

HALLOWE'EN PARTY

To P. G. Wodehouse

whose books and stories have
brightened my life for many years.
Also, to show my pleasure in his
having been kind enough to tell
me that he enjoys *my* books.

CHAPTER 1

Mrs Ariadne Oliver had gone with the friend with whom she was staying, Judith Butler, to help with the preparations for a children's party which was to take place that same evening.

At the moment it was a scene of chaotic activity. Energetic women came in and out of doors moving chairs, small tables, flower vases, and carrying large quantities of yellow pumpkins which they disposed strategically in selected spots.

It was to be a Hallowe'en party for invited guests of an age group between ten and seventeen years old.

Mrs Oliver, removing herself from the main group, leant against a vacant background of wall and held up a large yellow pumpkin, looking at it critically: 'The last time I saw one of these,' she said, sweeping back her grey hair from her prominent forehead, 'was in the United States last year—hundreds of them. All over the house. I've never seen so many pumpkins. As a matter of fact,' she added thoughtfully, 'I've never really known the difference between a pumpkin and a vegetable marrow. What's this one?'

'Sorry, dear,' said Mrs Butler, as she fell over her friend's feet. Mrs Oliver pressed herself closer against the wall.

‘My fault,’ she said. ‘I’m standing about and getting in the way. But it *was* rather remarkable, seeing so many pumpkins or vegetable marrows, whatever they are. They were everywhere, in the shops, and in people’s houses, with candles or nightlights inside them or strung up. Very interesting really. But it wasn’t for a Hallowe’en party, it was Thanksgiving. Now I’ve always associated pumpkins with Hallowe’en and that’s the end of October. Thanksgiving comes much later, doesn’t it? Isn’t it November, about the third week in November? Anyway, here, Hallowe’en is definitely the 31st of October, isn’t it? First Hallowe’en and then, what comes next? All Souls’ Day? That’s when in Paris you go to cemeteries and put flowers on graves. Not a sad sort of feast. I mean, all the children go too, and enjoy themselves. You go to flower markets first and buy lots and lots of lovely flowers. Flowers never look so lovely as they do in Paris in the market there.’

A lot of busy women were falling over Mrs Oliver occasionally, but they were not listening to her. They were all too busy with what they were doing.

They consisted for the most part of mothers, one or two competent spinsters; there were useful teenagers, boys of sixteen and seventeen climbing up ladders or standing on chairs to put decorations, pumpkins or vegetable marrows or brightly coloured witchballs at a suitable elevation; girls from eleven to fifteen hung about in groups and giggled.

‘And after All Souls’ Day and cemeteries,’ went on Mrs Oliver, lowering her bulk on to the arm of a settee, ‘you have All Saints’ Day. I think I’m right?’

Nobody responded to this question. Mrs Drake, a

Hallowe'en Party

handsome middle-aged woman who was giving the party, made a pronouncement.

'I'm not calling this a Hallowe'en party, although of course it is one really. I'm calling it the Eleven Plus party. It's that sort of age group. Mostly people who are leaving the Elms and going on to other schools.'

'But that's not very accurate, Rowena, is it?' said Miss Whittaker, resetting her pince-nez on her nose disapprovingly.

Miss Whittaker as a local school-teacher was always firm on accuracy.

'Because we've abolished the eleven-plus some time ago.'

Mrs Oliver rose from the settee apologetically. 'I haven't been making myself useful. I've just been sitting here saying silly things about pumpkins and vegetable marrows'—And resting my feet, she thought, with a slight pang of conscience, but without sufficient feeling of guilt to say it aloud.

'Now what can I do next?' she asked, and added, 'What lovely apples!'

Someone had just brought a large bowl of apples into the room. Mrs Oliver was partial to apples.

'Lovely red ones,' she added.

'They're not really very good,' said Rowena Drake. 'But they look nice and partified. That's for bobbing for apples. They're rather soft apples, so people will be able to get their teeth into them better. Take them into the library, will you, Beatrice? Bobbing for apples always makes a mess with the water slopping over, but that doesn't matter with the library carpet, it's so old. Oh! Thank you, Joyce.'

Joyce, a sturdy thirteen-year-old, seized the bowl of

Agatha Christie

apples. Two rolled off it and stopped, as though arrested by a witch's wand, at Mrs Oliver's feet.

'You like apples, don't you,' said Joyce. 'I read you did, or perhaps I heard it on the telly. You're the one who writes murder stories, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Oliver.

'We ought to have made you do something connected with murders. Have a murder at the party tonight and make people solve it.'

'No, thank you,' said Mrs Oliver. 'Never again.'

'What do you mean, never again?'

'Well, I did once, and it didn't turn out much of a success,' said Mrs Oliver.

'But you've written lots of books,' said Joyce, 'you make a lot of money out of them, don't you?'

'In a way,' said Mrs Oliver, her thoughts flying to the Inland Revenue.

'And you've got a detective who's a Finn.'

Mrs Oliver admitted the fact. A small stolid boy not yet, Mrs Oliver would have thought, arrived at the seniority of the eleven-plus, said sternly, 'Why a Finn?'

'I've often wondered,' said Mrs Oliver truthfully.

Mrs Hargreaves, the organist's wife, came into the room breathing heavily, and bearing a large green plastic pail.

'What about this,' she said, 'for the apple bobbing? Kind of gay, I thought.'

Miss Lee, the doctor's dispenser, said, 'Galvanized bucket's better. Won't tip over so easily. Where are you going to have it, Mrs Drake?'

Hallowe'en Party

'I thought the bobbing for apples had better be in the library. The carpet's old there and a lot of water always gets spilt, anyway.'

'All right. We'll take them along. Rowena, here's another basket of apples.'

'Let me help,' said Mrs Oliver.

She picked up the two apples at her feet. Almost without noticing what she was doing, she sank her teeth into one of them and began to crunch it. Mrs Drake abstracted the second apple from her firmly and restored it to the basket. A buzz of conversation broke out.

'Yes, but where are we going to have the Snapdragon?'

'You ought to have the Snapdragon in the library, it's much the darkest room.'

'No, we're going to have that in the dining-room.'

'We'll have to put something on the table first.'

'There's a green baize to put on that and then the rubber sheet over it.'

'What about the looking-glasses? Shall we really see our husbands in them?'

Surreptitiously removing her shoes and still quietly champing at her apple, Mrs Oliver lowered herself once more on to the settee and surveyed the room full of people critically. She was thinking in her authoress's mind: 'Now, if I was going to make a book about all these people, how should I do it? They're nice people, I should think, on the whole, but who knows?'

In a way, she felt, it was rather fascinating *not* to know anything about them. They all lived in Woodleigh Common, some of them had faint tags attached to them in her memory

Agatha Christie

because of what Judith had told her. Miss Johnson—something to do with the church, not the vicar's sister. Oh no, it was the organist's sister, of course. Rowena Drake, who seemed to run things in Woodleigh Common. The puffing woman who had brought in the pail, a particularly hideous plastic pail. But then Mrs Oliver had never been fond of plastic things. And then the children, the teenage girls and boys.

So far they were really only names to Mrs Oliver. There was a Nan and a Beatrice and a Cathie, a Diana and a Joyce, who was boastful and asked questions. I don't like Joyce much, thought Mrs Oliver. A girl called Ann, who looked tall and superior. There were two adolescent boys who appeared to have just got used to trying out different hair styles, with rather unfortunate results.

A smallish boy entered in some condition of shyness.

'Mummy sent these mirrors to see if they'd do,' he said in a slightly breathless voice.

Mrs Drake took them from him.

'Thank you so much, Eddy,' she said.

'They're just ordinary looking hand-mirrors,' said the girl called Ann. 'Shall we really see our future husbands' faces in them?'

'Some of you may and some may not,' said Judith Butler.

'Did you ever see your husband's face when you went to a party—I mean this kind of a party?'

'Of course she didn't,' said Joyce.

'She might have,' said the superior Beatrice. 'E.S.P. they call it. Extra sensory perception,' she added in the tone of one pleased with being thoroughly conversant with the terms of the times.

Hallowe'en Party

'I read one of your books,' said Ann to Mrs Oliver. '*The Dying Goldfish*. It was quite good,' she said kindly.

