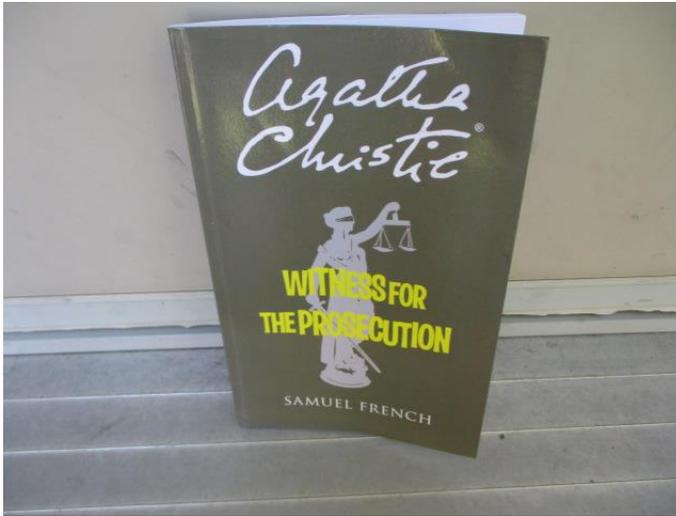


Witness for the Prosecution

By Rod Fraser



'*Witness for the Prosecution*' is a lovely film, as well as an enjoyable book. I watched the 2016 film version recently, set out in two parts on Acorn TV. I purchased the book shortly thereafter.

I believe there were also film adaptations of the book in 1957 and 1982. I watched the earlier one when I was a youngster. I expect at least one of these three films should be available at your local library. And if not there, you can purchase or rent them through Amazon. The book is also widely available at libraries and book stores.

The plot for the 2016 film is considerably more complex than the book. And because of this, it is the better story.

I mention all this to state an 'unalterable' fact. Far more readers are likely to watch the film, than read the book. For this reason, I will discuss the outline of the original plot (from the book) in this review. Then should you watch the 2016 film, you'll be familiar with the underlying story—without knowing all the additional complexities the film version added.



The book opens with Leonard Vole visiting the offices of Sir Wilfrid Robarts, QC, together with his solicitor, John Mayhew. Vole is concerned he may be arrested for the murder of Miss Emily French.

Now before I go too far with this story, I should mention a curiosity of the law in England. Lawyers who engage in courtroom work in the U.K. are called barristers; lawyers that perform other legal work such as wills, contracts and real estate are called solicitors.

When a client comes to a solicitor concerned he might be arrested for a crime, he is referred to a barrister who will handle his case at trial. In Canada, lawyers are both barristers and solicitors, although

some lawyers do courtroom work and others don't.

The distinction is worth mentioning, as readers might wonder why Vole has both Mayhew and Robarts on retainer. It is merely a peculiarity of the practice of law in the United Kingdom.



Now where was I? Oh yes. Emily French.

Emily French was a fifty-six year old, single woman, who lived alone with her housekeeper, Janet MacKenzie. Miss French was brutally murdered on the evening of October 14th. The book is unclear on the year this happened, but it is unimportant to the story. For those who might be interested in such things, 1925 is a pretty good guess.

In the last few months of Miss French's life, she was regularly in the company of Leonard Vole. For this, and other reasons, he was a suspect in her murder.

Miss French was a wealthy woman who had recently changed her will to name Vole her principal beneficiary. She had a romantic interest in Vole, who she assumed was single and available.

This was not the case. Leonard Vole was 'apparently' married to a German woman by the name of Romaine Vole. When she arrived at the

offices of Sir Wilfrid Roberts to help with her husband's defence, she told the two lawyers the following details (which I have paraphrased):

My husband became friendly with Miss French about six weeks ago, when he helped her with some parcels one day in the middle of a crowded street.

To thank him for his help, Miss French invited him to visit her and soon they became good friends.

This friendship extended only to Leonard. I never met her. My husband told me Miss French preferred it that way.

Mrs. Vole went on to confirm that her husband visited Miss French on the evening of October 14th, and then returned home at 9:30 pm (it being a half-hour walk from Miss French's house).

