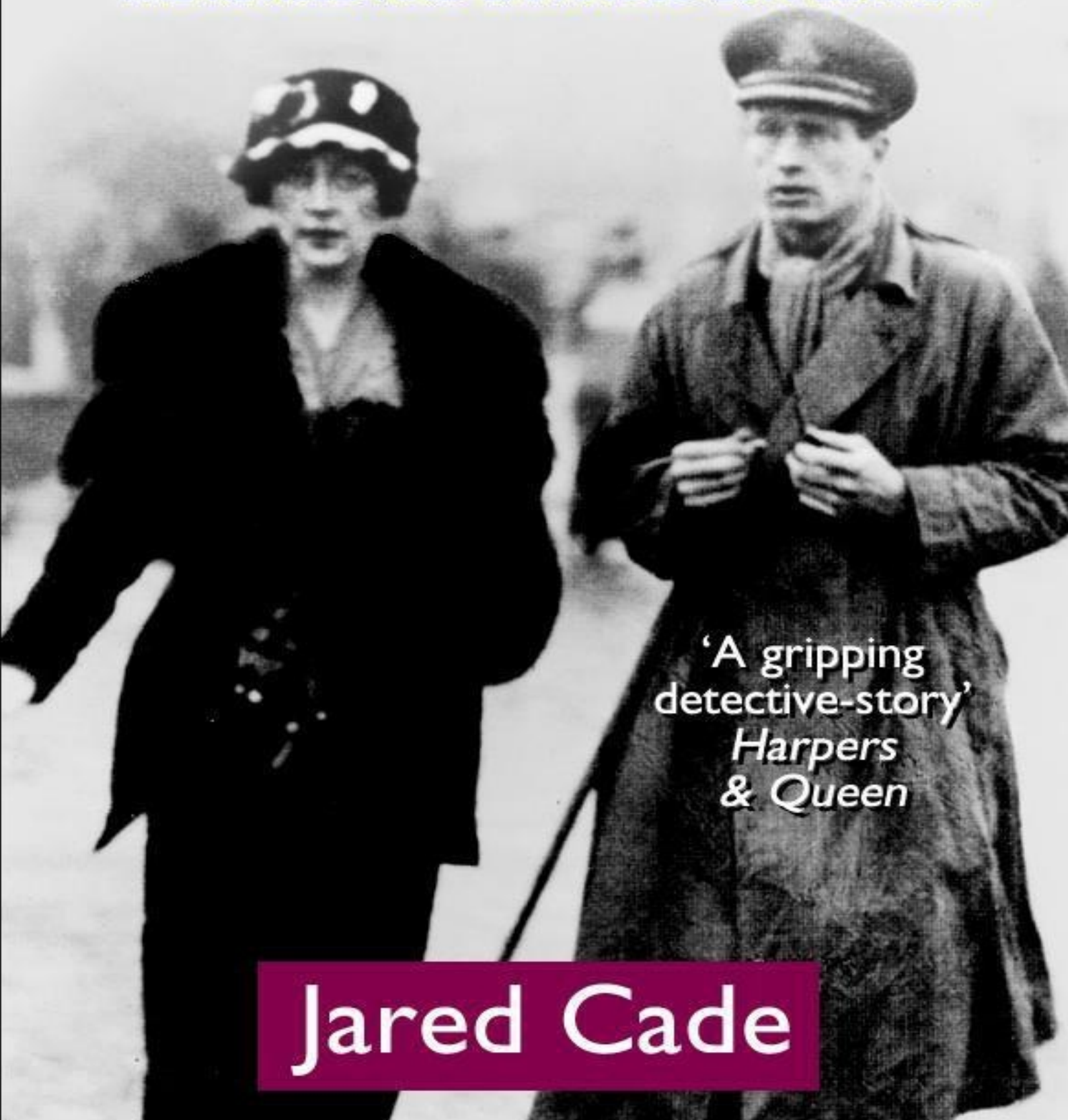


Agatha Christie

and the Eleven Missing Days

THE REVISED AND EXPANDED 2011 EDITION



'A gripping
detective-story'
*Harpers
& Queen*

Jared Cade

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**Agatha Christie and
the Eleven Missing Days:**

**The Revised and Expanded
2011 Edition**

Scarab eBooks

[About this Book](#)

In December 1926, Agatha Christie disappeared in bizarre circumstances from her home in Berkshire, England. The discovery of the crime writer's abandoned car led to the biggest manhunt in British history for a missing person. Eleven days later she was found over two hundred miles away in a northern spa town, claiming to be the victim of amnesia.

Until the publication of this book in 1998 none of her biographers had come up with conclusive evidence as to what she did in the first twenty-four hours of her disappearance or whether her memory loss was genuine. Although the newspaper headlines made Agatha Christie famous, the private anguish that surrounded the episode ensured she made no reference to it in her memoirs.

Jared's Cade's acclaimed biography – which has been used as the basis of a BBC television documentary – provides the answers to the mystery, including Agatha Christie's long forgotten explanation of the notorious episode, along with startling accounts by her relatives that reveal for the first time why she staged the disappearance with the help of a co-conspirator and how it all went terribly wrong. His sympathetic investigation reveals the incidents that shaped her character and how the fall-out from the disappearance affected the rest of her life.

Illustrated with photos from private albums, this fully revised and expanded 2011 edition draws on a newly discovered cache of family papers, diaries and letters, to which Jared Cade was given exclusive access, and reveals even more fascinating secrets about her life and works. *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* is a must for all Christie devotees.

'A brilliant job of research... Jared Cade has succeeded where all we other writers failed to trace what really happened to Agatha on the night of the disappearance.' – Gwen Robyns, author of *The Mystery*

‘A fascinating account’ – *Wall Street Journal*

‘A real page-turner’ – *Daily Telegraph*

‘This is the only biography that tells Agatha’s life story as it really was. Jared Cade’s insight into her personality is unsurpassed.’ – Judith and Graham Gardner, relatives of Agatha Christie

‘Jared Cade paints a brilliant picture of the tabloid press turning a disappearance and a possible murder hunt into a national jamboree, complete with day outings, picnics and all the pleasures of the chase. His book is a must.’ – Robert Barnard, author of *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*

‘A wonderfully sympathetic and detailed biography requiring extensive research, which was made possible by a part of Agatha’s family, who were prepared to open up their archives and memories. Certainly a book that any real fan of Agatha should have; it still keeps her image as glowing as ever but with the benefit of a deep human story.’ – Vanessa Wagstaff, author of *Agatha Christie: A Reader’s Companion*

‘Jared Cade’s new biography is valuable for the detail in which he examines her 11-day disappearance... His meticulously researched and interestingly illustrated volume is fascinating read.’ – Charles Osborne, author of *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie*.

‘Jared Cade has unearthed the Queen of Crime’s long lost account of her disappearance from several decades ago. He has proved himself to be a detective so meticulous and thorough that Agatha herself would have been proud.’ – Sarah French, *Northern Echo*

‘Agatha Christie’s greatest mystery was her strange disappearance in December 1926. The already well-known writer’s car was found abandoned in Surrey. After vast publicity she was found, claiming to be suffering from amnesia, in a Harrogate hotel. Jared Cade, in a well-researched and attractively written book, unravels the mystery and explains how and why she fled from her husband. Although the book concentrates on this dramatic event, the author shows how echoes of the disappearance turned up in her later writings. The book is especially good in describing her second marriage and providing depth and texture to the life of one of the most popular writers of all time.’ – *Contemporary Review*

‘Jared Cade not only traces the disturbing events of the lost eleven days and their far-reaching repercussions; he also throws considerable light on the personality of a complex character, her sufferings (her second husband also deceived her), her frustrations, her achievements.’ – *Keswick Reminder*

‘Cade’s riveting, stylish procedural’ – *Publishers Weekly*

‘A gripping detective story’ – *Harpers and Queen*

‘Affectionate and objective’ – Alan Travis, *Guardian*

‘This thoughtful and absorbing inquiry lends credible dimension to the complex life story mystery’s most celebrated practitioner. Well done!’ – Sue Grafton

