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The Mysterious Disappearance

By

KIRT SHINEMAN

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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The Mysterious Disappearance was premiered by Theatre Artists Studio (Scottsdale, Ariz.) on Oct. 29, 2021.

CAST:

AGATHA Pamela Fields
MARY KatiBelle Collins
ROSALIND HICKS Anne Safford
TONY/ARCHIE/BILLY Trevor Penzone

PRODUCTION:

Director Janis Webb
Set Design Douglas Clarke
Lighting Stacey Walston
Sound and Music Adam Bennet

The Mysterious Disappearance

CHARACTERS

AGATHA CHRISTIE: 85 years old, walks with a limp and wears dentures. She wears late 1940s-style suits and skirts with pintucks instead of figure seams.

MARY WESTMACOTT: 80 to 115 years old and wears a grey 1940s dress with words sewn into the print. Her severe eyes give away her curiosity. The personification of Agatha's nom de plume, only Agatha can see her.

ROSALIND HICKS: 56 years old, tall and white-haired. She wears late 1960s bell-bottom pants and a blouse. Throughout the play she smokes Embassy Filter Virginia cigarettes.

ANTHONY "TONY" HICKS: 59 years old and wears 1970s work clothes with a knit cap. He carries a flask and sneaks sips of Scotch.

ARCHIE CHRISTIE: An elegant, well-groomed man dressed in a 1920s tuxedo with tails. Played by the same actor who plays TONY.

WILLIAM "BILLY" COLLINS: Friend, publisher and editor for HarperCollins. He wears a business suit. Played by the same actor who plays TONY.

TIME: The end of December 1975.

PLACE: Agatha's library room of Greenway House in Torbay, England.

SETTING

The room contains bookshelves, a writing desk, a record player, a couch and swivel chairs. Parts of the bookshelves have cabinet doors hiding a Dictaphone and a hidden door for some mysterious exits. A telephone sits on a side table by the couch. A granddaughter clock stands in the corner. Windows flank the room opposite a door. Outside the room, through an archway, is a staircase and hallway, leading to the front door, which is on the same side of the house as the windows. A full-length mirror hangs in the hallway. A Christmas tree and other holiday decorations adorn the room. Portions of the set should slowly be removed as the play progresses. After each scene, segments of the set disappear. By ACT II, Scene 3, the set should be the bones of what it was. This goes for the use of costumes and props. Begin with full costumes and complete props, but by the final scene, only the carcasses of those items exist.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The play is neither a whodunit nor a thriller. It portrays fictional events set before Agatha Christie's death and is loosely based on historical events that took place. The events are imagined encounters and do not purport to be true.

The Mysterious Disappearance

ACT I

Scene 1: Greenway House

(Midmorning on Monday, Dec. 29, 1975. Outside the windows, a light snow falls. Inside the library, a Christmas record plays. AGATHA CHRISTIE and MARY WESTMACOTT are reading newspapers. MARY sits in one of the chairs, her knitting bag lies beside her. AGATHA sits at her desk and turns a page of her newspaper.)

AGATHA. Another death at Rowcroft.

MARY. The nursing home?

AGATHA. Yes, and the photographs are horrible!

MARY. Let me see.

AGATHA. Photographs of each body! An elocution in the bath.

MARY. You mean an electrocution in the bath.

AGATHA. Yes. And an overdose in the bath. And now, a drowning in the bath.

MARY. I would avoid the bath.

AGATHA. Good luck with that.

MARY. Seems the most dangerous place on Earth is the British countryside.

AGATHA. Full of fatalities.

MARY. You know the line, we “all must as chimney-sweepers” ... you remember it, surely.

AGATHA. Remind me.

MARY. How can you forget it? “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,
/ Nor the furious winter’s rages” ... surely you remember?

AGATHA. Forgetting is not something I control.

MARY. No, but you know the rest—“Thou thy worldly task
hast done, / Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages” ...

AGATHA. I don’t remember it!

MARY. You do—say it with me ... “Golden lads and girls all
must, / As—”

AGATHA. Stop it, Mary.

MARY. It’s Shakespeare.

AGATHA. I get that.

MARY. *Cymbeline*. One of Archie’s favorites.

AGATHA. Certainly not mine.

MARY. It was. One you knew. Well.

AGATHA. I can’t recall it.

MARY. How could you forget? How Archie insisted Rosalind
be named after a character in *Cymbeline*—

AGATHA. No one remembers *Cymbeline*! I’ll bet even
Shakespeare didn’t. Anyway, leave it alone.