The time of his arrival was critical. If Leonard Vole left Miss French's residence at 9:00 pm, arriving home at 9:30 pm, he could not be the murderer. The key questions at trial would be: Would Mrs. Vole's evidence be believed by the jury? Was she telling the truth?



As the preparation for the trial continued, Sir Wilfrid Roberts and Mayhew became increasingly nervous

with Mrs. Vole's evidence. She didn't seem quite definite about anything. She vacillated. She was devoid of emotion. Both lawyers felt the prosecutor would "easily break her down."

There was also the evidence of the housekeeper to consider. Janet MacKenzie told the police October 14th was her night off. She went out for the evening at 7:30 pm, but returned to Miss French's residence early, around 9:25 pm, to pick up a pattern for a knitted cardigan her friend admired.

When Janet MacKenzie passed the sitting-room door, she heard Leonard Vole talking to Miss French. Then she went upstairs to her room, picked up the pattern and left the house to rejoin her friend, who lived just a short walk away.

At 10:40 pm, Janet MacKenzie left her friend's house and walked home. Once there, she discovered Miss French's dead body and called the police.

Dr. Wyatt, the Police Surgeon, later confirmed in his testimony — Miss French was killed with a sharp blow to the head. The time of death was between 9:30 and 10 pm on the evening of October 14th.



Up to this point, the story is what you might expect of a murder mystery. There is a suspect, a murdered woman and ample evidence to suggest the suspect

is rightfully accused of the murder. One key bit of evidence to the contrary, is his wife's claim Leonard Vole arrived home at 9:30 pm on the evening of the murder.

When Romaine Vole is called to the witness box, it is quickly established she was not legally married to Leonard Vole. At the time of their wedding, she was already married to a man named Otto Heilger (a man who is still alive). Her marriage to Vole was invalid.

For this reason, Romaine Vole was legally able (and apparently quite willing) to give evidence in the murder trial of her 'husband'. Here is a summary of her evidence:

Leonard told me to tell the police he returned home at 9:30 pm, but that wasn't true. He returned home at ten minutes after ten, and told me he killed Miss French.

When the prosecutor asked Mrs. Vole why she had lied to the police and now wanted to change her story, she replied, "Because it is murder. I cannot go on lying to save him."



Back at the offices of Sir Wilfrid Robarts, he and Mayhew are confronted by a woman with letters written by Romaine Vole, showing that Mrs. Vole had

falsified her evidence in court, with the intention of sending Leonard Vole to the gallows.

The letters showed Mrs. Vole was having an affair with a man called Max, and planned to live with him after Leonard Vole's execution. She wanted to be rid of her husband and be with Max forever. All she had to do was falsify her evidence to ensure Leonard was without an alibi for the evening of the murder.

When these letters were presented in court the next day, Sir Wilfrid clearly showed Mrs. Vole had lied to the court with the intention of seeing Leonard Vole hanged for murder. With this evidence in hand, the court found Vole not guilty.

He was set free and would now inherit the bulk of Miss French's estate. Mrs. Vole was guilty of perjury. Her trial for this crime would take place at some future date.



While this was clearly the end of the trial, it is not the end of the story. Romaine met with Leonard and his lawyers after the trial and explained what they had just witnessed. It was a thoughtful and well-executed plan to ensure Leonard would be set free.

If Romaine had merely provided Leonard an alibi, she would not likely have been believed. After all, the evidence was very convincing. There was a

strong motive for the killing and Leonard was there at the time of the murder. IN FACT, Leonard was the murderer. Romaine's plan was designed to ensure his acquittal and their inheritance of a sizable estate.

Romaine admitted she was the woman who gave the lawyers the letters that allowed them to discredit her earlier testimony. She played the role of informer with exquisite makeup and convincing theatrical skills. She wrote the damning letters to ensure Leonard Vole, the only man she had ever loved, would be free to be with her.

Romaine would go to jail for a time for her perjury. That was a given. Then she and Leonard would be together, with all the money they would require to live happily and well.

I wish I could say this is all there is to the story, but no. There is a surprise ending with a twist. I will leave you to read the book and find out all about it.

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