‘Jared Cade is an acknowledged expert on Christiana and *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* has received much acclaim for its impressively detailed examination of the Queen of Crime disappearance.’ – *Crime Time*

[About the Author](#)

Jared Cade was born in 1962 and lives in London. He is a lifelong fan of Agatha Christie, and in 1991 he appeared on *The 64,000 Dollar Question*, correctly answering all questions on his specialist subject of Agatha Christie’s novels and winning what was then British television’s biggest cash prize of £6,400. While researching his biography about Agatha Christie’s life he located several short stories she had written in the 1920s that had escaped detection by scholars for decades. In 1997 they were published for the first time in the collection *While the Light Lasts*. He also traced copies of two missing Agatha Christie plays, *Chimneys* and *A Daughter’s a Daughter*, both of which have since been performed in Great Britain. He acted as a research consultant in 1997 for the BBC documentary series *Mysteries With Carol Vorderman*, which featured a segment on the writer’s disappearance. *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* was first published in 1998 and still holds the distinction of being the only biography to be endorsed by relatives from her brother-in-law’s side of the family. In 2002 *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* became the basis of a documentary for the BBC. The revised and expanded edition was published in 2011, as was Jared Cade’s debut murder mystery *Deadly Vendetta*. To find out more, please visit www.jaredcade.co.uk

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Finally, special thanks is due to a small band of dedicated and knowledgeable Christie enthusiasts who kept me informed and whose modesty prevents them from being named here.

Preface

On 3 December 1926 a distraught woman mysteriously vanished from her home in Berkshire, England. The discovery of her abandoned car in Surrey led to fears for her safety. She was found a week and a half later in a luxurious hotel in Harrogate, Yorkshire, reading newspaper accounts of the nationwide search for her. When her extraordinary conduct was challenged, her husband intervened claiming she was suffering from amnesia. The woman was Agatha Christie, and the events of those eleven missing days would haunt her for the rest of her life.

The disappearance was to prove a watershed in Agatha's life, and her enduring reticence on the subject has posed a number of intriguing questions. How could a woman who saw photographs of herself on the front pages of newspapers have failed to realize she was the most talked-about woman in Britain? What was the significance of the trail of letters she left in her wake? And what prompted her husband to reveal that she had previously spoken about the possibility of disappearing and, when she was discovered, why was he approached to pay the bill for the police search?

Although the disappearance made her famous, no previous account of Agatha's life has fully explained the extraordinary circumstances behind the disappearance and why she behaved as she did. It was discovered during the early stages of my research in the 1990s that most of the books written about the author have amounted to little more than literary critiques. All the writers concluded that Agatha experienced some sort of nervous breakdown and that the notoriety of the disappearance led to her becoming a recluse. In Britain there had been just two actively researched biographies, and in the account of Agatha's long life both writers had admitted difficulty in tracing witnesses. An unauthorized biography by Gwen Robyns in 1978 had challenged the family's official explanation while an authorized biography by Janet Morgan in 1984 had drawn a decorous veil over the disappearance, blaming much of what happened on press intrusiveness. Both biographers maintained that Agatha never discussed the incident after she was found. This is factually wrong. Agatha did eventually discuss the disappearance, and her motive for breaking her silence was as instructive as her reasons for never publicly speaking of the matter again.

Intrigued by the story, I had a hunch that the explanations previously advanced for the most famous incident in the author's life contained too many discrepancies to be wholly credible. On my first visit to Newlands Corner, Ralph Barnet, an administrative ranger with the Surrey County Council, gave me a guided tour of the area and the chalk pit into which Agatha's car almost plunged. It was immediately apparent that her disappearance could not possibly have occurred under the circumstances described by her and latter-day theorists. So what had really happened? Fuelled by curiosity at the many unresolved questions, I embarked on a pilgrimage around England to find out more about the reclusive personality who had figured in her own bizarre real-life mystery.

As a child Agatha had delighted in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, but it quickly emerged that the cover-up her family and others had perpetrated immediately following her disappearance demanded a greater suspension of disbelief than anything Lewis Carroll could have written. The Christie family's explanation left numerous questions unanswered and dozens of loose ends. For instance, what was the significance of the identity she created for herself during her disappearance, and why did the press hint broadly at deliberate design? Given that her bank accounts had been stopped by the police, how did she survive financially? Also, what was the intriguing significance of an inscription to a friend written on the flyleaf of one of her books three years after the disappearance?

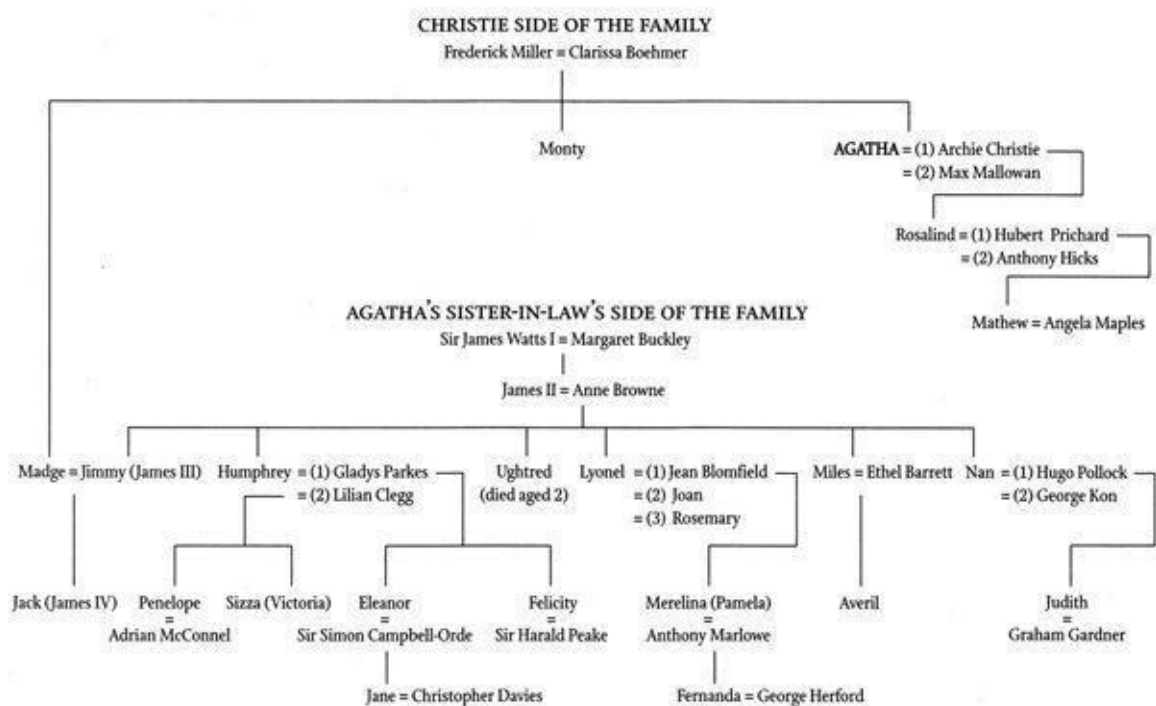
In discovering the answers to these and other questions my own journey was no less labyrinthine than Agatha's, but I managed to trace a number of people with first-hand knowledge of the disappearance. The truth has emerged from an impeccable source following an inevitable weakening of the walls of silence that the writer built around herself in her lifetime, since her own prediction that she would be forgotten within ten years of her death has not proved true.

After her sister Madge married Jimmy Watts, Agatha became life-long friends with his sister Nan. The latter's daughter and son-in-law, Judith and Graham Gardner, have confirmed the truth about the disappearance and other hitherto undisclosed details of Agatha's personal life. Judith and Graham knew Agatha intimately, and their knowledge of her together spans over eighty-five years. The reason for confiding in me, in opening up their photograph albums and showing me private letters for the very first time, is because I have read everything Agatha wrote, since, as they say, 'There's no short cut to Agatha. You have to read the books.' They have broken decades of silence and officially endorsed this biography to put Agatha's relationship with the Watts side of her family into perspective for her fans and also because they wish 'to put an end to all the ridiculous speculation about the disappearance'. I owe them an enormous debt of gratitude, as do Agatha's many admirers. My interest in updating and expanding this biography came after the discovery of a new cache of diaries, letters and family correspondence to which they have, once again, given me exclusive access. I am also grateful to other family members for supplying me with background information on the Wattses.

