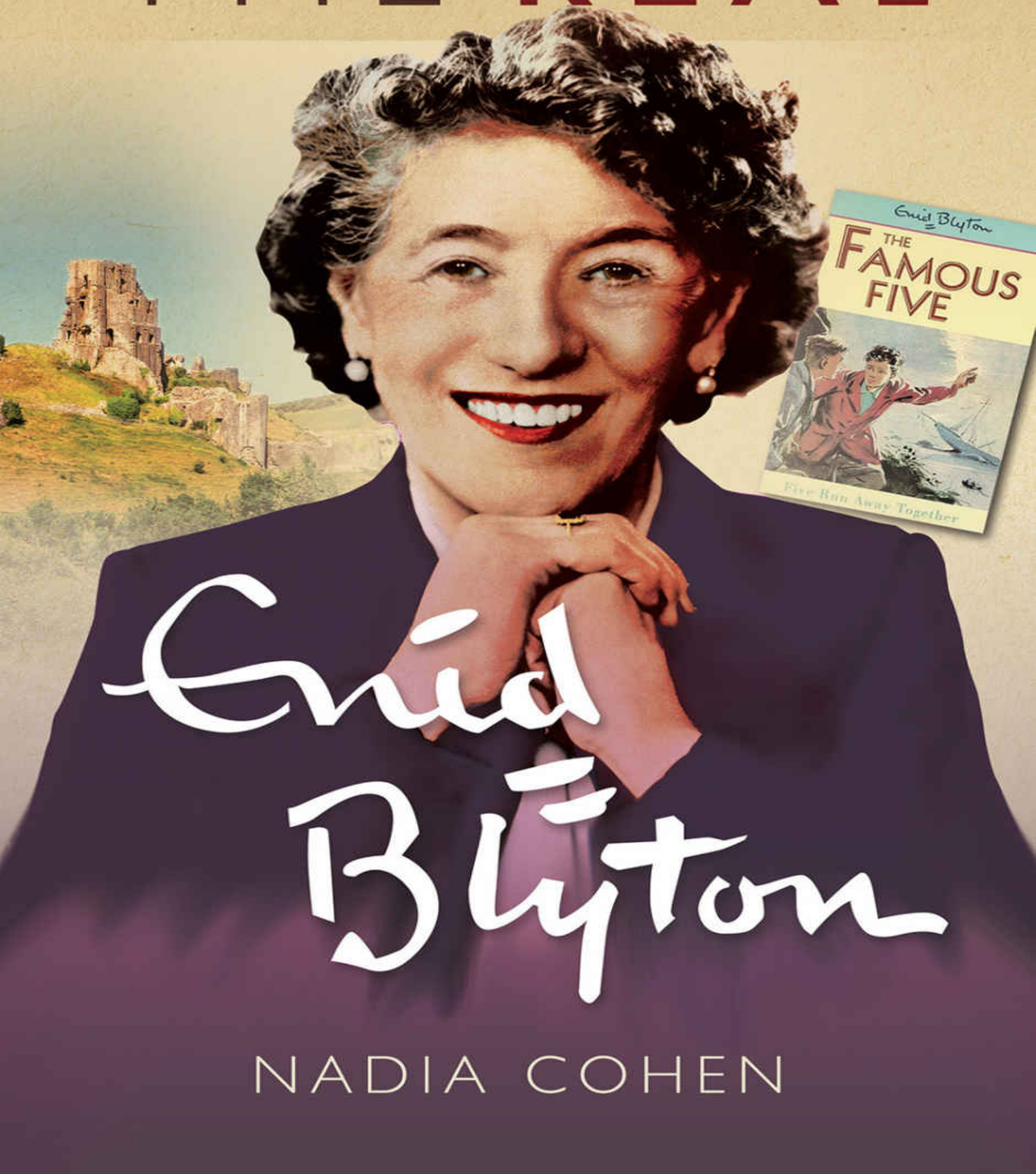


THE REAL



Enid
Blyton

NADIA COHEN

The Real Enid Blyton

Nadia Cohen



Introduction

She is the most prolific children's author in history, yet Enid Blyton is also the most controversial. She was a complex, troubled and truly remarkable woman who wrote almost eight-hundred books in an extraordinary career spanning forty years, but even her notoriously razor sharp mind could never have predicted the enormous global audience she would eventually reach. Now, fifty years after her death, Enid remains a true literary phenomenon. With book sales soaring way over 600 million, she easily outranks all her rivals, and having survived backlash, scandals and slurs that threatened to ruin her reputation she is still among the most popular authors in the world today.

For years parents, teachers, librarians and critics have lobbied against Enid's books, complaining that they are too simplistic, repetitive and littered with racist, sexist and snobbish undertones. Indeed, some of her stories do feature racially offensive terms which are considered unacceptable by today's standards, while foreign characters and the working classes were treated with a disdain that often horrifies modern readers. It has also been repeatedly suggested that she simply put her famous signature to stories churned out by a factory of writers.

The criticism baffled and stung Enid, although she famously said she was not interested in the opinion of anyone over the age of 12, and she refused to stop. Enid felt she owed it to her loyal army of young readers to keep going until she could not physically produce another word. Enid worked tirelessly until her memory failed her, typically producing an astonishing 6,000–8,000 words a day, hunched over her manual typewriter, as well as answering every piece of fan mail by hand.

She was a product of a far simpler and more innocent time than the one children see around them today. Enid created an idyllic place where her characters were given freedom to roam unsupervised for days on end, there were no adults to spoil their fun and there was not a problem that could not be fixed with a midnight feast or a glorious picnic – and of course lashings of ginger beer. Smugglers, thieves, spies and kidnappers were thwarted by fearless gangs of children who easily outwitted them and the police, while the most popular girls in the school always scored the winning goal in nail-biting lacrosse matches.

Enid was also a shrewd businesswoman whose canny understanding of marketing and merchandising opportunities was years ahead of her time. There have been very few authors who have come close to achieving the same success, and certainly very few women. Privately, she was prone to bursts of furious temper, which made her difficult to work and live with, and left her own children feeling unloved, yet she took great pains to carefully craft and guard her public image to ensure her young readers only knew of the sunny, happy world she created for them.

Behind the scenes, she wove elaborate stories to conceal her infidelities, betrayals and unconventional friendships. Enid spun a web of lies about her childhood, and never fully recovered from the collapse of her parent's marriage, and the feeling that her father had deserted her for someone he loved more. In many ways she remained that little girl who never really grew up, always terrified of being abandoned again. No man could ever measure up to the impossible standards she set, and she often felt rather disappointed by both her two husbands and daughters.

A quite infuriating and somewhat immature woman, Enid remained plagued by these insecurities and forever haunted by dark episodes in her past. She may not have been particularly likeable, and her stories may have been flawed, but her talent was undeniable and she has left a vast literary legacy to future generations of children.

Chapter One

In the long, hot summer of 1897, Thomas Carey Blyton and his wife Theresa Mary welcomed their first child, a much longed for daughter they named Enid Mary. Their bright and inquisitive baby, with a mop of dark curls, heralded the start of their glorious future together as a family. It was 11 August, Britain was celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and the creative young couple had just bought their first home together – a two-bedroom flat above a shop at 354 Lordship Lane in Dulwich, South London. They modestly hoped little Enid might inherit their musical talents; they would have never dared to imagine she would become a household name across the globe.

Thomas had been born in Sheffield in 1870 when the steel industry was booming in the prosperous Yorkshire town. The fourth of seven children, he was artistically gifted and longed to be a pianist, but the overstretched family could not afford for Thomas to pursue a career in music, and instead he had little choice but to take a frustratingly steady job as a cutlery salesman. In 1896, at the age of 26, Thomas married his childhood sweetheart and they moved to London to join his two older brothers in their uncle's firm, Fisher and Nephews, selling Yorkshire cloth. At first he and Theresa enjoyed a happy marriage, and as Thomas worked his way up the family business he was being paid well and they were gradually climbing the social ladder too. Just months after Enid arrived they were able to move out of the capital to the more affluent suburb of Beckenham, into a spacious detached house in Chaffinch Road. In 1899 their son Hanly was born, and they moved again to a larger house in nearby Clockhouse Road, where three years later Enid's youngest brother Carey arrived to complete their family of five.

But there was no question that Enid would always remain Thomas' favourite child. They had forged a particularly close bond after Thomas saved his daughter's life when, at just 3 months old, she suffered a potentially fatal bout of whooping cough during a cold November night. Enid was so gravely ill that when they called the doctor out, he warned the Blytons that their sick daughter might not survive the night. But Thomas would not let his baby die. He refused to accept the solemn medical opinion and sat up all night cradling and rocking his beloved daughter to keep her warm. By the early hours, he realised the danger had passed, and as dawn broke Enid was sleeping peacefully in his arms. Enid loved hearing this story and throughout her childhood she would beg her father to recount the dramatic anecdote over and over again.

