornings, not after that first glorious coming together. His life was well-ordered and neat – like his emotions, thought Agatha. She went through to the bathroom, washed and dressed and went downstairs and stood irresolute. This is where she would live, among James’s library of books, among the old regimental and school photographs, and here, in this clinical kitchen with not a spare crumb to mar its pristine counters, she would cook. Or would she? James had always done all the cooking when they were together. She felt like an interloper.

James’s mother and father were dead, but she had met his elegant sister again and her tall stockbroker husband. They seemed neither to approve nor to disapprove of Agatha, though Agatha had overheard his sister saying, “Well, you know, if it’s what James wants, it’s none of our business. It could have been worse. Some empty-headed bimbo.”

And her husband had said, “Some empty-headed bimbo would have been more understandable.” Hardly an accolade, thought Agatha.

She decided to go next door to the security of her own home. As she let herself in to a rapturous welcome from her two cats, Hodge and Boswell, she looked about wistfully. She had made arrangements to put all her furniture and bits and pieces in storage, not wanting to clutter up James’s neat cottage with them, especially after he had agreed to house her cats. Now she wished she had suggested that they club together to buy a larger house where she could have some of her own things. Living with James would be like being on some sort of perpetual visit.

She fed the cats and opened the back door to let them out into the garden. It was a glorious day, with a large sky stretching across the green Cotswold hills

and only the lightest of breezes.

She went back into the kitchen and made herself a cup of coffee, looking affectionately around at all the clutter which James would never allow. The doorbell rang.

Detective Sergeant Bill Wong stood on the step, clutching a large box. "Got around to getting your wedding present at last," he said.

"Come in, Bill. I've just made some coffee."

He followed her through to the kitchen and put the box on the table. "What is it?" asked Agatha.

Bill smiled, his almond-shaped eyes crinkling up. "Open it and see."

Agatha tore open the wrappings. "Careful," warned Bill. "It's fragile."

The object was very heavy. She lifted it out with a grunt and then tore off the tissue paper which had been taped around it. It was a huge gold-and-green china elephant, noisily garish and with a great hole in its back.

Agatha looked at it in a dazed way. "What's the hole for?"

"Putting umbrellas in," said Bill triumphantly.

Agatha's first thought was that James would loathe it.

"Well?" she realized Bill was asking.

Agatha remembered hearing once that Noel Coward had gone to see a quite dreadful play and when asked by the leading actor what he thought of it, had replied, "Dear boy, I am beyond words."

"You shouldn't have done it, Bill," said Agatha with real feeling. "It looks very expensive."

"It's an antique," said Bill proudly. "Victorian. Only the best for you."

Agatha's eyes suddenly filled with tears. Bill had been the first friend she had ever had, a friendship formed shortly after she had moved to the country.

"I'll treasure it," she said firmly. "But let's put it carefully away because the men will be coming tomorrow to remove all my stuff to storage."

"But you won't want to pack this," said Bill. "Take it to your new home."

Agatha gave a weak smile. "How silly of me. I wasn't thinking straight."

She poured Bill a cup of coffee.

"All set for the big day?" he asked.

"All set."

His eyes were suddenly shrewd. "No doubts or fears?"

She shook her head.

"I never asked you – what did that husband of yours die of?"

Agatha turned away and straightened a dish-towel. "Alcohol poisoning."

"Where is he buried?"

"Bill, I did not have a happy marriage, it was a century ago and I would rather forget about it. Okay?"

“Okay. There’s your bell.”

Agatha answered the door to Mrs. Bloxby. Bill rose to leave. “I’ve got to go, Agatha. I’m supposed to be on duty.”

“Anything interesting?”

“No juicy murders for you, Miss Marple. Nothing but a spate of burglaries. Bye, Mrs. Bloxby. You’re to be Agatha’s bridesmaid?”

“I have that honour,” said Mrs. Bloxby.

When Bill had left, Agatha showed the vicar’s wife the elephant. “Oh dear,” said Mrs. Bloxby. “I haven’t seen one of those things in years.”

“James is going to hate it,” said Agatha gloomily.

“James will just have to get used to it. Bill is a good friend. If I were you, I would grow some sort of green plant in it, you know, one of the ones with trailing branches and big leaves. It would hide most of it and Bill would be pleased you were putting it to such artistic use.”

“Good idea,” said Agatha, brightening.

“And so you’re off to northern Cyprus for your honeymoon. Are you going to stay in a hotel? I remember Alf and I stayed in the Dome in Kyrenia.”

“No, we’ve taken a villa. James used to be stationed out there and he wrote to his old fixer, a man who used to arrange everything for him, who sent him photographs of a lovely villa just outside Kyrenia and down a bit from the Nicosia road. It should be heaven.”

“I actually came to help you pack,” said the vicar’s wife.

“There’s no need for that,” said Agatha, “but thanks all the same. I hired one of those super-duper removal firms. They do everything.”

“Then I won’t stay for coffee. I must call on Mrs. Boggle. Her arthritis is bad.”

“That old woman is a walking case for euthanasia,” said Agatha waspishly. Mrs. Bloxby turned mild eyes on her and Agatha flushed guiltily and said, “Even you must admit she’s a bit of an old pill.”

Mrs. Bloxby gave a little sigh. “Yes, she is a bit of a trial. Agatha, I don’t want to press you on the matter, but I am a little taken aback by the fact that you didn’t want to be married in our church.”

“It all seemed too much fuss, a church wedding, and I’m not exactly religious, you know that.”

“Oh, well, it would have been nice. Still, everyone is looking forward to the reception. We would all have helped, you know. There was no need for you to go to the expense of hiring a firm of caterers.”

“I just don’t want any *fuss*,” said Agatha.

“Never mind, it is your wedding. Did James ever say why he never married before?”