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Written by Jeffrey Archer

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JEFFREY ARCHER

THE CLIFTON CHRONICLES

VOLUME ONE

ONLY TIME WILL TELL

MACMILLAN



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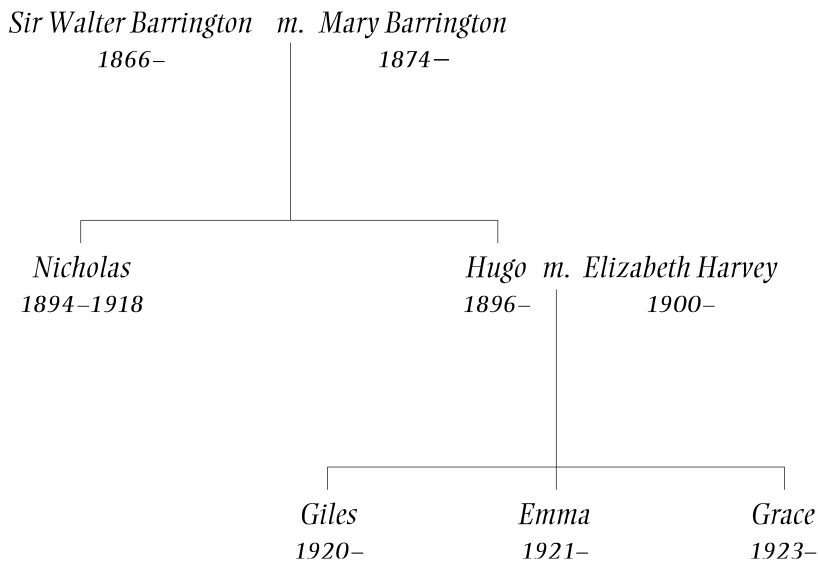
ALAN QUILTER

1927–1998

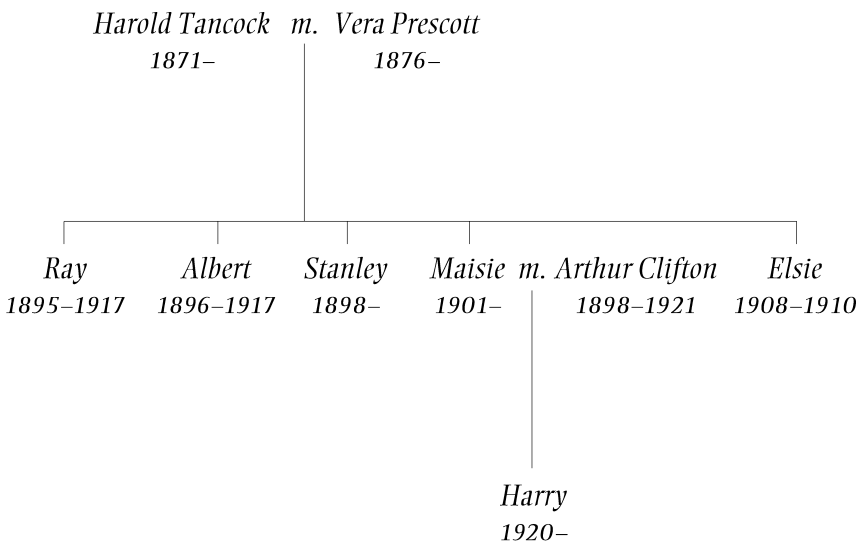
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THE BARRINGTONS



THE CLIFTONS



MAISIE CLIFTON

1919

PRELUDE

This story would never have been written if I hadn't become pregnant. Mind you, I had always planned to lose my virginity on the works outing to Weston-super-Mare, just not to that particular man.

Arthur Clifton was born in Still House Lane, just like me; even went to the same school, Merrywood Elementary, but as I was two years younger than him he didn't know I existed. All the girls in my class had a crush on him, and not just because he captained the school football team.

Although Arthur had never shown any interest in me while I was at school, that changed soon after he'd returned from the Western Front. I'm not even sure he realized who I was when he asked me for a dance that Saturday night at the Palais but, to be fair, I had to look twice before I recognized him because he'd grown a pencil moustache and had his hair slicked back like Ronald Colman. He didn't look at another girl that night, and after we'd danced the last waltz I knew it would only be a matter of time before he asked me to marry him.

Arthur held my hand as we walked back home, and when we reached my front door he tried to kiss me. I turned away. After all, the Reverend Watts had told me often enough that I had to stay pure until the day I was married, and Miss Monday, our choir mistress, warned me that men only wanted one thing, and once they'd got it, they quickly lost interest. I often wondered if Miss Monday spoke from experience.

