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# **A Talent for Murder**

Written by Andrew Wilson

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# A TALENT FOR MURDER

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters,  
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To fans of Agatha Christie everywhere,  
and one in particular

## Editor's Note

Agatha Christie never spoke of her disappearance in the winter of 1926. As a result it has remained one of the great mysteries of modern times.

When I first mentioned the idea of this book to her, she was understandably reluctant. However, she agreed to be interviewed on condition that the resulting volume should not be published until at least forty years after her death. I too served my solicitors with notice to the same effect.

I must admit it is odd to see my own name as a character in these pages. I played a very minor part in this narrative and I have tried to keep my role to the bare minimum. It really is Mrs Christie's story and as such a great deal of it is told from her point of view, rather than my own.

In addition to Mrs Christie, I tried to speak to as many of the protagonists as possible to get an overview of the main events. Neither I, nor Mrs Christie,

witnessed all the ensuing action and so, rather than leave out essential pieces of information, I decided to call upon the power of the imagination to reconstruct certain scenes.

This book is dedicated to those who did not survive the eleven dark days in December 1926. May they rest in peace.

– John Davison

## Chapter One

Wherever I turned my head I thought I saw her, a woman people described as striking, beautiful even. That would never have been my choice of words.

Of course, when I looked again across the glove counter or perfume display it was never her, just another dark-haired woman trying to make the best of herself. But each of these imagined glimpses left a piece of scar tissue across my heart. I told myself to stop thinking of her – I would simply pretend the situation did not exist – but then I caught sight of another pale-faced brunette and the dull ache in my chest would flare up again and leave me feeling nauseous.

When I had first fallen in love with Archie, I had likened the feeling to a white dove trying to escape from my chest. Now that Archie's head had been turned by this creature I imagined the dove being strangled with a necklace of barbed wire and slowly rotting away inside me.

The distant sound of a brass band playing carols lightened my mood for a moment. I had always adored Christmas and I was determined that this year was going to seem just as festive and jolly as normal, at least for Rosalind's sake.

I walked over to the doll counter and a bank of china-white faces with blank blue eyes stared back at me. I picked up a doll with straw-yellow hair and ran my fingers down its smooth pale cheek. How funny that I had named my own daughter after my childhood doll, a toy that I had admired but rarely played with. Even then I had preferred to make up my own stories. Rosalind had not inherited my imagination, which was probably for the best as sometimes my fancy, although it had its benefits, left me feeling wrung-out and close to wretched.

As I put the doll back down on the counter and was about to pick up its black-haired twin with eyes like plump blackberries, I felt a pricking at the base of my skull. The hairs on the back of my neck bristled and a shiver went through me. I turned round, certain that someone was studying me, but met only the kindly eyes of elderly ladies dressed in their smart tweeds. I comforted myself with the knowledge that the Army & Navy Stores in Victoria was the kind of place where nothing dreadful could ever happen.

I had been coming here since I was a girl, when Granny B. would take me shopping to buy lengths of ribbon and bags of buttons. Afterwards my grandmother



would always treat me to a delicious strawberry ice. And yet now, there was something terribly wrong. The feeling of dread was physical. My mouth was dry and my throat tightened. My breathing had quickened. I raised my hand to my neck to try to loosen the collar of my blouse, but that didn't help. I still felt as though someone was watching me and they wanted to do me harm.

When I was a small girl I had suffered from nightmares in which the character of a gunman had appeared to me. He had looked, so I had told my mother and sister, Madge, like a French soldier carrying a musket. But it had not been the sight of the gun that had frightened me. Rather, there had been something else that had disturbed me, something about his nature, his character. He was a personification of evil, a force I knew even then was only too real. Sometimes I would have dreams in which I would be sitting at the dining table at Ashfield, the family house in Torquay, and I would look up to see that his spirit had stolen into the body of my dear mother or Madge. Now I could almost feel the Gunman's hot, sour breath on the back of my neck.

I gathered my things together and, with the kind of slow, deliberate pace of a cat sensing the approach of danger, walked towards the exit onto Victoria Street. The sharp slap of the cold December air came as something of a relief. I had to stop myself from looking around nervously. My hands were trembling, my mouth still dry.

Surely the sense of danger I had felt in the Stores and on the street could not have been merely a product of my imagination. Yet I felt my cheeks redden as I remembered the incident of the cheque. I had been down at Ashfield, clearing out the house after my mother's death. What with the ten- or eleven-hour days, the boxes full of family mementoes, the moth-eaten clothes, the piles of Grannie's dresses, and the crowd of memories from my childhood that threatened to transport me back to the past, I must have lost my senses for a moment. I had been asked to write a cheque and I had signed not my own name but that of Blanche Amory, a character from a Thackeray novel. What had come over me? Was the same thing happening to me now? Was I losing touch with reality? It was a terrifying feeling.

