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* novelized by Charles Osborne  † contributor

Agatha Christie®

# *The Body in the Library*



HarperCollins*Publishers*

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# CHAPTER 1

Mrs Bantry was dreaming. Her sweet peas had just taken a First at the flower show. The vicar, dressed in cassock and surplice, was giving out the prizes in church. His wife wandered past, dressed in a bathing-suit, but as is the blessed habit of dreams this fact did not arouse the disapproval of the parish in the way it would assuredly have done in real life . . .

Mrs Bantry was enjoying her dream a good deal. She usually did enjoy those early-morning dreams that were terminated by the arrival of early-morning tea. Somewhere in her inner consciousness was an awareness of the usual early-morning noises of the household. The rattle of the curtain-rings on the stairs as the housemaid drew them, the noises of the second housemaid's dustpan and brush in the passage outside. In the distance the heavy noise of the front-door bolt being drawn back.

Another day was beginning. In the meantime she must extract as much pleasure as possible from the flower show—for already its dream-like quality was becoming apparent . . .

Below her was the noise of the big wooden shutters in

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the drawing-room being opened. She heard it, yet did not hear it. For quite half an hour longer the usual household noises would go on, discreet, subdued, not disturbing because they were so familiar. They would culminate in a swift, controlled sound of footsteps along the passage, the rustle of a print dress, the subdued chink of tea-things as the tray was deposited on the table outside, then the soft knock and the entry of Mary to draw the curtains.

In her sleep Mrs Bantry frowned. Something disturbing was penetrating through to the dream state, something out of its time. Footsteps along the passage, footsteps that were too hurried and too soon. Her ears listened unconsciously for the chink of china, but there was no chink of china.

The knock came at the door. Automatically from the depths of her dreams Mrs Bantry said: 'Come in.' The door opened—now there would be the chink of curtain-rings as the curtains were drawn back.

But there was no chink of curtain-rings. Out of the dim green light Mary's voice came—breathless, hysterical: 'Oh, ma'am, oh, ma'am, *there's a body in the library*.'

And then with a hysterical burst of sobs she rushed out of the room again.

Mrs Bantry sat up in bed.

Either her dream had taken a very odd turn or else—or else Mary had really rushed into the room and had said (incredible! fantastic!) that there was a body in the library.

'Impossible,' said Mrs Bantry to herself. 'I must have been dreaming.'





But even as she said it, she felt more and more certain that she had not been dreaming, that Mary, her superior self-controlled Mary, had actually uttered those fantastic words.

Mrs Bantry reflected a minute and then applied an urgent conjugal elbow to her sleeping spouse.

'Arthur, Arthur, wake up.'

Colonel Bantry grunted, muttered, and rolled over on his side.

'Wake up, Arthur. Did you hear what she said?'

'Very likely,' said Colonel Bantry indistinctly. 'I quite agree with you, Dolly,' and promptly went to sleep again.

Mrs Bantry shook him.

'You've got to listen. Mary came in and said that there was a body in the library.'

'Eh, what?'

'A *body* in the *library*.'

'Who said so?'

'Mary.'

Colonel Bantry collected his scattered faculties and proceeded to deal with the situation. He said:

'Nonsense, old girl; you've been dreaming.'

'No, I haven't. I thought so, too, at first. But I haven't. She really came in and said so.'

'Mary came in and said there was a body in the library?'

'Yes.'

'But there couldn't be,' said Colonel Bantry.

'No—no, I suppose not,' said Mrs Bantry doubtfully.

Rallying, she went on:

'But then why did Mary say there was?'

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'She can't have.'

'She did.'

'You must have imagined it.'

'I didn't imagine it.'

Colonel Bantry was by now thoroughly awake and prepared to deal with the situation on its merits. He said kindly:

'You've been dreaming, Dolly, that's what it is. It's that detective story you were reading—*The Clue of the Broken Match*. You know—Lord Edgbaston finds a beautiful blonde dead on the library hearthrug. Bodies are always being found in libraries in books. I've never known a case in real life.'

'Perhaps you will now,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Anyway, Arthur, you've got to get up and see.'

'But really, Dolly, it *must* have been a dream. Dreams often do seem wonderfully vivid when you first wake up. You feel quite sure they're true.'

'I was having quite a different sort of dream—about a flower show and the vicar's wife in a bathing-dress—something like that.'

With a sudden burst of energy Mrs Bantry jumped out of bed and pulled back the curtains. The light of a fine autumn day flooded the room.

'I did *not* dream it,' said Mrs Bantry firmly. 'Get up at once, Arthur, and go downstairs and see about it.'

'You want me to go downstairs and ask if there's a body in the library? I shall look a damned fool.'

'You needn't ask anything,' said Mrs Bantry. 'If there *is* a body—and of course it's just possible that Mary's gone





mad and thinks she sees things that aren't there—well, somebody will tell you soon enough. *You* won't have to say a word.'

Grumbling, Colonel Bantry wrapped himself in his dressing-gown and left the room. He went along the passage and down the staircase. At the foot of it was a little knot of huddled servants; some of them were sobbing. The butler stepped forward impressively.

'I'm glad you have come, sir. I have directed that nothing should be done until you came. Will it be in order for me to ring up the police, sir?'

'Ring 'em up about what?'

The butler cast a reproachful glance over his shoulder at the tall young woman who was weeping hysterically on the cook's shoulder.