*(AGATHA rises from her desk, moves to the record player
and turns it off.)*

MARY. I’m sorry, but I thought surely you would remember it—

AGATHA. I do, but I don’t. At my age ... words ... sometimes
the snow slurs the words. I mean the words blur. But it’s why
friends like you are so important, and why I love these ...
you anchor me when I’m feeling adrift.

MARY. You’re feeling adrift?

AGATHA. I am. And a writer who can’t find the birds because
they’ve flown is a writer who is inept.

MARY. You can't find the birds?

AGATHA. Birds? No. I meant the words. The words with wings. The ones that— (*She gestures "fly away and die out."*) You know. So, we must write a new one. My last review for the *Marple* novel?

MARY. Let's not do this—

AGATHA. Ah, here! "There was no thrill in the book. Too many words and too little story." "Easily forgettable." "This book can be taken as a perfect example of Christie at her worst." My worst! Oh, and ... "She's lost her flair. She's lost her words." Can you—do you agree?

MARY. Can't write hits every time.

AGATHA. But this! They wrote, "She might be a victim of her own gift. A woman no longer for the present." Like I'm not here!

MARY. Let's stop.

AGATHA. You're right. Must be the business at the nursing home. They claim it's suicide. The man was ... ummm ...

MARY. Constable Harry ... Harry Maynard?

AGATHA. Yes. I feel ... I'm grasping at ... it's like I know him.

MARY. Well ... Harry—wasn't Harry at Styles?

AGATHA. Styles? You mean with Archie?

MARY. Yes. (*Reading the paper.*) Says right here. His first case—fifty years ago—you'll never guess.

AGATHA. My missing persons case?

MARY. Yes, dear. Certainly not mine. They've put a photo of Harry with the detective.

AGATHA. Oh! Yes. Officer Maynard! Yes! He's the officer Archie brought to interrogate me.

MARY. Says he died the night before Christmas Eve. Wasn't that the same day you visited? The open house?

AGATHA. I wonder if I saw him.

MARY. You might've.

AGATHA. Wasn't Nancy Neele at the same nursing home?

MARY. As I recall—she moved from hospital, since they couldn't cure her.

AGATHA. Is she ill?

MARY. Cancer, I'm afraid.

AGATHA. Must be the guilt eating her.

MARY. Wouldn't that beat it all.

AGATHA. What do the Indians call that? Charm-a?

MARY. Yes, something like that.

MARY. Anyway, they moved Nancy into Rowcroft. I mention it because—well, you're not moving there?

AGATHA. No. Too many suicides. Nancy? Bet Archie would be upset.

MARY. If he were still alive?

AGATHA. True. You know, she never let Rosalind see her father.

MARY. That's not true. She visited him when you and Max went to Egypt, and you did research on the book—

AGATHA & MARY. *Death on the Nile!*

AGATHA. Well, if it wasn't for Nancy, Rosalind wouldn't have been separated from her father. She was the reason for our divorce.

MARY. I'll give you that.

AGATHA. Ruined everything.

MARY. Her old sins have long shadows.

AGATHA. Since then it's been difficult to ... I don't know. I mean, I love Max. I do. A decent second husband. But—don't get me wrong—but our love isn't the same. Not the same passion I had with Archie.

MARY (*accusatory*). Oh, Agatha, you loved Archie too much.

And I've always said so. It's one of the most frightening things in the world.

AGATHA. What?

MARY. Love. To love someone too much.

AGATHA. Too much? Absurd. I loved *and* I hated Archie.

MARY. You never hated him.

AGATHA. Yes, I did.

(The lights shift, and ARCHIE CHRISTIE stands in the archway in silhouette.)

ARCHIE (*calling out*). Darling?!

AGATHA (*melting*). Just that voice. But he always had a sting.

ARCHIE. Why get all made-up? It doesn't make a difference.

AGATHA. Many of my villains were Archie.

ARCHIE. Shall I—

ARCHIE & AGATHA (*mimicking*). Start the car?

ARCHIE. Maybe a new car. A Jaguar. Such fun. Nancy lets me drive hers. Nice! Handles well on the curves. (*He looks at his watch.*) How to explain such a tardy arrival?

AGATHA. AHHH!

(AGATHA throws a pen at him.)

AGATHA (*cont'd*). You know what really took the mickey out of me? The lipstick!!

ARCHIE. What lipstick?

MARY. Can we forget the lipstick?

AGATHA. No. And it should be in the book. (*Turns on the Dictaphone.*) Archie and I were at Styles. We'd planned a trip to London.

ARCHIE. You're trying my patience.

MARY. You're twisting it.

AGATHA. And we were going away for the weekend—

ARCHIE. What lipstick are you talking about?