I tried to take a couple of deep breaths, but my chest felt tight. I could not shake off the sense that at any moment something awful would happen. I wanted to rush back to the safety and comforts of the Forum, my club on Hyde Park Corner. But I didn't want the Gunman to follow me there. With a deliberately slow pace I set off down Victoria Street in the direction of the Underground. As I approached the entrance to the station the crowd began to swell. Even though my legs felt as though they might give way at any moment, fear propelled me forwards. Luckily, the station was busy and I disappeared amongst the throng. I pushed my way through the crowd, looking around as I did so. I bought

myself a ticket and descended into the dark bowels of London. I felt sure I had shaken off whoever it was who had been following me. As I breathed in the sooty air I felt, for a moment, happy and safe again.

Some of my smart Sunningdale friends always thought it was rather quaint that I loved travelling on the Underground. But it was such a rich source of material: all those intriguing faces, those curious characters, not to mention the delicious possibilities it presented when it came to plot. *The Man in the Brown Suit* was a perfect example. It was a bit of a silly story, but it had proved popular with the readers, no doubt because of its dramatic opening which I had chosen to set on the platform at Hyde Park Corner.

That had been such a fun novel to write and I had dashed it off relatively quickly, not like the turgid stuff I had been churning out lately. Perhaps I needed a holiday. I hoped the short break in Beverley would do me – do both of us – the world of good. I certainly wasn't a subscriber to the theory that unhappiness bred creativity. This last year had been the most miserable of my life and look what I had produced: the Frankenstein's monster that was *The Big Four*, a novel that had been stitched together from a series of short stories, and a few lacklustre scenes for a book, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, that would not flow.

A blast of hot air signalled the imminent arrival of the train. I grasped my hat and stepped closer to the edge of the platform so I could have a better chance of securing

a seat. Another step and I could easily lose my balance and fall onto the tracks. Everything, all the pain that I had suffered over the course of the year, would come to an end. Archie would be free to marry, there would be none of the shame that always came with a divorce, and Rosalind would learn to love her new mother. What was it my daughter had said to me? 'I know Daddy likes me and would like to be with me. It's you he doesn't seem to like.' Only a child, in all her innocence, could utter such a thing. And yet while this was an accurate description of the state of our marriage, the observation had felt like another dagger to the heart.

As the train emerged from the blackness and started to hurtle towards us I took a step back. The noise of the engine vibrated in my ears, deafening me for a moment. Just then, I felt a light touch on the base of my spine. I turned to look round, but in that split second the pressure on my back intensified. I felt myself being shunted, pushed forwards towards the tracks. I opened my mouth to scream, but my throat had turned to sandpaper.

My hands reached out at awkward angles in a bid to hold on to something, anything, but I clasped at nothing but hot air. I could feel the skin on my cheeks begin to burn from a ferocious all-consuming heat that seemed to be sucking the liquid from my eyes. Just as I was tipping forwards, my head lolling like the doll's I had handled in the Stores, I felt an almighty wrench pull me back, a strength that I had hardly thought

possible. I gasped at the force of it. It was then I felt myself melting away as I fainted and collapsed onto the platform.

I became aware of someone breathing into my ear. At first, I thought I was in bed, with Rosalind beside me. But then I became aware of a sourness, an unpleasant ferric odour that forced me to open my eyes. I woke up to a world of fragments and disjointed faces.

‘I’m a doctor, stand clear, please stand clear,’ a voice said.

I tried to speak, but could not. Again, there was that foul stream of air on my face. I felt someone cradling my head. The touch was soft and delicate, but my body, instead of relaxing, began to tense up. I attempted to sit, but the long fingers with their silky touch eased me back down again.

‘Now, now, lie there for a moment or two. You nearly had a nasty accident. It seems that you fainted just as the train was approaching.’

‘No, I felt someone—’

‘Yes, you felt someone pull you back. That was me. I’m a doctor.’

Although the words should have been comforting, for some reason they sent a chill through me.

‘Thank you, that’s very kind. But I’m feeling much better now. If you could just let me get on my way I would be most grateful.’

The people who had gathered around me had started to disperse now that they thought they understood the

situation: a lady had fainted, a doctor who had behaved like a hero was in attendance and had stopped her from falling onto the tracks.

‘I think it would be wise if you took a couple of deep breaths,’ he said, before leaning towards me. The stench of his metallic breath forced me to take out my handkerchief and place it over my nose.