'I understood, sir, that Mary had already informed you. She said she had done so.'

Mary gasped out:

'I was so upset I don't know what I said. It all came over me again and my legs gave way and my inside turned over. Finding it like that—oh, oh, oh!'

She subsided again on to Mrs Eccles, who said: 'There, there, my dear,' with some relish.

'Mary is naturally somewhat upset, sir, having been the one to make the gruesome discovery,' explained the butler. 'She went into the library as usual, to draw the curtains, and—and almost stumbled over the body.'

'Do you mean to tell me,' demanded Colonel Bantry, 'that there's a dead body in my library—*my* library?'

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The butler coughed.

'Perhaps, sir, you would like to see for yourself.'

'Hallo, 'allo, 'allo. Police station here. Yes, who's speaking?'

Police-Constable Palk was buttoning up his tunic with one hand while the other held the receiver.

'Yes, yes, Gossington Hall. Yes? Oh, good-morning, sir.' Police-Constable Palk's tone underwent a slight modification. It became less impatiently official, recognizing the generous patron of the police sports and the principal magistrate of the district.

'Yes, sir? What can I do for you?—I'm sorry, sir, I didn't quite catch—a *body*, did you say?—yes?—yes, if you please, sir—that's right, sir—young woman not known to you, you say?—quite, sir. Yes, you can leave it all to me.'

Police-Constable Palk replaced the receiver, uttered a long-drawn whistle and proceeded to dial his superior officer's number.

Mrs Palk looked in from the kitchen whence proceeded an appetizing smell of frying bacon.

'What is it?'

'Rummest thing you ever heard of,' replied her husband. 'Body of a young woman found up at the Hall. In the Colonel's library.'

'Murdered?'

'Strangled, so he says.'

'Who was she?'

'The Colonel says he doesn't know her from Adam.'

'Then what was she doing in 'is library?'





Police-Constable Palk silenced her with a reproachful glance and spoke officially into the telephone.

'Inspector Slack? Police-Constable Palk here. A report has just come in that the body of a young woman was discovered this morning at seven-fifteen—'

Miss Marple's telephone rang when she was dressing. The sound of it flurried her a little. It was an unusual hour for her telephone to ring. So well ordered was her prim spinster's life that unforeseen telephone calls were a source of vivid conjecture.

'Dear me,' said Miss Marple, surveying the ringing instrument with perplexity. 'I wonder who that can be?'

Nine o'clock to nine-thirty was the recognized time for the village to make friendly calls to neighbours. Plans for the day, invitations and so on were always issued then. The butcher had been known to ring up just before nine if some crisis in the meat trade had occurred. At intervals during the day spasmodic calls might occur, though it was considered bad form to ring after nine-thirty at night. It was true that Miss Marple's nephew, a writer, and therefore erratic, had been known to ring up at the most peculiar times, once as late as ten minutes to midnight. But whatever Raymond West's eccentricities, early rising was not one of them. Neither he nor anyone of Miss Marple's acquaintance would be likely to ring up before eight in the morning. Actually a quarter to eight.

Too early even for a telegram, since the post office did not open until eight.

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'It must be,' Miss Marple decided, 'a wrong number.'

Having decided this, she advanced to the impatient instrument and quelled its clamour by picking up the receiver. 'Yes?' she said.

'Is that you, Jane?'

Miss Marple was much surprised.

'Yes, it's Jane. You're up very early, Dolly.'

Mrs Bantry's voice came breathless and agitated over the wires.

'The most awful thing has happened.'

'Oh, my dear.'

'We've just found a body in the library.'

For a moment Miss Marple thought her friend had gone mad.

'You've found a *what*?'

'I know. One doesn't believe it, does one? I mean, I thought they only happened in books. I had to argue for hours with Arthur this morning before he'd even go down and see.'

Miss Marple tried to collect herself. She demanded breathlessly: 'But whose body is it?'

'It's a blonde.'

'A what?'

'A blonde. A beautiful blonde—like books again. None of us have ever seen her before. She's just lying there in the library, dead. That's why you've got to come up at once.'

'You want *me* to come up?'

'Yes, I'm sending the car down for you.'

Miss Marple said doubtfully:





'Of course, dear, if you think I can be of any comfort to you—'

'Oh, I don't want comfort. But you're so good at bodies.'

'Oh no, indeed. My little successes have been mostly theoretical.'

'But you're very good at murders. She's been murdered, you see, strangled. What I feel is that if one has got to have a murder actually happening in one's house, one might as well enjoy it, if you know what I mean. That's why I want you to come and help me find out who did it and unravel the mystery and all that. It really *is* rather thrilling, isn't it?'

'Well, of course, my dear, if I can be of any *help* to you.'

'Splendid! Arthur's being rather difficult. He seems to think I shouldn't enjoy myself about it at all. Of course, I do know it's very sad and all that, but then I don't know the girl—and when you've seen her you'll understand what I mean when I say she doesn't look *real* at all.'

A little breathless, Miss Marple alighted from the Bantrys' car, the door of which was held open for her by the chauffeur.

Colonel Bantry came out on the steps, and looked a little surprised.

'Miss Marple?—er—very pleased to see you.'

'Your wife telephoned to me,' explained Miss Marple.

'Capital, capital. She ought to have someone with her. She'll crack up otherwise. She's putting a good face on things at the moment, but you know what it is—'

At this moment Mrs Bantry appeared, and exclaimed: