SUMMARY OF NOVEL

The novel features Belgian detective Hercule Poirot and the mystery novelist Ariadne Oliver. A girl at a Hallowe'en party with Ariadne Oliver in attendance, claims she witnessed a murder, which at the time as she was so young, she had not realized was a murder. Soon, the girl is found murdered. Oliver calls in Poirot to find the cause of this and the next murder. This book was dedicated to P.G. Wodehouse.

A review at the time of publication and another 20 years later both felt this story was not one of Agatha Christie's best, "a disappointment", a novel littered with loose ends and unrealized characters.

During the preparation of a Hallowe'en party in Woodleigh Common, thirteen-year-old Joyce Reynolds tells everyone, including Ariadne Oliver, that she saw a murder once, but only recently realised that it was a murder that she had seen. At the end of the party, Joyce is found drowned in an apple-bobbing tub. Mrs Oliver is visiting her friend Judith Butler, whose young daughter Miranda is too ill to attend the party. With Mrs Oliver's help, Poirot must unmask the real evil of the night.

Mrs Oliver seeks Hercule Poirot's help. She is shaken by this death. She relates Joyce's claim, and now wonders if Joyce might have been telling the truth, which would provide someone with a motive for murdering her. Poirot investigates. He finds no one who admits to believing Joyce's story. Her older sister Ann and younger brother Leopold consider that Joyce told stories to gain attention.
Retired superintendent Spence provides Poirot with a list of murders or disappearances in the last few years that Joyce might have witnessed. Mrs Llewellyn-Smythe, the aunt of Rowena Drake and her late husband, died about two years earlier. A codicil to her will was found to be forged, and her au pair girl, Olga Seminoff, disappeared soon after, raising questions never fully answered. Other candidate murders involve Charlotte Benfield, a sixteen-year-old shop assistant found dead of multiple head injuries, with two young men under suspicion; Lesley Ferrier, a lawyer's clerk who was stabbed in the back; and Janet White, a teacher at Elms School who was strangled.

At The Elms School, Poirot speaks first with the headmistress, Miss Emlyn, who sends in the mathematics teacher, Elizabeth Whittaker. While the party-goers were playing snapdragon, she saw Rowena Drake on the first floor landing. Rowena looked startled by what she saw in the open door of the library, and then dropped the glass flower vase she had filled with water. Other suggestive pieces of evidence include Lesley Ferrier's history as a forger. Many thought Lesley and Olga worked together to secure Mrs Llewellyn-Smythe's inheritance.

Poirot visits the lovely sunken garden built for Mrs Llewellyn-Smythe in an abandoned quarry by Michael Garfield. Poirot meets Garfield there, and then meets Miranda Butler. Mr Goby sends Poirot information about Olga. A one-time cleaner for Mrs. Llewellyn-Smythe tells Mrs Oliver about the codicil she witnessed. Rowena Drake seeks Poirot to tell him that Leopold Reynolds, Joyce's younger brother, has been drowned. Mrs Drake, unusually upset by Leopold's death, admits that she saw Leopold in the library, which led her to think he knew
who killed his sister. Poirot shares that the boy had been flush of money, which would soon be explained.

Poirot knows what happened, and fears more murders. He tells Miss Emlyn she correctly interpreted what Whittaker told her. The police dig up an abandoned well where they find a knife and the remains of Olga, who had been stabbed like Ferrier. Mrs Oliver takes Judith and Miranda Butler safely away from the village; when they stop for lunch, Miranda rides away with Michael Garfield, who takes her to a pagan sacrificial altar and is set to kill her. He is stopped by Nicholas Ransom and Desmond Holland, two young men trailing Miranda at Poirot's request. Garfield swallows the poison he had intended for Miranda. Miranda tells the police that she saw a murder, and told her close friend Joyce the story. Hidden in a tree watching wildlife, Miranda saw Michael Garfield and Rowena Drake carrying Olga's dead body in the sunken garden years earlier. Joyce made the story her own at the party; Miranda was not there to contradict her. Rowena Drake did believe Joyce's story and acted immediately to kill the witness. Rowena Drake broke the vase of flowers in front of Miss Whittaker as a pretext for being wet after having drowned Joyce. Subsequently, Leopold had used what he knew to blackmail Rowena Drake, leading to his murder.

Garfield played the role of lover to Olga to help Rowena Drake secure Mrs Llewellyn-Smythe's inheritance. The real codicil, written by Mrs Llewellyn-Smythe and leaving her fortune to Olga, had been replaced with a clumsy forgery, produced by Lesley Ferrier, to halt investigation for the real one, left in the pages of a large book. In earlier wills, Rowena Drake would inherit the bulk of the large
estate. Lesley Ferrier and Olga Seminoff were murdered to conceal the deceit. Garfield's motivation was his narcissistic desire to construct another perfect garden with Mrs Drake's money on a Greek island that she has secretly purchased. Poirot muses that Rowena Drake might have met a similar fate to Olga as Garfield would have no use for her once he secured her money. Poirot intuits the link between Miranda and Garfield: Judith Butler is not a widow but a single mother, and, unknown to Miranda, Michael Garfield was her father. It was by chance Judith met him again in Woodleigh Common.

Questions left unanswered include whether Mr Drake's death was an accident, and if the police took Mrs Drake to trial.