

CHRISTIE EDMUNDS

A true tale of Victorian crime and punishment

by Miss Bellwood



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Written By :
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Alone on the boardwalk, shivering in the October breeze, Christie held on to her hat and looked out at the churning, grey ocean. Along the desolate beach ran two small boys in sailor suits, followed by their black-bonneted nanny whose wide skirts ballooned comically in the wind. With a sigh, Christie turned towards the jumble of stalls lining the beachfront, selling postcards, ices and wildly spinning paper windmills. The season was nearly over but the counters were still heaped with cheap souvenirs – varnished shells, framed prints and china plates – all emblazoned with the slogan **A Gift from Beautiful Brighton.**



Christie Edmunds

Brighton wasn't very beautiful just now, reflected Christie grimly, noting the clouds and wondering if it was about to rain and ruin her hat with its lovely chocolate-brown feathers. The hat was probably too big, too showy, for such a dreary day, but Christie had been trying desperately to cheer herself up. Last week she had turned forty and, often, when she sat gazing miserably into her looking glass, she felt every one of those forty years pressing down and crushing the life out of her.

Yet she was still a good-looking woman, she knew it, and as she made her way up West Street, she was pleased to see that ragged street boys stepped politely off the path to let her pass. Yes, she was still a lady, still admired and respected. However empty her life might actually be.



Penny Dreadful magazines

Reaching the newspaper stall, Christie hastily purchased one of the shocking Penny Dreadful magazines that her mother insisted on reading every week. The stallholder tipped his cap and grinned, but Christie looked away, embarrassed. Hurriedly slipping the nasty pamphlet into her bag, she noted the ridiculous title: **Black-Cloaked Bill, the Terror of London Town.** Each week the heading was different, but the contents were the same – gruesome tales of murder and horror, shocking stories of knife-wielding robbers and dashing tricksters. Not that proper newspapers were any better, with their sensational reports of trials and hangings. Christie sniffed in disgust and, gripping her hat again with one gloved hand, continued home.

Despite the spots of rain now in the air, her footsteps slowed as she neared Gloucester Place, where she and her mother lived. The house was grand, but somehow the spacious rooms only emphasised their terrible emptiness, haunted by the ghosts of her poor dead father, who had died raving with madness, and her dear brother, who had suffered a similar fate several years later.

Mother's sadness had twisted her into a bitter old woman and she and Christie hardly spoke, except to bicker. Sometimes Christie thought the loneliness would drive her mad. Desperate to delay her return, she lingered on West Street, catching sight of the colourful front window of Maynard's sweet shop. On a sudden impulse, she climbed the steps and pushed open the heavy door.

Inside, she inhaled the delicious smells of liquorice and toffee, syrup and chocolate. Around her, shelves of glass jars held thousands of glowing sweets in a rainbow of colours.

Ahead was the ornate counter where rows of exquisite chocolates were neatly lined, some topped with swirls of icing, others with glazed almonds that gleamed like jewels. Christie had a fondness for chocolate and, although she was careful never to eat too much, she decided that today she would treat herself.



A newspaper advertisement for Maynards sweet shop

A short while later, she emerged from the shop, carrying a dainty box of chocolates. Delighted with her treasure, she stepped into the street, at which moment her hat, which she had completely forgotten to hold down, was swept off her head in a gust of wind and went tumbling down the street. With a cry, Christie made to run after it, but a gentleman on the other side of the road was faster.

Nimbly he sprang across, grabbed the hat just before it was blown into the path of a horse and cart and jogged back to her with it held tightly in both hands.

“Well, that was a stroke of luck, wasn’t it?” he exclaimed with a good-natured laugh. “What a tragedy it would have been to see such a fine hat squashed flat!”

His manner was so charming that, before she knew it, Christie was laughing along with him. Carefully, he straightened the feathers and, bowing, handed her the hat.

“As good as new,” he smiled pleasantly, adding, “Though in this gale I fear you may lose it again.”

“I suppose you think it a dreadfully silly hat to wear in such weather,” Christie giggled, feeling self-conscious under his gaze as she fixed the hat in place with pins.

“Not at all, ma’am, not at all,” smiled the man, still watching her with frank enjoyment. “The sight of such a splendid hat – and its wearer, of course – has brightened my day immensely.”

Christie glowed with pleasure. The man was not young – probably about her age, she thought – but his eyes twinkled youthfully in his cheerful face, and he was smartly dressed in a tweed suit and expensive overcoat.

Although she was enjoying the conversation, it was of course not proper to stand in the street too long with a stranger, and Christie began to move away. Quickly, the man said, “Madam, I still fear for the safety of that hat. You must let me walk you home, so that I can chase it whenever it decides to take flight again.”