My decision to write this book arises from a life-long interest in the woman behind some of the most morally compelling crime fiction of our time. Her refusal to discuss the more painful aspects of her life has led some critics to dismiss her as an uninteresting recluse. Yet what she went through on the most traumatic night of her life led her to sublimate much of her experience into her fiction: in one instance she accurately reconstructed her departure on the night of the disappearance, and only the initiated knew. The mystique surrounding the disappearance fascinates people to this day. What emerges is the extraordinary story of a woman driven by private torment to the edge of desperation who came back to become one of the best-loved story-tellers of the twentieth century.

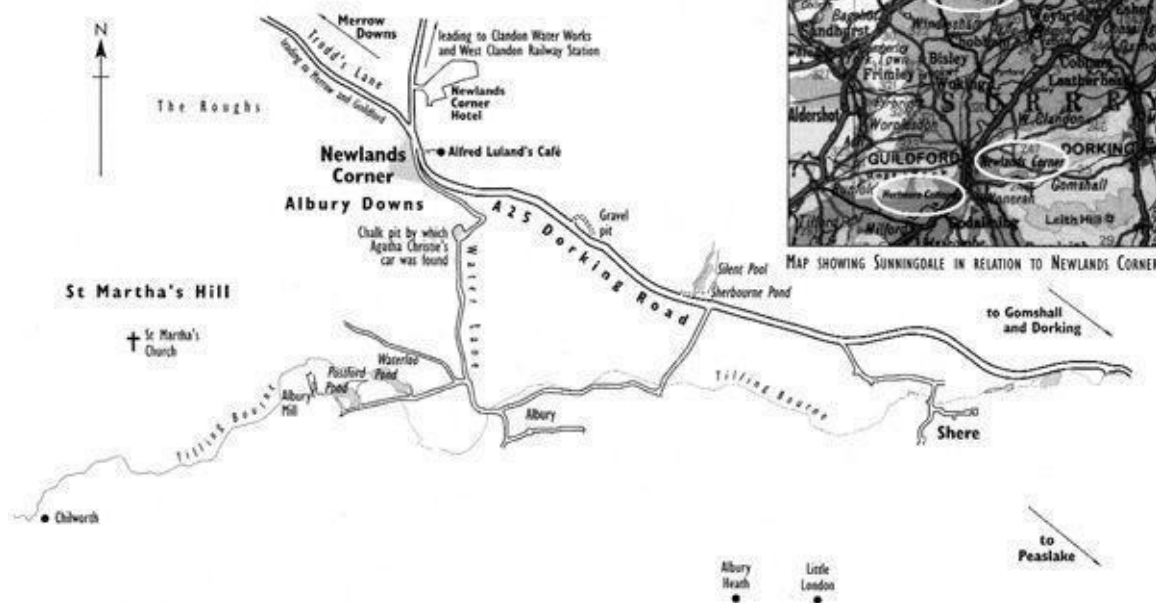
Agatha Christie's Family Tree

WHO'S WHO IN AGATHA CHRISTIE'S FAMILY



Map of Newlands Corner

NEWLANDS CORNER, WHERE AGATHA CHRISTIE'S CAR WAS FOUND



Prologue Grandfather's Whiskers

When Agatha Christie disappeared in December 1926 she was the toast of literary London with the publication of her sixth novel. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was primarily a connoisseur's item when it first appeared, quickly selling 4,000 copies, but, as controversy raged over whether she had played fair or tricked her readers over the killer's identity and further reprints were destined to sell out, when no one realized was that it was set to become one of the most discussed detective stories ever written.

The debates about the novel confirmed Agatha's place as a rising star in the firmament of crime writers of the time. However, what should have been a happy period in her life was about to become the most traumatic. Shortly before the publication of the book her mother, to whom she was devoted, died. Not long after this her husband, Colonel Archibald Christie, a dashing flying hero of the First World War, told her that he had fallen in love with a young woman called Nancy Neele.

Then the unthinkable happened – Agatha vanished on the night of 3 December and the story became front-page news throughout Great Britain. News of marital discord came swiftly to the attention of the authorities. For a week and a half three police forces in the south of England competed to find her. Innumerable special constables, members of the public and the press assisted in the search. The revelation that the missing woman's husband had spent the night of the disappearance with his mistress led to whispers of suicide and murder.

The search came to an abrupt end on 14 December when Agatha was officially identified by her husband at a prestigious health hydro in Harrogate. The outcome, although dramatic, never fully explained how and why she had disappeared. Questions were asked about the extravagant lifestyle the missing writer had been leading, and the Colonel's explanation as to what had happened to her was considered by many to be far from convincing. He responded to public censure by calling in the family doctor and a consultant, and soon a carefully worded statement was released to the effect that she was 'suffering from an unquestionably genuine loss of memory'. He made a personal appeal to the press to let the matter drop, so that his wife could be restored to health and enjoy their married life out of the media spotlight.

It was, however, the end of the Christies' marriage, and the rest of the tragic drama that had

briefly erupted on the public stage was played out resolutely behind closed doors. It was from this period that Agatha's revulsion of the press dated; it was later exacerbated by further headlines over her divorce from Archie and his subsequent marriage to Nancy Neele.

The public furore that erupted over the disappearance meant that Agatha went overnight from being a moderately well-known author to being a household name. After she was found she became the target of cartoonists, comedians and bar-room wits. Some members of the public were convinced that she must have experienced some sort of temporary mental breakdown. Others believed that her literary agent had organized the disappearance and spoke of it as a major publicity stunt.

The story soon vanished from the headlines, but a measure of the fame she achieved throughout Great Britain is attested to by a popular song which was sung each summer in the late 1920s on a stage constructed on Bourne-mouth beach by Birchmore and Lindon's Gay Cadets. 'Grandfather Whiskers' was altered thus to include their own explanation of the affair:

*Grandfather's whiskers, grandfather's beard!
Never had it shingled, never had it sheared!
Where did Mrs Christie go when she disappeared?
Into grandfather's whiskers, grandfather's beard!*

Until the publication of this biography the facts behind the disappearance had remained a mystery, and the incident had never been forgotten, despite the apparently normal and happy life Agatha led afterwards. Sadly, the stability she enjoyed following her second marriage was undermined by further shame and heartbreak which she hid from the public. When in later years she relaxed her guard and allowed the occasional journalist into her presence it was always on the condition that she was not asked questions about her private life or the disappearance. The few interviewers who were privileged to meet her seldom came away better informed: she had her stock answers and seldom deviated from them. The real Agatha was a complex woman who kept herself deliberately hidden from the public.

Despite the reverberations over her disappearance she gained more fans than she lost. An extraordinary example of how popular she became is a letter from a survivor of the German concentration camp at Buchenwald who wrote to her after the war telling her how the inmates had devised and performed a production of her novel *Ten Little Niggers*. Although it was one of her most macabre stories, in which all the characters are murdered one by one, the suspenseful plot, together with the underlying morality of the tale, had had the effect of lifting the prisoners' spirits.

Inevitably, there were honours: a CBE in 1956, a Doctorate of Letters in 1961 and a DBE in 1974. By then her readers had come to expect their 'Christie for Christmas'. When it seemed as if further fame and success were impossible, Sidney Lumet's faithful 1974 film version of *Murder on the Orient Express* marked the most successful adaptation of her work for the screen ever and resulted in a major film première. Although she savoured the evening and the widespread accolades, she never forgave the press for having intruded into her private life at a time when she had been at her most vulnerable. The emotional scars caused by the disappearance had never entirely left her. Her death two years later on 12 January 1976, left such a void in the sphere of crime literature that hers is one of the foremost names by which would-be detective writers are compared.