The following Saturday, Arthur invited me to the flicks to see

Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms*, and although I allowed him to put an arm around my shoulder, I still didn't let him kiss me. He didn't make a fuss. Truth is, Arthur was rather shy.

The next Saturday I did allow him to kiss me, but when he tried to put a hand inside my blouse, I pushed him away. In fact I didn't let him do that until he'd proposed, bought a ring and the Reverend Watts had read the banns a second time.

My brother Stan told me that I was the last known virgin on our side of the River Avon, though I suspect most of his conquests were in his mind. Still, I decided the time had come, and when better than the works outing to Weston-super-Mare with the man I was going to marry in a few weeks' time?

However, as soon as Arthur and Stan got off the charabanc, they headed straight for the nearest pub. But I'd spent the past month planning for this moment, so when I got off the coach, like a good girl guide, I was prepared.

I was walking towards the pier feeling pretty fed up when I became aware someone was following me. I looked around and was surprised when I saw who it was. He caught up with me and asked if I was on my own.

'Yes,' I said, aware that by now Arthur would be on his third pint.

When he put a hand on my bum, I should have slapped his face, but for several reasons I didn't. To start with, I thought about the advantages of having sex with someone I wasn't likely to come across again. And I have to admit I was flattered by his advances.

By the time Arthur and Stan would have been downing their eighth pints, he'd booked us into a guest house just off the seafront. They seemed to have a special rate for visitors who had no plans to spend the night. He started kissing me even before we'd reached the first landing, and once the bedroom door was closed he quickly undid the buttons of my blouse. It obviously wasn't his first time. In fact, I'm pretty sure I wasn't the first girl he'd had on a works outing. Otherwise, how did he know about the special rates?

I must confess I hadn't expected it to be all over quite so quickly. Once he'd climbed off me, I disappeared into the bath-

room, while he sat on the end of the bed and lit up a fag. Perhaps it would be better the second time, I thought. But when I came back out, he was nowhere to be seen. I have to admit I was disappointed.

I might have felt more guilty about being unfaithful to Arthur if he hadn't been sick all over me on the journey back to Bristol.

The next day I told my mum what had happened, without letting on who the bloke was. After all, she hadn't met him, and was never likely to. Mum told me to keep my mouth shut as she didn't want to have to cancel the wedding, and even if I did turn out to be pregnant, no one would be any the wiser, as Arthur and I would be married by the time anyone noticed.

HARRY CLIFTON

1920–1933

1

I was told my father was killed in the war.

Whenever I questioned my mother about his death, she didn't say any more than that he'd served with the Royal Gloucestershire Regiment and had been killed fighting on the Western Front only days before the Armistice was signed. Grandma said my dad had been a brave man, and once when we were alone in the house she showed me his medals. My grandpa rarely offered an opinion on anything, but then he was deaf as a post so he might not have heard the question in the first place.

The only other man I can remember was my uncle Stan, who used to sit at the top of the table at breakfast time. When he left of a morning I would often follow him to the city docks, where he worked. Every day I spent at the dockyard was an adventure. Cargo ships coming from distant lands and unloading their wares: rice, sugar, bananas, jute and many other things I'd never heard of. Once the holds had been emptied, the dockers would load them with salt, apples, tin, even coal (my least favourite, because it was an obvious clue to what I'd been doing all day and annoyed my mother), before they set off again to I knew not where. I always wanted to help my uncle Stan unload whatever ship had docked that morning, but he just laughed, saying, 'All in good time, my lad.' It couldn't be soon enough for me, but, without any warning, school got in the way.

I was sent to Merrywood Elementary when I was six and I thought it was a complete waste of time. What was the point of school when I could learn all I needed to at the docks? I wouldn't

have bothered to go back the following day if my mother hadn't dragged me to the front gates, deposited me and returned at four o'clock that afternoon to take me home.

I didn't realize Mum had other plans for my future, which didn't include joining Uncle Stan in the shipyard.

Once Mum had dropped me off each morning, I would hang around in the yard until she was out of sight, then slope off to the docks. I made sure I was always back at the school gates when she returned to pick me up in the afternoon. On the way home, I would tell her everything I'd done at school that day. I was good at making up stories, but it wasn't long before she discovered that was all they were: stories.