Blushing, Christie allowed him to walk beside her and the two made their way up the street, chatting all the way as if they were old friends. By the time they had reached Christie's house, she had learned that his name was Doctor Arthur Beard, that he had a surgery in the town, and (best of all) that he lived on the street almost opposite hers, across the small, leafy park called Victoria Square. As they parted on her doorstep, he commented on the box of chocolates she held.

"I bought them on impulse," confessed Christie.

Dr Beard rocked back on his heels and looked her directly in the eye.

"I quite approve of acting on impulse," he smiled. "How dull life would be without it!"



Dr Arthur Beard

As she entered her house, Christie's mind was a whirl of delight. Catching sight of herself in the heavy-framed hall mirror, she thought how young and pretty she looked, flushed with the wind and excitement. She burst into Mother's room merrily, but the old woman looked at her sourly, hunched as usual in her rocking chair, and Christie felt her happiness draining away.

"Where've you been all this time? The fire's getting low," the old woman grumbled. "And where's my magazine?"

With a sigh, Christie pulled the Penny Dreadful from her bag and placed it on the table, along with the chocolates, then began to stir the dying fire with the poker.

Reaching out a thin claw to grab the magazine, Mother chuckled at the garish cover, then gave Christie a sly look.

“Who were you talking to out there?” she asked sharply. “I heard a man’s voice.”

Christie stared dreamily into the fire. “It was Dr Beard,” she said. “He lives just across the road.”

“Oh him,” snorted Mother. “I saw him once for my backache. Hopeless he was. Has that big fat wife and a whole army of snivelling children.”

Christie froze, her dreams draining of colour. So he was married. Not once in all their talk had he mentioned this, but why would he? After all, he was only being polite. Suddenly she felt very foolish. Mother was still speaking, complaining yet again about the noise the stray cats made in the back alley, but Christie took little notice. Viciously she poked at the fire.

“Goodness, Christiana, you’ll kill it completely,” shrieked Mother. Then her tone changed. “Oooh, chocolates. Let’s hope you got the kind I like.” And before Christie could stop her, the old woman ripped open the beautiful box and began to guzzle chocolates. Christie flung down the poker and stormed out of the room.

The following morning was drizzly and dull, and Christie lay in bed later than usual, sapped of all energy. The dismal prospect of a long day indoors with Mother stretched ahead. But then the little freckled housemaid knocked timidly at the door and presented her with a box “left by a gentleman at the door, ma’am”. A Maynard’s chocolate box, but far bigger than the one she had bought the previous day, decorated with painted roses and tied with a red velvet bow.

Tucked in the bow was a card, covered in bold, swirling handwriting, which said: “More sweets for the sweet. From your impulsive admirer.”



And so began the most wonderful months of Christie’s life. No longer did she mind running errands for Mother, as it gave her so many chances to see Dr Beard, whether it was just a glance through the thick panes of his surgery windows, or to smile and nod across the street.

They began to leave their homes at the same time so that they could walk through Victoria Square together and, when the weather improved in the spring, strolled along the pier, where they listened to the organ grinder and laughed at the street jugglers. Christie did not even feel jealous whenever



Brighton seafront in Victorian times

she saw Arthur’s plump, red-faced wife, Emily, sitting at the sea front, surrounded by a gaggle of children. In the evenings she daydreamed over her sewing, oblivious to Mother’s grumbles about the stray cats, then hurried to bed where she could write Arthur long letters. He never replied, but she knew by the twinkle in his eye that he liked them.

It was the height of summer and the pier was crowded with excitable tourists, joyful at having escaped the London grime for the fresh air and fun of Brighton. Christie and Arthur had stopped to admire the work of a street painter, and Christie could not resist slipping her arm into his.

Near them was a crowd of men, lounging against the railings, and suddenly Christie became aware that they were staring at her and the doctor. One of them said something in a low voice and another snorted with laughter. Beside her, Christie felt Arthur's body stiffen. Abruptly he dropped her arm and moved away. She tried to follow, but he vanished in the crowd. After a fruitless search, she walked home alone, hoping that tomorrow things would return to normal.

But they didn't. Arthur did not appear at his usual time and, when she stood at the surgery window, he pretended not to see her. He avoided her all week. Then came the cruellest blow – the housemaid brought her a present “from the gentleman”, yet this time it was not a box of chocolates, but all her letters returned, bound with string. There was no note.

All through the long autumn and into the bleak winter, Christie haunted the doctor's street, but he always managed to avoid her. The only person she ever saw from his household, apart from servants, was Emily, and Christie began to loathe the sight of the woman. She stood for hours in Victoria Square, oblivious to rain or snow, silently wishing that Emily Beard was dead, run over by a tram or killed by a burglar. She was thinking such vicious thoughts one cold January afternoon as she trudged back from the chemist where she had bought a bottle of poison to sort out the screeching alley cats. (The chemist had advised strychnine; one taste, he said, would kill a cat and scare off the rest.) Listlessly buying Mother's new Penny Dreadful, she glanced at the title and suddenly the words seemed to jump off the page.