The posthumous publication of her autobiography in 1977 was awaited eagerly. Would she finally reveal what had really happened during those eleven missing days? Far from comment on the disappearance, however, her memoirs made no reference to it whatsoever. Many of her readers felt

cheated. Some commentators even wondered if it was an eccentric act of revenge on the press which had hounded her all those years before.

The tributes she still receives as a writer inevitably mention the disappearance, and so the one incident in her life which she would have preferred not to be dwelt on has continued to invite questions. To understand what happened it is necessary to examine her life from childhood, for it was here, surprisingly, that the seeds of her unhappiness were sown.

Part One **Love and Betrayal**

Chapter One **Mauve Irises and Ewe Lambs**

Agatha was the third child of the American-born Frederick Miller and his wife Clarissa Boehm Miller who was born in Belfast and raised in England. Their marriage was such a happy one that Agatha confidently believed that the ideal husband for her would come along when she grew up and that love and happiness would be hers for ever.

Ashfield was a white villa on the outskirts of Torquay, a fashionable seaside resort spread over seven hills on the south coast of Devon. She was born there on 15 September 1890 and christened Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller – a much-loved ‘afterthought’ in the lives of her middle-aged parents. Frederick Miller was a genial and highly sociable gentleman, fussy in his health and fond of all forms of theatrical activities. His cousin Clarissa, known to the family as Clara, had adored Frederick since she was a young child and theirs was a particularly loving and fulfilled marriage. Clarissa, who had long been fascinated by religion, was very mystical in outlook. Their love for Agatha, combined with their affluent lifestyle, would make for a secure and happy childhood that would leave Agatha insufficiently prepared for the blows life would offer.

The Millers’ other two children were the gregarious and assertive Madge and Monty who were charming but feckless. Madge was eleven years older than Agatha and would enthral her as she grew up by her ability to put on sinister voices and her love of dressing up. The ne’er-do-well Monty, who after a short-lived military career gradually faded out of his family’s lives, was ten years older than Agatha and was apt to treat her in such a condescending and relentlessly teasing manner that she grew up relating more easily to the women in the family. Since Madge and Monty were away at school for much of the time Agatha was raised virtually as an only child. She never went to school as a little girl and was free to roam Ashfield, the family home, with playmates from her imagination.

The hub of her early universe was the nursery with its wallpaper with mauve irises, where Agatha was presided over by a caring nanny, a devout Christian, whose moral certitudes and conventional beliefs were conveyed forcefully to her adoring young charge. Agatha sometimes found it difficult to reconcile her nanny’s strict morals and ideals with the ways of the world, but she never rebelled because of her complaint nature and the fact that her nanny’s strictures, like those of the other adults around her, were instilled with love not fear.

Agatha was a hypersensitive child. In her memoirs she recalled her horror when she overheard her nanny confiding to a housemaid that young Miss Agatha had been playing again with her imaginary friends the Kittens. After this disturbing exposure of her privacy she vowed never again to let anyone know about her esoteric invented world.

The person on whom she came to depend most was Clarissa. There formed between mother and daughter a uniquely intuitive and loving bond. In times of misery Agatha found there was no one more understanding and supportive than Clarissa. Agatha also knew that when she was ill there was no one quite like her mother for restoring her vitality.

Agatha's dumpling face, with its heavy-lidded grey eyes and long blonde hair, gave her a wraith-like appearance. As she grew older she developed an elusive manner, a defence against inquisitive probing; an unwelcome question was liable to glance off her like a spent arrow. When she did part with information she preferred to do so on her own terms. Silence for Agatha became a precious guarded commodity, a cocoon for concocting fantasies, and in later life the two things she most hated were noise and large crowds.

Beneath the surface of her seemingly idyllic upper-middle-class childhood her dream of the Gun Man introduced an element of discord. This recurring nightmare originally involved a figure in some sort of military dress with a gun, only it was not his gun that frightened Agatha into waking screaming but the moment when his pale blue eyes looked into hers. Later variations of the dream became more macabre: Agatha would be attending a tea-party or picnic with family and friends when she looked into a familiar loved one's face to see the dreaded eyes of the Gun Man staring back. To her greatest horror she would see that stumps had replaced her loved one's hands. The dream perhaps reflected her caution and reticence before offering any object of her affections unconditional love.

Agatha's religious beliefs were derived mainly from her nanny. The child formed the opinion that, being virtuous, she was one of the 'saved' and dreamed of being addressed as 'Lady Agatha.' It came as a profound disappointment when her nanny told her she could be called Lady Agatha only if she was an aristocrat. Heaven, she thought, must be exactly like the beautiful meadows full of grazing lambs near Ashfield. Agatha's confused religious beliefs were revealed in her ambivalent feelings towards her father: for a time she feared that Frederick would burn in hell because he defied conventions by playing croquet on Sunday afternoons and by telling light-hearted jokes about the clergy. Clarissa also played croquet, but Agatha's concern for her was less acute because her mother kept a copy of Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* by her bedside.

Shortly after Agatha's fifth birthday she went with her family for an extended holiday in France. Included in their itinerary were Paris, Dinard, Pau, Argeles, Lourdes and Caunterets. Travelling was relatively inexpensive in those days. Ashfield was rented out because it was cheaper for the family to live abroad than at home, and Frederick was anxious to relieve the strain on his finances, which were being handled by a New York firm at this time. Later there were suspicions in family circles – though never any proof – that his fortune may have been embezzled by the US company.

The effect of Frederick's dwindling resources was to weaken his resistance to illness over the next six years, although doctors never managed to come up with a definite diagnosis. Frederick's finances and ill health formed a faint, almost imperceptible shadow over Agatha.

The decision for Agatha to be educated at home, after their return to Ashfield, was made by Clarissa, who was not afraid to try out new ideas. She had an exceptionally vivid imagination, and this acted as a catalyst on her daughter. Clarissa was prejudiced against children learning to read before they were eight, but Agatha had already taught herself to read by the time she was five by learning to recognize the shapes of words, rather than the spelling. Her father taught her elementary mathematics and soon discovered she had a natural talent for the subject, and her ability to sort out complicated mental problems later proved invaluable when devising plots for her detective fiction. Her tw

grandmothers – one of whom lived in Bayswater, the other in Ealing – were firm upholders of Victorian values, and from them she gleaned many of the precepts that were to form the character of her spinster sleuth Miss Marple. Surrounded by so many forceful and extrovert adults, Agatha grew up believing herself to be ‘the slow one’ of the family. She was to realize only in her twenties that her family had been abnormally bright and that she was more intelligent and able than she had previously thought.

Frederick’s finances, strained by his eldest daughter’s coming-out in New York, continued to dwindle and to perplex him. Around Agatha’s eleventh birthday he sought employment in the City of London; a difficult prospect for a gentleman of fifty-five who had never worked and who had no qualifications. His inability to find a job in the City led to increased worry. The weather turned cold and the chill Frederick caught turned into double pneumonia. On the afternoon of 26 November 1900 Agatha saw her mother burst out of the room in which her father was lying, and, without having to be told, she knew he was dead.

Frederick’s death brought home to Agatha how things could suddenly change. Owing to the family’s straitened circumstances it was thought that Clarissa would have to sell Ashfield. But following the entreaties of her daughters and a letter of protest from Monty – by now abroad serving with his regiment – Clarissa capitulated. Instead, rigid economizing enabled her to keep on the small estate. Agatha adored Ashfield so much that a recurring theme in several of her books would be her protagonists’ overwhelming desire to retain the family home.

Fortunately, nine months after Frederick’s death, an event took place that reduced the isolation of mother and daughter at Ashfield. In September 1902 Agatha’s sister Madge married Jimmy Watts, the sensible, prudent and self-effacing eldest son of a wealthy Manchester manufacturer, James Watts I. Agatha approved of Jimmy, who was kind to her, always treated her seriously, refrained from making infantile jokes and, best of all, spoke to her as if she were an adult. Agatha’s former jealousy at the attention Clarissa and Frederick had lavished on Madge’s New York coming-out was forgotten, for she had her own part to play in her vivacious and witty sister’s wedding.