As well as sharing his sensitive nature and enjoying many of the same keen interests, Enid also looked like her father – they both had dark hair and brown eyes. Thomas was a passionate man with many hobbies including astronomy, playing the piano and banjo, watercolour painting, singing and writing poetry. He also taught himself French and German but his main interest was nature, wildlife and the outdoors, and he took every opportunity to take Enid on long walks so they could discover the countryside together. The Blytons' house in Clockhouse Road was where Enid spent most of her childhood years, with its sprawling garden where the three children could play happily for hours, and where Enid started to develop her early love of plants and flowers.

From the moment she could walk, Enid followed her father everywhere. Beckenham, which is now a London suburb, was then surrounded by unspoilt countryside, and the happy pair would disappear on long walks together for hours at a time. As they walked, Thomas would make up poems or tales of goblins and fairies for Enid, and shared his in-depth knowledge of the joy of nature and the countryside. His great passion for the subject never left her. Describing him years later, Enid said: 'He knew more about flowers, birds and wild animals than anyone I had ever met and was always willing to share his knowledge with me.' A enthusiastic gardener too, Thomas helped Enid develop her own patch of the

garden when she was just five years old and encouraged her to be patient while she waited excitedly for the seeds to grow. He made a bargain with Enid, telling her: 'If you want anything badly, you have to work for it. I will give you enough money to buy your own seeds, if you earn it.' She was so determined to impress him that Enid would clean her father's bicycle until it gleamed, and carefully weeded the flowerbeds until she had earned sixpence – enough to buy herself a packet of seeds. With her father's help she planted them and monitored them each day as they grew into buds, and then flowers. It was an experience Enid would never forget.

Although she longed for a pet, Enid's house-proud mother refused to have an animal making the place untidy and Thomas would not let her keep one either, since he believed that animals should be kept in their natural surroundings. During one of her long walks, however, Enid found a lost kitten, which she brought home and called Chippy. But knowing how her parents both felt, she hid it in a garden shed and with the help of their young maid, Annie, Enid managed to keep Chippy a secret for two weeks. But one day when she rushed home from school to play with the kitten she realised that her mother had discovered her secret and it had been sent away. Enid was distraught when Annie broke the news to her, 'I was heartbroken', she said later. Instead Enid settled for playing in the garden with caterpillars which she found fascinating and later told how she liked 'feeling their funny little clingy feet' walking over her hands. But she would make up for it as an adult when she filled her homes with numerous pets of all kinds.

At home in the evenings Thomas would entertain his rapt daughter by playing his banjo, and singing songs. Music had always been his other great passion and he played well; one of his sisters had gone on to become a successful concert pianist and Thomas envied her career. As a keen amateur pianist, he hoped Enid would one day fulfil his own ambition of becoming a professional musician, and often told people how much she looked like his sister. He started giving Enid piano lessons when she was just 6-years-old, and keen to please and impress her father, she practised every day, although

she never really enjoyed it, and gave up playing altogether when she left home at the age of 19.

After she was sent upstairs to bed, Enid would lie awake or crouch on the stairs listening to her father playing classical pieces including Beethoven's sonatas and grand compositions by Chopin, Liszt and Mozart until late into the night. She particularly enjoyed it when he played music by Bach, her favourite composer. Enid later recalled many occasions as a child when she would fall asleep to the sound of her father's melodic piano playing: 'I knew them by heart and now, whenever I hear those same pieces of music played, I seem to be back in my little bed, almost asleep, hearing my father playing hour after hour downstairs, all those years ago.'

Enid began her early education at a small nursery school just across the road from the family home in Beckenham, run by two sisters both called Miss Reid, who remembered Enid as a bright pupil who enjoyed reading, English and art, although she had trouble getting to grips with the logic of maths. She also sang well and had an excellent memory. Her favourite stories were *The Princess and The Goblin* by George MacDonald, *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and *Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne. Another firm favourite was Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and these exotic settings started an early fascination for the mystery and excitement of islands and caves, which would feature so heavily in many of Enid's later stories.

Enid also loved it when Thomas read her poetry, as she liked the rhythm of the verses, although admitted she did not always understand the meaning of it: 'The lilt of the words and the beautiful stringing together of lines lifted my heart,' she said. 'My father used to quote poetry so often that it became part of my life.' She would also memorise facts from encyclopaedias and was given free rein to devour whatever she wanted from her father's extensive book collection which he had gradually accumulated by saving up for a 'sixpenny classic' every week.

Although Thomas was self-educated, he was an enthusiastic reader, and was utterly delighted that his daughter shared his love of reading. As Enid grew slightly older she preferred traditional stories

for girls, including *Little Women* by Louisa M. Alcott and *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell because they were about incidents and dramas involving real children, as opposed to mythical creatures which she was beginning to find terrifying. She said many years later: 'Those were real children. When I grow up I will write books about real children, I thought. That is the kind of book I like best. That's the kind of book I would know how to write.' She even began to pick up novels which had been written in French and German, with a dictionary beside her since she did not know either language.