The Demon Poisoner's Reign of Terror: His Victims Die In Agony!

she read. Within seconds she was striding briskly towards Maynard's sweet shop. She would do what Arthur himself had once advised. She would act on impulse.

Once Christie had seen Dr Beard leave for his surgery, she adjusted her hat and rapped confidently on his front door. There was not a tremble in her hand as she presented the pale housemaid with a beautiful box of chocolate creams, and not a tremor in her voice as she directed the girl firmly: "Give these to your mistress. Tell her they are a gift from a friend."

Marching home, Christie smiled in satisfaction. They were indeed a fine gift (Maynard's best chocolate creams) but each with a very special ingredient – an injection of strychnine. She wondered how long Emily would wait before gobbling them up. Why, she might be writhing in agony on the floor at that very moment! And when Arthur returned from the surgery, there she would be on the floor, stone cold dead. Excitement bubbled inside Christie. Soon she could be the new Mrs Beard!

All day she waited, heart hammering, for a sign from Arthur, but nothing happened. Then, late in the evening, while Mother dozed in her rocking chair and Christie combed her hair in front of the looking glass, there came a violent banging on the door. She flew down the stairs to open it before the housemaid got there.



*A bottle of
strychnine poison*

Sure enough, it was Arthur, but he was not smiling and holding out his arms to her as she'd imagined. Instead his face was scarlet with anger.

"Arthur, dear –" she began, but he cut her off.

"Don't you ever speak to me again, you madwoman!" he cried. "I know what you tried to do. You wanted to poison my wife!"

"What? No..." Christie protested, panic gripping her throat. "Arthur, what are you saying?"

Arthur leaned forward, his fists clenched. "You tried to kill Emily," he whispered savagely. "Thank god she realized there was something wrong with the chocolate and didn't swallow it. But if there is any lasting damage to my wife, I swear... I swear I will kill you." He spoke the last words with such venom that Christie took a step back, her eyes filling with tears.

"No, Arthur," she begged, clawing at his arms. "Please..."

Roughly, he shook her off. "I want nothing more to do with you. Do not approach me or my family ever again."

Suddenly faint, Christie fell to her knees, but Dr Beard turned sharply away and marched into the night. Christie remained huddled on the doorstep, her hair over her face, sobbing.

She spent a tortured, sleepless night. Again and again she saw Arthur's angry face, hatred blazing in his eyes. She could hardly bear it. Yet by morning, Christie's fevered mind had come up with a plan. If she could make Arthur believe that she had not poisoned those chocolates – and that someone else had – then he would change his mind...

As a pale dawn broke, Christie was already dressed in her finest clothes, adjusting her hat with the chocolate feathers. She felt better already.

When Mr Maynard pulled up the shutters of his sweet shop, Christie was there waiting. He beamed merrily at her and held open the door.

“I do believe you are getting rather a taste for my chocolates!” he exclaimed. “Weren’t you here yesterday? Buying for a friend, am I right?”

“You are quite correct,” replied Christie with a smile. “And now I wish to make another purchase.”

Ensuring that Mother was engrossed in her latest magazine, Christie got to work with a syringe and the bottle of strychnine. It was so hard to know, she thought as she carefully pierced the base of each delicate chocolate, how much poison to use! Too much and it would surely be spotted leaking out; too little and it perhaps would have no effect at all. She would have to guess. Afterwards, she repositioned the chocolates in the box and glanced at the clock. It was still only midday. Plenty of time for a second trip out. Mother didn’t even notice as she left.

“I’m so very, very sorry,” Christie sighed, blushing in what she knew was a very charming manner. “I bought quite the wrong chocolates for my friend. Oh dear – is there any chance I could swap them? Goodness, what a silly thing I am.”

Just as she had predicted, Mr Maynard was more than happy to help a maiden in distress.

“Oh yes, my dear,” he clucked, taking the box and waving away her apologies. “Of course you may select different ones! There, there – such an easy mistake to make. Don’t you bother your head about it.”

“You are so kind,” simpered Christie. “I’ll take these peppermint creams instead, thank you.”

As she left the shop, she glanced back and saw Mr Maynard carefully returning the original chocolates to the display. She smiled and popped a peppermint cream into her mouth. It was delicious.