The choral service was held in Torquay at St Saviour’s Church, and Madge wore a gown of beautifully wrought silver embroidery and carried a prayer book instead of a bouquet out of respect for her father’s memory. Agatha was one of six bridesmaids, including Nan Watts, the bridegroom’s younger sister. They wore ivory white Louisine pictures dresses, with petticoats, elbow sleeves and fichus of Alençon lace. Pinned on the dresses were diamond and pearl brooches in the shape of marguerites, the gift of Jimmy, who also gave them bouquets of the same flower to carry as a flourish pun on the name of the bride.

Although many deserted Agatha after the notoriety she acquired following her disappearance, Nan would stand by her for life. Initially, there was antagonism between them. The brash fourteen-year-old tomboy Nan had been told that Agatha was an exceedingly demure and well-behaved twelve-year-old. Agatha had been given to understand that Nan was a polite but forthright child who always spoke up clearly for herself. The two girls met in mutual suspicion but lowered their reserves sufficiently to inflict ‘every variety of torture’ possible on the newly-weds. With the help of Agatha’s cousin, Gerald, and Nan’s brothers, Lionel and Miles, satin shoes were tied to the carriage in which Madge and Jimmy drove away; a notice on the back of the carriage proclaimed ‘Mrs Jimmy Watts is first class name’; and throughout the honeymoon rice fell out of every garment they removed from their suitcases.

After the wedding was over Nan’s parents returned to their hotel and Agatha’s mother retired to her bedroom at Ashfield, exhausted and weeping with happiness. Much to their surprise Agatha and Nan discovered they liked each other enormously. Upstairs in the school room they had a glorious time steeplechasing over furniture with Gerald, Lionel and Miles. The springs on the chesterfield sofa

were broken beyond repair. The day was rounded off with a visit to the theatre to see *The Pirates Penzance*.

The Watts family lived in a splendid Victorian Gothic pile called Abney Hall in Cheadle, Cheshire (now part of Greater Manchester). Agatha's regular visits there over the years provided her with the experience of lavish living that she was to make use of in her future country-house murder. Abney Hall had been in the Watts family since 1849, and in the past they had offered hospitality to Prince Albert and other famous aristocratic and political figures. Complete with gargoyles, it contained numerous corridors and passageways, ornate carved staircases, mullioned windows, suits of armour, marble busts and more than three hundred oil paintings, including ones by Holbein, Gainsborough and Ansdell. A stuffed lion that had once killed a missionary guarded the main hallway. Outside, the manicured gardens contained a small lake in front of the house and a larger one at the back. An archway with a clock tower opened on to the enormous walled kitchen garden where a Gothic-style ventilating shaft wafted warm air towards the fruit trees. Agatha considered Abney Hall 'marvellous', and it would later surface, lightly disguised, as the setting for a large number of her mysteries, including *The Secret of Chimneys* and *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*.

The Wattses also owned farms and estates in excess of 3,000 acres, including the massive Kinder Scout, in Derbyshire. The family fortune was derived from a hugely successful textile business, S. and J. Watts, founded by Nan's and Jimmy's late grandfather Sir James Watts I who had been Mayor of Manchester between 1855 and 1857. Situated on Portland Street in Manchester, the firm's five-storey warehouse, which is now the Britannia Hotel, was designed in the form of an elegant Venetian palazzo, with each floor decorated in a different style: the ground floor was Egyptian; the first was Italian; the second was sixteenth-century Dutch; the third was Elizabethan; the fourth was based on the Galerie de Glaces at Versailles in France; and the fifth featured four roof pavilions with large Gothic wheel windows. Sir James Watts I had been knighted by Queen Victoria on the steps of Manchester's town hall in 1857, and after his death in 1878 his fortune had passed to Nan's and Jimmy's father James Watts II, who now ran S. and J. Watts with Jimmy's help.

The relationship Madge forged with her new mother-in-law Anne Watts was not a happy one. Madge offended Nan's mother by being rude and demanding. Anne Watts never ceased to opine 'Madge is the worst thing that's ever happened to this family.' Despite these tensions, the good manners of Agatha and Clarissa ensured that they were always welcome in the Watts household. Moreover, Anne Watts and Clarissa were already firm friends because they had been at school together in Cheshire as children.

The straitened circumstances under which Agatha grew up at Ashfield had little effect on her as a teenager, since Clarissa ensured that their home remained a bastion of love and security. She also arranged for her daughter to take arithmetic and literature classes two days a week at a school run by Miss Guyer in Torquay. Agatha was to attend for a year and a half. Her religious beliefs received a jolt one day when one of her teachers insisted that every one of them would at some time in their lives face despair and that until that time they would not truly know what it was to be a Christian. The real test, she was told, was to know, as God did, what it was like to feel that all your friends had forsaken you, that those you love and trust have turned away from you. The teacher explained that the way to survive was to hold on to the conviction that this was not the end and to remember that if you love you will suffer and if you do not you will never know the meaning of a Christian life. Agatha never forgot this lesson.

An undoubted highlight of Agatha's rather staid life as a teenager was when Nan visited Ashfield. Agatha revelled in organizing their social activities. A favourite game was to cram themselves into a wardrobe packed with clothes and fall out of it. The fact that Nan was an heiress meant that Agatha often became the recipient of her cast-off clothes.

Christmases were invariably spent at Abney Hall. Agatha and Nan like to drink a mixture of milk and cream on the estate farm, where Nan once painted all the piglets green. It was an established routine for the Wattses and their guests to dress up for dinner, and a photograph exists showing Nan made up to resemble a Kentucky minstrel. Agatha and Nan were irrepressible together, and after dinner they often performed pantomimes in a room known as the Council Chamber. An enormous curtained alcove in front of the fireplace made an excellent stage, and, on account of her porcelain features and dreamy manner, Agatha was nicknamed ‘Starry Eyes’ by the Watts family.

Years later, after the disappearance, Agatha developed agoraphobia, a nervous reaction to crowds and strangers that led many to suppose that she was pathologically shy. Yet those who knew Agatha before the incident remembered her as an extremely attractive young girl who, when she grew older, had no shortage of male admirers. Her reticence, which arose from her pleasure in observing other people and her disinclination to part with information except on her own terms, meant that she was often mistaken by those who did not know her well as either aloof or shy.

Nan’s father, James II, used to make Agatha feel self-conscious by asking her, ‘What is our dream-child thinking of?’ He would encourage her to play the piano and sing sentimental songs to him, which she found easier to do than talking to him. She much preferred Nan’s mother, Anne, whom she found brisk, cheerful and completely factual. At this time Nan went in for being an *enfant terrible* and firing off damns and blasts at her mother, which upset her a great deal.

In addition to Jimmy, Nan had three other brothers: the sensitive and charming Humphrey (Ughtred had died at the age of two), the gifted and precocious Lyonel and the shy and handsome Miles. They all loved acting with the exception of Jimmy. Humphrey eventually owned his own theatre in Manchester and ran a firm called Fitups, later known as Watts and Corry, which supplied scenery and stage equipment to amateur societies and did camouflage work during the Second World War. Lyonel married three times and had one daughter Pamela, known as Merelina, by his first wife, the actress Jean Blomfield, who was related to the actor-manager Sir Nigel Playfair. During the 1920s Lyonel helped Sir Nigel run the Lyric Theatre at Hammersmith in London. In addition to acting professionally on the stage, Lyonel also appeared in several films, including *Outward Bound* and *So Well Remembered* with John Mills and Trevor Howard. Humphrey and Lyonel also became the inspiration for the two brothers Alex and Stephen Restarick in Agatha’s 1952 novel *They Do It With Mirrors*.

The youngest brother Miles, despite being shy all his life, was very good with children and used to play a game called ‘sitting on books’, which endeared him to Agatha and Nan. He was easily the most handsome of all the brothers – tall, with clean-cut features and very fair hair – and he once boasted of this in a piece of verse.