'I didn't like that one,' said Joyce. 'There wasn't enough blood in it. I like murders to have lots of blood.'

'A bit messy,' said Mrs Oliver, 'don't you think?'

'But exciting,' said Joyce.

'Not necessarily,' said Mrs Oliver.

'I *saw* a murder once,' said Joyce.

'Don't be silly, Joyce,' said Miss Whittaker, the school-teacher.

'I did,' said Joyce.

'Did you really?' asked Cathie, gazing at Joyce with wide eyes, 'really and truly see a murder?'

'Of course she didn't,' said Mrs Drake. 'Don't say silly things, Joyce.'

'I did see a murder,' said Joyce. 'I did. I did. I did.'

A seventeen-year-old boy poised on a ladder looked down interestedly.

'What kind of a murder?' he asked.

'I don't believe it,' said Beatrice.

'Of course not,' said Cathie's mother. 'She's just making it up.'

'I'm *not*. I *saw* it.'

'Why didn't you go to the police about it?' asked Cathie.

'Because I didn't know it *was* a murder when I saw it. It wasn't really till a long time afterwards, I mean, that I began to know that it was a murder. Something that somebody said only about a month or two ago suddenly made me think: Of course, that was a *murder* I saw.'

'You see,' said Ann, 'she's making it all up. It's nonsense.'

'When did it happen?' asked Beatrice.

Agatha Christie

‘Years ago,’ said Joyce. ‘I was quite young at the time,’ she added.

‘Who murdered who?’ said Beatrice.

‘I shan’t tell any of you,’ said Joyce. ‘You’re all so horrid about it.’

Miss Lee came in with another kind of bucket. Conversation shifted to a comparison of buckets or plastic pails as most suitable for the sport of bobbing for apples. The majority of the helpers repaired to the library for an appraisal on the spot. Some of the younger members, it may be said, were anxious to demonstrate, by a rehearsal of the difficulties and their own accomplishment in the sport. Hair got wet, water got spilt, towels were sent for to mop it up. In the end it was decided that a galvanized bucket was preferable to the more meretricious charms of a plastic pail which overturned rather too easily.

Mrs Oliver, setting down a bowl of apples which she had carried in to replenish the store required for tomorrow, once more helped herself to one.

‘I read in the paper that you were fond of eating apples,’ the accusing voice of Ann or Susan—she was not quite sure which—spoke to her.

‘It’s my besetting sin,’ said Mrs Oliver.

‘It would be more fun if it was melons,’ objected one of the boys. ‘They’re so juicy. Think of the mess it would make,’ he said, surveying the carpet with pleasurable anticipation.

Mrs Oliver, feeling a little guilty at the public arraignment of greediness, left the room in search of a particular apartment, the geography of which is usually fairly easily identified. She went up the staircase and, turning the corner on the half

Hallowe'en Party

landing, cannoned into a pair, a girl and a boy, clasped in each other's arms and leaning against the door which Mrs Oliver felt fairly certain was the door to the room to which she herself was anxious to gain access. The couple paid no attention to her. They sighed and they snuggled. Mrs Oliver wondered how old they were. The boy was fifteen, perhaps, the girl little more than twelve, although the development of her chest seemed certainly on the mature side.

Apple Trees was a house of fair size. It had, she thought, several agreeable nooks and corners. How selfish people are, thought Mrs Oliver. No consideration for others. That well-known tag from the past came into her mind. It had been said to her in succession by a nursemaid, a nanny, a governess, her grandmother, two great-aunts, her mother and a few others.

'Excuse me,' said Mrs Oliver in a loud, clear voice.

The boy and the girl clung closer than ever, their lips fastened on each other's.

'Excuse me,' said Mrs Oliver again, 'do you *mind* letting me pass? I want to get in at this door.'

Unwillingly the couple fell apart. They looked at her in an aggrieved fashion. Mrs Oliver went in, banged the door and shot the bolt.

It was not a very close fitting door. The faint sound of words came to her from outside.

'Isn't that like people?' one voice said in a somewhat uncertain tenor. 'They might *see* we didn't want to be disturbed.'

'People are so selfish,' piped a girl's voice. 'They never think of anyone but themselves.'

'No consideration for others,' said the boy's voice.