As winter gave way to spring and the trickle of tourists again grew into a steady flow of holidaymakers, Christie was very busy with her syringe and the bottle of strychnine. She became a regular customer at Maynard's, often buying chocolates for herself but then, every few weeks, returning a poisoned batch, which gullible old Mr Maynard never refused. She also began paying a group of boys, who she'd seen hanging around the pier, to buy small boxes of chocolates, which she poisoned then left in public places to tempt greedy passers-by. As an experiment, she also began adding poison to plum cakes and baskets of fruit, which she sent (anonymously, of course) to random households. She even sent herself one, to ensure she would never be suspected – a stroke of genius, she thought.



Christie busy with her strychnine bottle

Soon she was thrilled to see her hard work having an effect. Reports were appearing in the local papers, becoming longer and more panic-stricken as the weeks went on. People falling ill after eating chocolates... mystery gifts found to contain poison... even a reward of twenty pounds offered for the capture of the poisoner!

Surely Arthur would now realize that those chocolates must have been contained poison before she bought them? Perhaps he might even worry that she too had been poisoned! Christie hugged herself in delight. Perhaps she should even increase the dose a little?

It was the height of June: a perfect blue-sky day, when the sea sparkled sapphire and the sand glowed golden, and when thousands of day trippers filled the beach and the streets with a happy hum of activity. Sidney Barker, four years old in his Sunday suit, held tightly to his father's hand and marvelled at the wonders around him. It was his first visit to the seaside, and he couldn't quite believe the vastness of clear sky compared with London's thick smog.

As he trotted along West Street, hot in his high collar and thick jacket, he craned his neck for a glimpse of the sea, and listened to jovial Uncle Jack pointing out places of interest.

"There's the variety hall, Sid, where the music hall stars perform – we shall have to come back one day to see 'em – and look at all them stalls selling toys!"

Sidney nodded, too full of excitement to speak.

"Let's get the lad to the beach first, eh?" said his father, and Sidney squeezed his hand in silent thanks. To see the ocean, where he would be able to paddle (Ma had promised), felt to the small child the most magnificent treat in the world. But Uncle Jack was still enjoying the town.



Brighton beach in summer

“Ah, now, Sidney, will yer look at this!” Jack exclaimed, stopping in front of a large, glass-plated shop. Sidney looked up. It was a sweet shop, bursting with huge jars of striped candy, sticky toffees and sugared almonds. His mouth watered. Jack chuckled.



The sweet shop

“Look at his face! Never seen such a sweetshop!” he grinned. “Come on, lad, I’ve got a penny in my pocket. Let’s treat you!”

Soon Sidney was standing before the beaming, round-faced shop owner and choosing a chocolate, feeling that this day was the most wonderful dream. He popped the sweet in his mouth as he headed back into the street.

He was only small: he didn’t stand a chance.
Sidney Barker never saw the sea.

Over the next few days, the newspaper headlines screamed murder.

Innocent Child DEAD: Chocolate Was Laced With Strychnine
The Chocolate Cream Killer – Who Will Be His Next Victim?
Confectioner J. G. Maynard Questioned By Police

People buzzed with the horrible thrill of it, pressing their noses against the glass of Maynard’s closed sweetshop to get a glimpse of the notorious chocolates inside. The tourists kept coming to Brighton, but far less food was eaten than normal, and the sellers of ice creams and peanuts cursed the murderer for ruining their businesses.

And Dr Beard, opening his evening paper to see yet another article about the case (this time stating that Maynard might stand trial for the child's death) had the uncomfortable feeling that he knew exactly who the Chocolate Cream Killer was – and that maybe now was the time to talk to the police.

And what of Christie in all this? She had seen the headlines about the child's death and at first her head spun with horror, but almost immediately she pushed it out of her mind. She had to concentrate on her firm belief that Arthur would soon be knocking at her door, begging for a second chance now he knew that she was innocent. She stayed at home, lost in fantasies, ignoring Mother and spending hours combing her beautiful hair. Yet when the knock finally came, three days later, it was not Arthur but two stout, stony-faced constables. Somehow Christie was not entirely surprised.



Victorian police officers

She didn't say a word to the officer who gave the order for her arrest, but stood with her head held high. And, just before she stepped out to the waiting carriage, where curious passers-by were already gathering to gossip, she calmly reached for her hat with the lovely chocolate-brown feathers and set it firmly on her head. She was a good-looking woman, and it would not do for a lady to go out improperly dressed.

In January 1872, Christiana Edmunds was found guilty of the murder of Sidney Barker. The jury recommended death by hanging. However, doctors declared her insane (mentally ill), so she was instead sent to Broadmoor Asylum in Berkshire. Here she lived until her death in 1907, aged 78.

Mr Maynard re-opened his shop and expanded his business. Maynard's sweets are still made today.

Dr Beard remained a well-respected doctor until his comfortable retirement.