*Miles once pondered in a deep reverie,
And the gist of his thoughts he confided to me.
Which were that he thought in the whole family
There was no-one as handsome or as clever as he.*

Despite his retiring nature Miles joined the Grenadier Guards as a private spoke fluently. He often carried messages behind enemy lines and his work resulted in him being awarded the French Croix de Guerre medal. In 1927 he took his capital out of the family firm S. and J. Watts and bought a fruit farm that was only intermittently successful.

On Boxing Day Agatha accompanied the Wattses to a pantomime in Manchester. A love c

pantomimes stayed with her all her life. She and the family returned home on the train singing all the songs they had heard, with the Wattses rendering the comedians' songs in broad Lancashire accent. One song they bawled out together went, 'I was born on a Friday, I was born on a Friday, I was born on a Friday when my mother wasn't at 'ome!' Humphrey sang the supreme favourite in a melancholy voice, 'The window, The window, I've push it through the window. I have no pain, dear Mother, now I've pushed it through the window.'

Back in Torquay, when she was not helping Clarissa run Ashfield, Agatha's activities included reading, embroidering cushion covers, tennis, croquet, roller-skating, swimming and riding her horse side-saddle. She made up for the general lack of excitement in her life by taking part in a number of amateur theatricals. While performing in *The Blue Beard of Unhappiness* she met a young man called Amyas Boston who became for a time the object of Agatha's affections and an ardent admirer. However, her passion was music, and when Clarissa sent her to finishing school in Paris she took piano and singing lessons and Amyas faded from her life.

Over the next two years finishing school awakened in Agatha the idea of making a career in the performing arts. Sadly, her dream was not matched by sufficient discipline or ability. Her teachers undermined her confidence, and she eventually concluded that she did not have enough talent to appear in public as a solo pianist. Once she realized that she did not possess the volume of voice needed for opera she gave up the idea of performing in public, since becoming a concert singer fell short of her musical ambitions.

During this period Nan was attending a finishing school in Florence. The former tomboy had turned into a demure, apple-cheeked brunette whose mischievous sense of humour readily attracted would-be suitors. Agatha kept in touch with her friend by visiting the Italian city during her school holidays.

After Agatha returned from Paris Clarissa rounded off her education by arranging a coming-of-age season in Cairo. By now Agatha had developed into a highly attractive blonde of almost Scandinavian appearance: tall and slim, with a radiant smile and an oval face. The one feature that made her self-conscious was what she called her 'Roman' nose, and it has been said of her, unfairly, that she was never photogenic. In fact most of the best photographs taken of her as a young woman were informal ones taken when she was caught unawares or when she was enjoying herself in a group of friends.

During her time in Cairo a series of enjoyable flirtations took the edge off Agatha's natural reticence. But her suitors were more ardent in their pursuit of her than she of them, for none of them had the adventurous qualities she craved, and so she returned to England.

Agatha recalled that she was 'gloriously' idle back at Ashfield, but the tranquillity was undermined by her growing feelings of restlessness. She was recovering from influenza one winter day when her mother suggested that she follow in her sister Madge's footsteps and write a short story to alleviate her boredom; this and other stories that followed were rejected by publishers. With her mother's encouragement Agatha sought the advice of their neighbour, the celebrated author Eden Phillpots, who, after reading her first attempt at a novel, *Snow Upon the Desert*, suggested she should refrain from moralizing so much. The novel, written around 1908, was followed by several stories including *Vision* and the novella 'Being So Very Wilful'. Eden Phillpots considered the later showed a 'steady advance', but it was some years before Agatha's literary promise would be recognized, for her romantic disposition and attractive looks ensured that her energies were taken up for the most part by courtships in which she did all the rejecting.

As far as Agatha was concerned, the life led by her friend Nan seemed far more glamorous and exciting. Nan had recently become attracted to a highly undesirable suitor, and her parents had sent her on a round-the-world trip with her Uncle George and Aunt Helen to prevent the romance from developing.

On 4 January 1910 the unforeseen occurred. The steamer *Waikare*, on which Nan was travelling with her guardians, struck an underwater rock pinnacle in the Dusky Sound and they were shipwrecked without loss of life on Stop Island off the coast of New Zealand. The two-day ordeal of the 23 passengers and crew was relieved by the fact that they had managed to salvage food supplies, luggage and a grand piano before the ship went down. A cat that was rescued gave birth to four kittens, and Nan, unfazed by the incident, made use of her Kodak camera to photograph her fellow victims sheltering under the tarpaulins.

Years later Agatha would use the shipwreck in her story 'The Voice in the Dark'. The incident made front-page news in the *Otago Witness*, and Nan triumphantly bore copies of the newspaper back to England to show her disbelieving family. On the return sea voyage she became romantically attached to a man from Belfast called Hugo Pollock whom she would marry two years later, and she happily regaled Agatha with the details of their liaison.

Agatha demonstrated her physical bravery on 10 May 1911 when she and her mother attended an aeroplane flying exhibition. The pilots were offering members of the public £5 to go flying with them and Agatha begged Clarissa to pay the fee so she could take her first aeroplane flight. Although aviation was in its infancy and aeroplanes frequently crashed, Clarissa gave her consent because she did not wish to disappoint her daughter. After returning safely to earth Agatha described her five-minute flight as 'fantastic'.

Around this time the most serious of Agatha's romances was with the modest, kindly and happy-go-lucky Reggie Lucy, a major in the Gunners, who later became the model for Peter Maitland in her autobiographical novel *Unfinished Portrait*, which was published under the pseudonym of Margaret Westmacott. Clarissa approved their engagement, and when Reggie Lucy returned to his regiment in Hong Kong their courtship continued by post.

Despite Reggie Lucy's lazy charm there was one thing he was unable to offer Agatha: she had a secret desire to be conquered by a stranger, 'the Man from the Sea', as she termed him in her autobiography. The need to be swept away by a stranger became a romantic obsession.

Reggie Lucy, despite his devil-may-care attitude, had missed out on many things in life, and his suggestion that Agatha should keep her options open gave her an escape clause. The romance and adventure that Agatha craved suddenly materialized on 12 October 1912 in the form of Archibald Christie, the man who would change her life for ever then break her heart.

Chapter Two The Man from the Sea

Agatha was just twenty-two years old when she met the dashing and assertive Archibald Christie at a dance given by Lord and Lady Clifford of Chudleigh at their home Ugbrooke House in Devon. Twenty-three years old, he was tall and handsome, with wavy fair hair, a cleft chin, an unusual upturned nose and intensely blue eyes. He had been born on 30 September 1889 in Peshawar, northern India.

Archie's Irish mother, Ellen Ruth Christie, was alive, but his English father, Archibald Christie Senior, a former divisional judge in the Indian civil service, had died some years earlier after falling from his horse following his return to England. Ellen Christie, known within family circles as Peggy, later married William Hemsley, a schoolmaster from Clifton College in Bristol, where Archie had been head boy. There was another son from the first marriage, Campbell Manning Christie, four years younger, who ended his military career as a major-general. He was a paler version of his brother, with artistic leanings that reached fruition after the Second World War when he wrote a series of highly

successful plays.

Archie had trained at the Royal Woolwich Military Academy after leaving Clifton and was lieutenant stationed at Exeter in Devon. He encouraged Agatha to cut several partners so that she could dance with him on their first meeting, but Agatha wistfully assumed theirs had been a passing encounter. Much to her surprise he turned up at Ashfield several days later on a motor cycle.

Agatha was quickly drawn out of herself by Archie's charm, intelligence and impetuosity. He was someone who promised romance and adventure in equal proportions and could challenge her reticence and seek out her hidden depths. Archie was that romantic figure of whom she had dreamed her 'Man from the Sea'. His profession was as adventurous as it was exciting: he was one of a small band of qualified aviators who had joined the elite ranks of the recently formed Royal Flying Corps.