AGATHA. I put together my bag and no lipstick—gone.

ARCHIE. I'll buy you another lipstick—

MARY. A woman's lipstick is very personal.

ARCHIE. Ask Rosalind. Maybe she played with it.

AGATHA. She'd never steal from me!

ARCHIE. What's it matter? Who're you going to kiss anyway?

AGATHA. So, you haven't seen it, Archie, have you?

ARCHIE. No. And anyway, who would take your lipstick?

AGATHA. Nancy, maybe.

ARCHIE. Nancy?

AGATHA. Has she been in my room?

ARCHIE. No. Not your room.

MARY. So indiscrete.

ARCHIE. Fine. I've changed my mind. You and Rosalind go to London. I'm staying here.

AGATHA. What? Without me?

ARCHIE. Yes.

AGATHA. All weekend?

ARCHIE. Yes. I have golf.

AGATHA. With Nancy?

ARCHIE. Perhaps.

MARY. He wouldn't flaunt their affair in your face like that?

AGATHA. He did! (*To ARCHIE.*) She will not step into my house!!

ARCHIE. Your house? It is MY house! And I will not be told who can and cannot come here!

(ARCHIE exits up the stairs. The lights return to the previous settings.)

AGATHA. Cheating on me with *her*! And chasing a skirt all over the countryside right in front of me! Maddening! I went upstairs, packed my things, put on my coat and gloves and drove away from the house. I drove until I had a plan.

MARY. You had no plan.

AGATHA. I had a plan.

MARY. Which was to?

AGATHA. To disappear.

MARY. To run away, you mean.

AGATHA. Oh, hush. I need to put this down while I have it. *(Speaking into the Dictaphone.)* The police searched and searched for me. Everyone looked, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He took one of my gloves to a medium. Even the great Sherlock Holmes could not find any clues. But they were there. In plain sight. It was all in the motive. The murder wasn't a whodunit, or a whydunit. But how? And where did I go?

(A banging on the front window. AGATHA and MARY scream.)

MARY *(after her scream)*. Oh my!

(Incensed with the interruption, MARY packs her knitting. AGATHA looks closer, pulling back the drapes to see out the window. The face of ANTHONY "TONY" HICKS appears. AGATHA jumps back. Seen from the waist up, TONY, covered in snow, speaks, but he can't be heard through the window.)

AGATHA. Tony! Don't do that!

(TONY gestures "I am sorry.")

MARY. He has the manners of an ox!

AGATHA. Even his face upsets my train of thought.

(TONY gestures "I didn't mean to scare you.")

AGATHA *(cont'd)*. Can't you see I'm working?!

(TONY falls.)

AGATHA *(cont'd)*. TONY!

MARY. I always thought he looked like Archie.

AGATHA. Certainly not!

MARY. Some girls marry their fathers; maybe Rosalind saw a likeness—

AGATHA. Tony's nothing like Archie!

MARY. Of course not. I'll put on the kettle.

(MARY exits. TONY reappears.)

AGATHA. TONY! BE CAREFUL!

(TONY gestures about the train being delayed.)

AGATHA *(cont'd)*. Choo? What? Oh! What about the train?

(TONY gestures he's giving up on the conversation.)

AGATHA *(cont'd)*. Just clear the walk.

(AGATHA leaves the curtain and returns to her writing. She turns off the Dictaphone.)

AGATHA *(cont'd)*. If I hadn't seen his birth certificate, I'd swear Tony was American. Where was I?

(AGATHA rewinds some of the tape. She presses play.)

AGATHA *(from the recording)*. “Even the great Sherlock Holmes could not find any clues. But they were there. In plain sight. It was all in the motive. The murder wasn’t a whodunit, or a whydunit. But how? And where did I go?”

(Then we hear a recording of banging on the window. Quickly, AGATHA presses stop, then record.)

AGATHA *(dictating into the microphone)*. All the elements of a murder were there. Classic Christie. I’d parked near the spring we all called the Silent Pool. People knew a young girl and her brother died there. My silence, my innocence. My death. Drowning in silence. And the single glove I left? The fur coat? Gifts from Archie. A hunter. A former first world war fighter pilot. I was dying at the hands of my unfaithful husband. Death comes in so many shapes.

(The granddaughter clock strikes eleven o’clock. Covered in snow, ROSALIND HICKS enters the hall, wearing a jacket and carrying the mail.)

ROSALIND. There must be an inch of ice! I told Tony to clear off the walk.

AGATHA. Well—sue him! You’re a—a—a—

ROSALIND. A barrister?

AGATHA. Yes!