‘Now listen to me very carefully,’ he said in a whisper. ‘I think I have something to say to you that you will very much want to hear.’

At the moment I removed my handkerchief from my mouth, again in a voice only I could hear, he said, ‘I wouldn’t scream if I were you. Unless you want the whole world to learn about your husband and his mistress.’

I couldn’t take in what he was saying. What did he know of Archie and that woman?

‘Yes, I thought that would get your interest. Now, what I suggest is that you let me help you up and we can go and have a cup of tea.’

I felt the spider-like touch of his fingers begin to encircle my wrist.

‘Sweet tea, that’s what I would prescribe,’ he said in a louder voice. ‘Wouldn’t you agree? That’s the best thing for shock.’

I did not know what to do. Should I make a dash for it? Obviously the man had some information that he thought he could use against me, against us. No doubt he was a dirty little blackmailer, keen to extort money

from me. How was he to know that our resources were stretched? On the face of it, it looked as though we lived a gilded existence. Yes, I had written six novels, and a collection of Poirot stories, but the earnings had not been that high because of the awful contract with my first publisher, The Bodley Head, which had tied me to five books on a low royalty rate. Thank goodness my agent had managed to extract me from that. In addition, the house cost a fortune to run and there had been a great many unforeseen expenses.

I could refuse point blank, but what if he took his nasty story to the newspapers? That would destroy Archie, I knew. Even after everything Archie had told me I still loved him and I would do anything in my power to protect him.

‘I know a nice little café just around the corner,’ he said, pressing my wrist with his fingers. ‘Shall I help you stand?’

‘I think I can manage by myself, thank you,’ I said, easing myself up off the ground. I brushed my skirt of the dust and grime, quickly adjusted my hat and assessed the man standing in front of me. The first thing I noticed was the contrast between his creamy pale skin and his black beard. He had eyes the shade of sloes and full, fleshy lips the colour of blood. He was of medium height, nicely-dressed and seemingly well-educated, not your typical grubby blackmailer.

As we walked out of the Underground and back down Victoria Street, unperceptive strangers might

have assumed that we were a married couple. But if those passers-by had taken the trouble to look into my face, I'm sure they would have seen the uncertainty and anxiety in my eyes.

'What is it that you want?' I asked.

'Let's wait until we are settled with a cup of tea,' he said. 'That way it will be much more civilised.'

I searched the street for a policeman, but there were none to be found. But perhaps it would be better if I dealt with this myself.

'First of all I must congratulate you on the success of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*,' he said. 'Absolutely first-rate. How you pulled it off, it's really quite extraordinary. I'm sure you've had a great number of people tell you so, but you can add my name to your growing list of admirers. You must have quite a mind inside that pretty head of yours.'

'Surely the last thing you want to do is talk about books,' I said stiffly as we walked into the café and sat down at a table some distance from the other customers.

'Oh, but it is. But first let me introduce myself. My name is Patrick Kurs. I'm a general practitioner from Rickmansworth. I have a small practice, mostly full of neurotic wives and husbands who drink too much. I suppose you could draw a parallel between Dr James Sheppard in *Roger Ackroyd* and me. Quite a fascinating character. You see, Mrs Christie, I believe you and I are remarkably similar in many ways.'

'I'm not sure what you mean,' I said, before a girl in a



black-and-white uniform came to our table to take our order. Dr Kurs ordered a pot of tea for two.

‘As I was saying, I have made a great study of your work, Mrs Christie, and I am certain that you have a first-class criminal mind. You seem to know how a murderer’s brain works. It’s almost as if you have some kind of inner knowledge of how a killer feels. It’s most uncanny.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, before I realised that what the doctor was saying was, in most people’s eyes, far from a compliment. ‘I mean – yes, that may be so, but what has this got to do with my husband? I would much rather you address the business at hand.’

When the girl returned with our tea we fell into silence, but as soon as she retreated, Dr Kurs shifted in his seat and cleared his throat.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘You see, it’s come to my attention that your husband has been having a – how shall I put this? – an intimate relationship with another woman. That’s correct, isn’t it?’

I simply nodded my head, but I could feel my eyes blaze with hatred.

‘And I take it you would rather this fact and the details be kept out of the newspapers?’

‘So it is money. That’s what you want?’

Dr Kurs blinked and looked slightly taken aback. ‘No, not at all,’ he said, laughing. ‘I think you’ve underestimated me, Mrs Christie. What I propose is something far more than mere financial gain. I have, I

suppose one could describe it, a certain scheme for you. You may think it unconventional, but it is something that I am sure you will find of interest.'

'What are you talking about?'

'It's a plan that you alone can execute. You, Mrs Christie, are going to commit a murder. But before then you are going to disappear.'