Archie, in turn, was mesmerized by Agatha's radiant attractiveness, as well as her femininity and her reticence, which made him feel even more decisive. A whirlwind courtship ensued. Archie tipped the scales in his favour and set Agatha's heart lurching two and a half months into their relationship when he said he wanted to marry her straight away. Despite recognizing they were poles apart in many ways, Agatha desperately wanted Archie to be her husband.

She knew that, in part, her fascination for him derived from the fact that he was still a stranger to her, and around this time she woke from a disturbing dream, distractedly murmuring: 'The stranger from the sea, the stranger from the sea . . .' She was so affected by this that she wrote a poem, 'The Ballad of the Flint', in which Archie was cast as the Leader of the Vikings whose fleet raids the peaceful inhabitants of Dartmoor in Devon. She cast herself as the Priestess of Dartmoor, and her feeling of helplessness over their circumstances was measured in the fact that after the Leader of the Vikings claims the Priestess as his own they both die tragically.

One person Archie was unable to win over completely with his confident manner and his charm was Agatha's mother. It was not just possessiveness of her much-loved daughter that led Clarissa to oppose the idea of their marrying straight away but the practical concern of how Archie might support a wife. Archie earned a modest subaltern's pay, and beyond this the only money he had was a small allowance from his mother. The £100 Agatha received each year from the legacy of her paternal grandfather, Nathaniel Miller, was clearly not a sufficient supplement to Archie's income.

Clarissa recognized, too, a certain ruthlessness in Archie's character which gave her foreboding. She knew also that her younger daughter's sensitive temperament made her vulnerable in the face of misery and hardship. Furthermore, Clarissa's instincts – which could at times amount to something like clairvoyance – told her that Archie would not be a faithful husband. But Clarissa loved Agatha too much to cause her pain, and confronted by her daughter's stubbornness she allowed the couple to become engaged.

Agatha plucked up the courage to write to Reggie Lucy to tell him their engagement was off. She would later ponder, after Archie had turned against her, that she might have been secure and happy with Reggie, although she knew she would never have loved him as much as she loved Archie. Quite early in their relationship Archie made it clear to her that he could not bear it when people were unhappy or ill, and an adoring Agatha only appreciated the significance of this matter later.

Their tempestuous engagement, which lasted a year and a half, was filled with ups and downs. With both Agatha and Archie often despairing as to whether their adverse circumstances would ever allow them to marry. No man in love, certainly not one of Archie's temperament, likes to feel he is playing second fiddle to his prospective mother-in-law, but Clarissa's precarious health was another reason the engagement was called off several times by Agatha.

Agatha's love for Archie continued to grow, because in some ways he remained a stranger to her. Everything he did or said seemed somehow exciting and unfamiliar, and he felt the same about her, exclaiming once, 'I feel I can't get *at* you.' In moments of uncertainty Agatha had the feeling of

‘wanting to go back’, to have ‘a safe foot on the shore’. But, where Archie was concerned, the lure of the ‘Man from the Sea’ was too strong, and she was aware that she had of her own accord swum into deep water.

The advent of the First World War provided them with an incentive to grasp at happiness while they could. Archie was on three days’ leave and they were staying with his mother in Clifton. The decision to marry was undertaken so precipitously that they had to apply for a special licence. Archie’s stepfather, William Hemsley, proved fatherly and supportive as usual and helped the couple to finalize their plans.

The same could not be said of Agatha’s future mother-in-law, Peg Hemsley, who had once been described by her other son, Campbell, as a dangerous woman, for hers was the sort of gushing affection that could rapidly change into hate. While at the beginning of their relationship she had warmly received Agatha into the family circle for Archie’s sake, Peg had never considered Agatha a suitable spouse for her son. Agatha wore the new Peter Pan collars – then considered very modern and daring – and Peg regarded her son’s fiancée as ‘fast’. Peg had consoled herself with the thought that Archie was too young to marry and that nothing would come of the unhappy alliance. She had not reckoned on her son’s determination. There were many occasions when Peg alternated between demonstrating ostentatious displays of affection towards Agatha and making her antipathy clear to her future daughter-in-law. Agatha suspected rightly that there would be trouble from Peg over the decision to marry.

However, not even Peg’s attack of hysterics and refusal to attend the ceremony at the parish church of Emmanuel, Clifton, could sway Archie or Agatha, who were married on Christmas Eve, 1914. Agatha’s initially angry and disappointed family only learned afterwards that she had become Mrs Archibald Christie. Thus the marriage got off to a bad start, and Agatha later recalled of the wedding day that all the people she and Archie were most fond of had been annoyed with them.

Two days later Archie was posted to France. Agatha returned to her mother. Ashfield’s upkeep had become increasingly difficult for Clarissa, but a second source of income improved matters, since Agatha’s aged and increasingly infirm grandmother from Ealing was now living with them. When Agatha was not helping with the running of the household she devoted her energies to the war effort as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse at the Torquay Town Hall Red Cross Hospital.

She found that reading detective stories eased her worries about Archie, for beneath the conventional elements of menace and sudden death there was always a comforting morality tale. Towards the end of the war Archie was prevented from flying in further combat owing to worsening sinus problems, and he was given a desk job in France. Agatha passed her apothecaries’ examination and went to work in the Torquay hospital dispensary.

Agatha’s decision to write her first detective story was rooted in her complex feelings about Madge. Agatha both admired and felt a strong undercurrent of jealousy for the elder sister who was dubbed ‘the clever one’. Madge had married into an extremely wealthy family, her looks and wit were widely praised, and she and her husband Jimmy had travelled to such exotic places as the Italian Alps and St Moritz. While frequently argumentative, Madge could be highly entertaining. The fascinating stories she told about herself and others were often heavily embellished but always contained a grain of truth. Much to Agatha’s awe and chagrin Madge had had a series of short stories published in *Vanity Fair*, making Agatha’s own literary rejections even more disappointing and humiliating.

After this, around the time of Agatha’s romance with Reggie Lucy, the sisters had got into a heated discussion on what made a good detective story. Madge made a bet with her sister that she could not write a detective story where the reader was not able to guess who was responsible for the crime that had been committed, despite having the same clues as the detective.

Goaded by jealousy, Agatha planned *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* during idle moments in the

dispensary. The ingenious murder method for her story was inspired by her newly acquired knowledge of poisons, while the many Belgian refugees proliferating in Torquay suggested to her the background of her little detective with the egg-shaped head, Hercule Poirot.

Her married life really only began in September 1918, two months before the war finally ended. Agatha gave up her war work in Torquay and moved to London to be with Archie. Her husband had been posted to the Air Ministry in Covent Garden where he served as Chief Technical Officer of the South-Eastern Area. He had returned from France a much decorated war hero, for in addition to having been mentioned in five dispatches he had received three medals: the DSO, the CMG and the Order of St Stanislaus Third Class with Swords. Archie no longer intended pursuing a career in the Royal Air Force, because he had become convinced there was no future for him in the armed forces, and he was determined to find a job in the City of London in order to make a lot of money.

Agatha's weekends were lonely, and initially she avoided her well-off friends in London. She was embarrassed by the financial gulf that separated her and Archie from them. Nan Watts had recently moved to 10 More's Gardens in Chelsea, and after Agatha had plucked up the courage to get in touch with her, she regretted not having looked her up sooner.

Nan's marriage to Hugo Pollock in 1912 was not a success. She had borne him a daughter, Judith, four years later, but he had had no time for the child and often told her to 'hop it' in Arabic. Shortly before Agatha visited Nan he had gone off on a walking holiday and had not bothered to return. Rather than brood, Nan had moved to London in search of a more cosmopolitan lifestyle. Agatha was so impoverished that one of her greatest pleasures when visiting Nan was to be invited to examine the contents of her affluent friend's wardrobe.

It was while Archie was looking for the right opportunity to come along in this difficult post-war period that Agatha discovered that she was pregnant. Archie was subdued on hearing the news and had expressed a desire for a daughter, saying he would be jealous of a son. His reaction was not altogether surprising, for after their marriage much of his boldness and audacity had evaporated to reveal a diffidence and boyishness that met the child in Agatha. Archie also was very concerned that his wife should regain her physical attractiveness after the birth. On 5 August 1919 they became the proud parents of a daughter, Rosalind, whom they nicknamed Teddy.