ROSALIND. If I had time to practice law, maybe I would.

AGATHA. How was the walk from / the cottage house?

ROSALIND. I took the car. Picked up the post. Final notice on ... everything. Electric. Water. Heating oil. Credit cards. Oh? *(Pause as she examines an envelope.)* Interesting.

AGATHA. What is it?

ROSALIND. A fan letter. I'll stick it with the others.

AGATHA. We can answer those later.

ROSALIND. Sure. Given any more thought to Rowcroft House?

AGATHA. I'm not ready for nurses! I'm comfortable here!

ROSALIND. Really?

AGATHA. Really. Quiz me.

ROSALIND. Mum, let's not—

AGATHA. Who's the leader of our country?

ROSALIND. OK. Who is the leader of our country?

AGATHA. The queen!

ROSALIND. And she is ...?

AGATHA. Elizabeth.

ROSALIND. And the king is ...?

AGATHA. Never going to wear a crown.

ROSALIND. And the prime minister?

AGATHA. Oh, that old, fat. The old—

ROSALIND. Fat?

AGATHA. I meant fart. The old fart—

ROSALIND. Yes—?

AGATHA (*the answer comes to her suddenly*). Harold!

ROSALIND. Yes, but—

AGATHA. See? I know things, and I'm not ready for that place!

ROSALIND. OK, but I found it nice. The nurses were lovely.

AGATHA. Then you live there.

ROSALIND. And what? Leave you? Sorry. You're stuck with me.

AGATHA. Hoorah! Anyway, I could never live where it smells like that.

ROSALIND. It didn't smell.

AGATHA. Exactly. It smelled like nothing. Ever notice?

Mortuaries don't smell. Neither do cemeteries.

ROSALIND. Oh, stop it. Think about it.

AGATHA. Give me that ...

ROSALIND. Brochure?

AGATHA. Yes. I was looking for something to start a fire.

Thank you.

ROSALIND. All right, all right—

AGATHA. Oh, and were you two warm enough / at the cottage?

ROSALIND. Warm enough. We would've come earlier. But

Max and Mathew. We took them / to the train station—

AGATHA. Yes, yes. I was in the bath.

ROSALIND. Yes, and Mother, I wish you wouldn't ...

AGATHA. Wouldn't what, dear? Complete your sentences, Ros.

ROSALIND. Bathe without my assistance. You could fall again.

AGATHA. Tony's the one who falls.

ROSALIND. Mum, we can't have another fall.

AGATHA. I use the handle rails.

ROSALIND. Those aren't handle railings. Those are towel racks.

AGATHA. Maybe they should be handle railings.

ROSALIND. By the way, Tony thinks the London train will be significantly delayed.

AGATHA. I wouldn't worry, Rosalind. The boy's in good hands.

ROSALIND. The boy? You mean Mathew?

AGATHA. Yes.

ROSALIND. My son knows London. Better than I do. I worry about stepfather. Not like he used to be.

AGATHA. None of us are.

(Pause. ROSALIND lights a cigarette.)

ROSALIND. How's the autobiography coming?

AGATHA. Good. Writing it ... generates ...

ROSALIND. Memories?

AGATHA. Yes.

ROSALIND. Good. And when you finish the tape, put it in the box, mark the sleeve, label it by dates—

AGATHA. 1926—

ROSALIND. Mum, 1926? It's due! Billy expects it in three days! Wants it January first. You must finish. Or we might all be living in a single-room flat in Belfast.

AGATHA. Max, you, me and Clumsy?

ROSALIND. Yes. All of us. We have a deadline, and if we don't meet it, then Mr. HarperCollins says he's cutting you off.

(The lights shift into her imagination, and WILLIAM "BILLY" COLLINS walks through the bookshelf in his fancy suit. He carries a book with a book jacket. Both BILLY and AGATHA are in a spotlight. ROSALIND smokes.)

BILLY. I hate to cut you off, but we have deadlines—

AGATHA. One book every year!

BILLY. Maybe you can't. Maybe you're not up to it—

AGATHA. I didn't say I can't do it, Billy—

BILLY. It's either the autobiography or Marple's last case.

AGATHA. Sleeping Murder?

ROSALIND. We need to—you pulled it out, right?

AGATHA. It's not ready—it's not good. And it must be. And as they say, you're only as good as your last.

BILLY. How bad can it be?

AGATHA. Embarrassing. It's upstairs next to my trunk. We'll go over it first. Bring the manuscript in the trunk.

(ROSALIND stands arms akimbo.)

AGATHA. Dear, I haven't looked at it since ...

BILLY. '44?