One or two other boys from my school also used to hang around the docks, but I kept my distance from them. They were older and bigger, and used to thump me if I got in their way. I also had to keep an eye out for Mr Haskins, the chief ganger, because if he ever found me loitering, to use his favourite word, he would send me off with a kick up the backside and the threat: 'If I see you loiterin' round here again, my lad, I'll report you to the headmaster.'

Occasionally Haskins decided he'd seen me once too often and I'd be reported to the headmaster, who would leather me before sending me back to my classroom. My form master, Mr Holcombe, never let on if I didn't show up for his class, but then he was a bit soft. Whenever my mum found out I'd been playing truant, she couldn't hide her anger and would stop my halfpenny-a-week pocket money. But despite the occasional punch from an older boy, regular leatherings from the headmaster and the loss of my pocket money, I still couldn't resist the draw of the docks.

I made only one real friend while I 'loitered' around the dockyard. His name was Old Jack Tar. Mr Tar lived in an abandoned railway carriage at the end of the sheds. Uncle Stan told me to keep away from Old Jack because he was a stupid, dirty old tramp. He didn't look that dirty to me, certainly not as dirty as Stan, and it wasn't long before I discovered he wasn't stupid either.

After lunch with my uncle Stan, one bite of his Marmite

sandwich, his discarded apple core and a swig of beer, I would be back at school in time for a game of football; the only activity I considered it worth turning up for. After all, when I left school I was going to captain Bristol City, or build a ship that would sail around the world. If Mr Holcombe kept his mouth shut and the ganger didn't report me to the headmaster, I could go for days without being found out, and as long as I avoided the coal barges and was standing by the school gate at four o'clock every afternoon, my mother would never be any the wiser.

Every other Saturday, Uncle Stan would take me to watch Bristol City at Ashton Gate. On Sunday mornings, Mum used to cart me off to Holy Nativity Church, something I couldn't find a way of getting out of. Once the Reverend Watts had given the final blessing, I would run all the way to the recreation ground and join my mates for a game of football before returning home in time for dinner.

By the time I was seven it was clear to anyone who knew anything about the game of football that I was never going to get into the school team, let alone captain Bristol City. But that was when I discovered that God had given me one small gift, and it wasn't in my feet.

To begin with, I didn't notice that anyone who sat near me in church on a Sunday morning stopped singing whenever I opened my mouth. I wouldn't have given it a second thought if Mum hadn't suggested I join the choir. I laughed scornfully; after all, everyone knew the choir was only for girls and cissies. I would have dismissed the idea out of hand if the Reverend Watts hadn't told me that choirboys were paid a penny for funerals and tuppence for weddings; my first experience of bribery. But even after I'd reluctantly agreed to take a vocal test, the devil decided to place an obstacle in my path, in the form of Miss Eleanor E. Monday.

I would never have come across Miss Monday if she hadn't been the choir mistress at Holy Nativity. Although she was only five feet three, and looked as though a gust of wind might blow her

away, no one tried to take the mickey. I have a feeling that even the devil would have been frightened of Miss Monday, because the Reverend Watts certainly was.

I agreed to take a vocal test, but not before my mum had handed over a month's pocket money in advance. The following Sunday I stood in line with a group of other lads and waited to be called.

'You will always be on time for choir practice,' Miss Monday announced, fixing a gimlet eye on me. I stared back defiantly. 'You will never speak, unless spoken to.' I somehow managed to remain silent. 'And during the service, you will concentrate at all times.' I reluctantly nodded. And then, God bless her, she gave me a way out. 'But most importantly,' she declared, placing her hands on her hips, 'within twelve weeks, you will be expected to pass a reading and writing test, so that I can be sure you are able to tackle a new anthem or an unfamiliar psalm.'

I was pleased to have fallen at the first hurdle. But as I was to discover, Miss Eleanor E. Monday didn't give up easily.

'What piece have you chosen to sing, child?' she asked me when I reached the front of the line.

'I haven't chosen anything,' I told her.

She opened a hymn book, handed it to me and sat down at the piano. I smiled at the thought that I might still be able to make the second half of our Sunday morning football game. She began to play a familiar tune, and when I saw my mother glaring at me from the front row of pews, I decided I'd better go through with it, just to keep her happy.

'*All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small. All things wise and wonderful . . .*' A smile had appeared on Miss Monday's face long before I reached '*the Lord God made them all*'.

'What's your name, child?' she asked.

'Harry Clifton, miss.'

'Harry Clifton, you will report for choir practice on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at six o'clock sharp.' Turning to the boy standing behind me, she said, 'Next!'