That same year Archie resigned his commission when he received an offer to join the staff of the Imperial and Foreign Corporation, deeming this to be the stepping-stone for which he had been looking. In the joy and excitement of being reunited with Archie and starting their life together – in a succession of cramped flats across London – Agatha had given up on *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, which over the previous few years had been rejected by five publishers. When the Bodley Head publishing house wrote towards the end of 1919 requesting a meeting it seemed a promising omen.

Agatha met John Lane of the Bodley Head in January 1920 and, after agreeing to alter the last two chapters, she eagerly – too eagerly – signed a contract there and then to have her manuscript published. What she did not realize was that the terms of the contract were very much in the Bodley Head's favour. Nor did she take in the fact that she was obliged to offer her new publishers a total of five books.

After fulfilling her agreement to alter the courtroom setting of the book's dénouement to a drawing-room bristling with tension, she received a rare distinction for a début novelist of having *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* serialized in the Friday supplement of *The Times Weekly Edition* from February to June that year. Agatha's real desire, however, was to see her story published in book form. The Bodley Head had advertised that the book would come out in August. When it had still not appeared by October Agatha was disappointed and frustrated. In a letter to her publishers she expressed the desire to see her book released before Christmas in order to coincide with the Greenwood trial. In November there was much press interest when the Kidwelly solicitor, Harold

Greenwood, was acquitted of poisoning his wife. It was Agatha's hope that her tale with its poisoning and courtroom drama would strike a similar chord of interest in the public.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles eventually appeared in America at the end of 1920 and in Britain at the beginning of 1921, selling just over 2,000 copies, which was then considered a good sale for a first detective story. But since the contract she had signed was so much in her publishers' favour that she made was £25, which was her half-share of the serial rights.

Agatha's next book, *The Secret Adversary*, would earn almost twice as much and introduced an idealized version of Archie and herself in the characters of the recently demobbed Tommy Beresford and Prudence 'Tuppence' Cowley, two bright young things whose decision to place an advertisement in *The Times* hiring out their services – 'No unreasonable offer refused' – would lead them into a espionage conspiracy involving missing papers and a mysterious girl who eludes her enemies by faking amnesia.

Agatha was hoping to succeed at her writing to alleviate the financial constraints of her married life and also because, once again, it had become difficult for her mother to maintain Ashfield on one source of income following the death in 1919 of Agatha's grandmother from Ealing.

Once Agatha realized that the Bodley Head had taken advantage of her, she determined to fulfil her contract with them as quickly as possible so that she might find a new publisher. Her contract did not stipulate that the five books she owed the Bodley Head had to be detective stories, and she seized on this loophole, after delivering the manuscript of *The Secret Adversary*, to offer the Bodley Head a long mystical story she had written some years previously called *Vision*.

Agatha was quite rightly convinced that the company would not accept it, but because her publishers had treated her so unfairly she felt no compunction in the matter. *The Secret Adversary* was brought out by the Bodley Head in 1922 and fancifully dedicated 'To all those who lead monotonous lives in the hope that they may experience at second hand the delights and dangers of adventure', by which time the Christies had embarked on their own adventure.

Agatha accompanied Archie in his capacity as Financial Adviser on the British Empire Mission of 1922, which took them to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States to promote the forthcoming British Empire Exhibition to be held in 1924 at Wembley on the outskirts of London. It was one of the most exciting experiences of their lives. Although the tour turned out to be an arduous publicity campaign that involved meeting numerous government officials from each country, it offered moments of respite such as when Archie and Agatha spent two weeks together in Honolulu, where their fascination for each other and their delight in surf-board riding resulted in a mood of companionable playfulness all too often dampened by Archie's struggle to create a niche for himself in the business world. On the negative side, there was the irascible Major Ernest Belcher whose fierce temper tantrums made him a volatile leader of the tour, and separation from the daughter Rosalind, who was being looked after by relatives. Their major problems, however, were to come on their return to England.

Chapter Three Adversity and Prosperity

As soon as the Christies returned to their London flat things started to go wrong. The Imperial and Foreign Corporation had not kept Archie's position open, and he found himself unemployed and unable to get a job. The couple had known before they started on the tour that it was highly likely that this might happen, but they had never believed in playing safe and had been determined to see the world and risk the consequences.

May 1923 saw the publication of *The Murder on the Links*, a new Poirot tale about a millionaire found stabbed on a golf course in France. Before the book's publication Agatha won a major row with her publisher, resulting in some ill feeling, over the proposed book jacket, which was to have featured a misleading illustration. Despite their continued financial hardship and Archie's dark moods Agatha was convinced he would eventually find the right job since he was fiercely ambitious and had a drive she had always admired.

A minor boost to their finances came in the second week of May when she won a small prize by correctly identifying the killer of Hugh Bowden in the seven-week-long newspaper serial *The Mystery of Norman's Court*. Had hers been the first correct entry received by the *Daily Sketch* the first prize of £1,300 would have resolved their financial difficulties, but it was not, and the second prize of £800 was divided among twelve runners-up, of whom Agatha was just one.

Shortly before the British Empire tour, after many years' absence, her elder brother Monty had returned to England. In her autobiography Agatha does not reveal the secret shame concerning her brother and the reason her mother found it so difficult to cope with his erratic behaviour. In fact Monty had become a drug addict. He had been expelled from Harrow because of his failure to apply himself to his studies and then served in the army in South Africa and India. He quickly squandered the legacy left to him by his paternal grandfather, Nathaniel Miller, and seems to have resigned his commission when his debts became too embarrassing. He moved to Kenya and took up farming and safari-hunting. His elder sister Madge – with money provided by her husband Jimmy – eventually financed Monty's ill-fated plans to run small cargo boats on Lake Victoria in East Africa, but this venture had to be aborted on the outbreak of war in 1914. Monty served in the King's African Rifles until he was discharged with a wound to his arm. The wound became infected and, although he resumed hunting, his health deteriorated. Finally, his doctors gave him six months to live because of the infected limb. Remarkably, however, he began to recover on his return to Ashfield. Like many charming people Monty was often economical with the truth, and it is not clear whether he became addicted to the morphine that would have been prescribed to relieve the pain of his injury or whether he became a habitual drug user for other reasons.

The worst of Monty's behaviour saw him firing pistol shots out of a window at visitors and tradesmen who called at Ashfield. His intention was not to hit or maim but to scare the wits out of his hapless victims. Madge was absolutely terrified when her brother turned his cruel game on her. Incredibly, Monty bluffed his way out of the situation to the police by insisting he was a crack shot and that there had been no real danger to his victims. The stress of dealing with her son's irresponsible behaviour put further strain on Clarissa's fragile health.

Agatha swiftly united with Madge to avert further scandal and distress to their mother. The rather drastic solution involved installing Monty temporarily in a bungalow at Throwleigh on Dartmoor, where he was looked after by a doctor's widow. Nan's daughter and son-in-law, Judith and Graham Gardner, recall that Madge's much put-upon husband, Jimmy – who disliked Monty as much as Monty disliked him – paid his bills for the rest of his life.

Meanwhile, the strain of living with an unemployed husband became so great for Agatha that she contemplated taking Rosalind home with her to Ashfield or Abney Hall while Archie sorted himself out. Being sensitive to failure, he hated being unable to get a job. If Agatha attempted to take his mind off their worries by indulging in light-hearted chat she was accused of having no sense of the gravity of their situation; while if she was silent she was censured for not trying to cheer him up.

By November 1923 Agatha had completed *The Man in the Brown Suit*, a fast-moving thriller, set mainly in South Africa, involving the murder of a Russian dancer, the disappearance of some jewels and a mysterious arch-criminal known only as 'the Colonel'. The characters of Sir Eustace Pedler and his secretary Guy Pagett were based on Major Belcher and his put-upon secretary Francis Bates from

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