AGATHA. '44, and we were being bombed by the Germans.

With all the explosions I'm sure it's full of typos, and exclamations. You'll need to re-type it.

ROSALIND *(sarcastic)*. Type it? Your editor can.

(The lights shift as AGATHA drifts into her mind. ROSALIND is busy transcribing notes, she does not see the fantasy.)

AGATHA. Billy? Type?

BILLY. Ha! No. We also need to redo your publicity photo. In this one you look seventy.

AGATHA. Well I'm over eighty!

BILLY. Good reason to re-shoot it. Now, I have notes. Let's go over them, shall we?

AGATHA. Notes?

BILLY. Revisions, really.

AGATHA. Those'll take months.

BILLY. Not with a mind like yours—

AGATHA. You have no idea.

BILLY. First. On pages twenty to twenty-six, it wanders.

AGATHA. I often wonder why I keep you on—

BILLY. People's minds wander and writing can't. Next, to have a mystery there must be a dead body—

AGATHA. There is a dead body. Weren't you paying attention?!

BILLY. And there must be a murderer—

AGATHA. Oh? You want a murderer?

(AGATHA opens a drawer and pulls out a handgun. ROSALIND is busy with the book. She does not see this fantasy.)

BILLY *(not looking up from his notes)*. There is a murderer, I know, but not until chapter four. That's too long to make the audience wait. They want a murder upfront—

AGATHA. A murder. Of course.

(BILLY sees AGATHA holding the handgun.)

BILLY *(squeals)*. Oh! Let's not get melodramatic.

AGATHA. Melodramatic?

BILLY. How did you get a gun?

AGATHA. It is still possible for some of us to own firearms.

BILLY. Put it away, and discuss my revisions—

AGATHA. Some of us personally know the queen—

BILLY. You don't know how to handle a gun.

AGATHA. I've written enough about it, I should know how to kill someone.

BILLY. You have no clue how to really kill someone. Stop playing—

(AGATHA pulls the trigger. BANG! BILLY is shot. He falters, drops the notes and falls behind the couch.)

AGATHA. Oh? I don't know how?

BILLY. You shot me? Right in my ...

AGATHA. Right where most men have a heart. Except you.

BILLY. Oh, I'm ... [bleeding].

AGATHA. A bleeding heartless liberal. And I guess you'll expire quickly.

BILLY. Call for help. Agatha ... please. I'm ... I'm ... ohhhh.

(He dies. AGATHA returns the gun to the drawer as the lights revert to the previous settings. [Somehow BILLY exits behind the couch.] ROSALIND squashes the cigarette.)

ROSALIND. Mum?

AGATHA. Dear?

ROSALIND. You like Mr. Collins.

AGATHA. Not his notes! I'd rather kill Billy than get his notes.

ROSALIND. Every writer hates notes—

AGATHA. Can't we publish Poirot's last, first.

ROSALIND *(concerned)*. You've been working hard today—

AGATHA. Writing Hercule's death was delicious!

ROSALIND. I'm sure it was, but—

AGATHA. And my readers will never see it coming. Curtains for Hercule! We must get it published.

ROSALIND. We did.

AGATHA. We did?

ROSALIND. Yes. Six, seven months ago.

AGATHA. Oh. Good.

ROSALIND. Well, finish the autobiography—send it off. Before you forget it all.

AGATHA. I've got it.

ROSALIND. Let's be honest, Mum.

AGATHA. I am ... I am ...

ROSALIND. OK.

(ROSALIND exits as AGATHA turns on the Dictaphone and slides the door to hide the reel-to-reel. She speaks into the microphone and sits on the couch.)

AGATHA. I hadn't lost my ... not like Officer Maynard suggested. I knew what I was doing. I just didn't want to talk about it.

(AGATHA leans her head back on the couch as the lights change.)

Scene 2: Mary

(The granddaughter clock strikes eleven o'clock. MARY enters from the kitchen. She carries in tea service.)

MARY. Why not just be honest with her?

AGATHA. What?

MARY. I heard you. You said you're honest. *(Scoffs.)*

AGATHA. I am.

MARY. No, you're not.

AGATHA. What good is being honest when nobody is, and I don't enjoy being different.

MARY. But you are. And you know it.

AGATHA. True. But I meant to say, "difficult" rather than "different," but I—

MARY. You slipped up.

AGATHA. My slips are my best part. That's true. I don't like to be different.

MARY. Or difficult.

AGATHA. That too.

MARY. Agatha? Can we talk? I need to tell you something.

AGATHA. Of course.

MARY. I haven't told you this, and I know you will be upset, but hear me out.

AGATHA. What is it?