I promised my mum I'd be on time for the first choir practice, even though I knew it would be my last, as Miss Monday would soon realize I couldn't read or write. And it would have been my

last, if it hadn't been obvious to anyone listening that my singing voice was in a different class to that of any other boy in the choir. In fact, the moment I opened my mouth, everyone fell silent, and the looks of admiration, even awe, that I had desperately sought on the football field, were happening in church. Miss Monday pretended not to notice.

After she dismissed us, I didn't go home, but ran all the way to the docks so I could ask Mr Tar what I should do about the fact that I couldn't read or write. I listened carefully to the old man's advice, and the next day I went back to school and took my place in Mr Holcombe's class. The schoolmaster couldn't hide his surprise when he saw me sitting in the front row, and was even more surprised when I paid close attention to the morning lesson for the first time.

Mr Holcombe began by teaching me the alphabet, and within days I could write out all twenty-six letters, if not always in the correct order. My mum would have helped me when I got home in the afternoon but, like the rest of my family, she also couldn't read or write.

Uncle Stan could just about scrawl his signature, and although he could tell the difference between a packet of Wills's Star and Wild Woodbines, I was fairly sure he couldn't actually read the labels. Despite his unhelpful mutterings, I set about writing the alphabet on any piece of scrap paper I could find. Uncle Stan didn't seem to notice that the torn-up newspaper in the privy was always covered in letters.

Once I'd mastered the alphabet, Mr Holcombe introduced me to a few simple words: 'dog', 'cat', 'mum' and 'dad'. That was when I first asked him about my dad, hoping that he might be able to tell me something about him. After all, he seemed to know everything. But he seemed puzzled that I knew so little about my own dad. A week later he wrote my first four-letter word on the blackboard, 'book', and then five, 'house', and six, 'school'. By the end of the month, I could write my first sentence, 'The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog', which, Mr Holcombe pointed out, contained every letter in the alphabet. I checked, and he turned out to be right.

By the end of term I could spell ‘anthem’, ‘psalm’ and even ‘hymn’, although Mr Holcombe kept reminding me I still dropped my aitches whenever I spoke. But then we broke up for the holidays and I began to worry I would never pass Miss Monday’s demanding test without Mr Holcombe’s help. And that might have been the case, if Old Jack hadn’t taken his place.

⊰⊙⊱

I was half an hour early for choir practice on the Friday evening when I knew I would have to pass my second test if I hoped to continue as a member of the choir. I sat silently in the stalls, hoping Miss Monday would pick on someone else before she called on me.

I had already passed the first test with what Miss Monday had described as flying colours. We had all been asked to recite *The Lord’s Prayer*. This was not a problem for me, because for as long as I could remember my mum knelt by my bed each night and repeated the familiar words before tucking me up. However, Miss Monday’s next test was to prove far more demanding.

By this time, the end of our second month, we were expected to read a psalm out loud, in front of the rest of the choir. I chose Psalm 121, which I also knew off by heart, having sung it so often in the past. *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.* I could only hope that my help cometh from the Lord. Although I was able to turn to the correct page in the psalm book, as I could now count from one to a hundred, I feared Miss Monday would realize that I was unable to follow every verse line by line. If she did, she didn’t let on, because I remained in the choir stalls for another month while two other miscreants – her word, not that I knew what it meant until I asked Mr Holcombe the next day – were dispatched back to the congregation.

When the time came for me to take the third and final test, I was ready for it. Miss Monday asked those of us who remained to write out the Ten Commandments in the correct order without referring to the Book of Exodus.

The choir mistress turned a blind eye to the fact that I placed theft ahead of murder, couldn’t spell ‘adultery’, and certainly

didn't know what it meant. Only after two other miscreants were summarily dismissed for lesser offences did I realize just how exceptional my voice must be.

On the first Sunday of Advent, Miss Monday announced that she had selected three new trebles – or 'little angels', as the Reverend Watts was wont to describe us – to join her choir, the remainder having been rejected for committing such unforgivable sins as chattering during the sermon, sucking a gobstopper and, in the case of two boys, being caught playing conkers during the *Nunc Dimittis*.

The following Sunday, I dressed up in a long blue cassock with a ruffled white collar. I alone was allowed to wear a bronze medallion of the Virgin Mother around my neck, to show that I had been selected as the treble soloist. I would have proudly worn the medallion all the way back home, even to school the next morning, to show off to the rest of the lads, if only Miss Monday hadn't retrieved it at the end of each service.

On Sundays I was transported into another world, but I feared this state of delirium could not last for ever.