The family were comfortably off, and decidedly middle class, but never took holidays abroad. Enid's grandparents still lived in Sheffield, and when she and her brothers were young the entire clan would gather together to spend Christmas at their uncle's house. At these large family gatherings, Enid always found herself drawn to the gregarious Irish grandmother she had been named after, Mary Ann Hanly. The well-educated daughter of a doctor, she fascinated and intrigued Enid as she entertained all the children with old folk songs and bewitching tales of leprechauns and banshees. As an adult, Enid was always sure her own gift for story telling had been inherited from her vivacious Irish ancestors.

Enid spent as little time as possible with her mother whom she found infuriatingly dull. Since Enid was her only daughter, Theresa expected her to help with domestic chores around the house and learn to cook and sew in order to prepare her for a successful married life. Theresa was extremely house-proud and imagined that Enid would grow up to be a traditional wife and mother just as she had been, but Enid had absolutely no interest in what she saw as a pointless existence of domestic servitude, and made her attitude crystal clear to her mother. Theresa was disappointed and as they started to pull in opposite directions their relationship became increasingly bitter. They grew more and more resentful of each other as Enid always felt that Theresa favoured the two boys, who were allowed to go out and play while it was seen as her duty to stay inside and help with the housework, although they had a maid. Instead, Enid would leap at any chance she got to disappear for hours with her father, and was thrilled to escape. Theresa was

exasperated by how little Enid did to help her around the house, and she felt Thomas spoilt their daughter. Thomas found it increasingly difficult to cope with his wife's constant criticism, especially over the way he blatantly favoured Enid, and their marriage began to crack.

In 1907 the family moved again, to another semi-detached house, still in Clockhouse Road, and Enid started attending St Christopher's School in Beckenham. She loved the new school where she had the chance to learn French, play lacrosse and tennis and go swimming but things were not so happy at home. Thomas and Theresa continued to grow apart. Theresa had few interests beyond the children and their home, and it became clear the couple had less and less in common. As the resentment began to build up, they would fight constantly, and Enid's idyllic childhood would soon be shattered when Thomas met an intelligent woman who shared his love of music and books, which Theresa had never done. As the arguments grew increasingly fierce, all three children were distraught. Enid would try to distract her brothers with stories she made up for them, but when they were asleep she would sneak down to her usual hiding place on the stairs to listen, hoping to hear her father play the piano softly as usual. Instead, he would furiously slam on the keys in the wake of yet another one of their vicious rows. Enid was horrified by what she heard but even when the fighting was at its worst, she never imagined what was to come.

When Enid realised that her father was leaving permanently to start a new life with another woman she was shattered and utterly heartbroken. She was 13 and never recovered from the shock and the feeling that it was she and not her mother who had been rejected. Thomas moved away and set up a wholesale clothing business in London, leaving it to Theresa to explain his sudden disappearance to the devastated children. The repercussions, which even included issues with the late development of her reproductive organs, would haunt Enid forever. Enid's daughter Imogen later described Thomas as 'My mother's inspiration', adding, 'He was a cultured and attractive man as well as a stubborn one; imaginative as was his daughter.'

Without her father for company, Enid was bereft. Now there was no one to encourage her love of nature, nor her writing, piano playing or painting, she felt she had lost her teacher and her best friend. Her two younger brothers were good company and she had plenty in common with the boys, but they were unable to fill the gaping void which had suddenly opened up in her life. As far as Theresa was concerned, a divorce was out of the question and she refused her husband's requests to make their split official. Theresa was too ashamed to admit the truth to anyone and urged the children to pretend that their father's absence was only temporary. She was unable to bear the stigma of being a single mother, and could not stand the thought of having to endure other people's pity. If anyone asked after Thomas, the children were instructed that they must say that their father was simply 'away', and it suited Enid perfectly to keep it a closely guarded secret as she did not want to face up to the reality of the situation either.

Following her mother's stoic example, Enid decided she too would keep her feelings well hidden in a bid to maintain appearances that the family was fine. Even Enid's best friend Mary Attenborough did not guess the truth about what had really happened. Just like her mother, Enid seemed able to easily convince other people – and possibly even herself – that if she did not openly admit to something then it never actually happened. It was a clever psychological trick that Enid would use again and again throughout her later life.

Enid was not allowed to talk about her feelings or grieve in any way for the loss she had experienced. She could not forgive her father's betrayal, and always felt he had chosen someone else over her. Not only that, but he had left her with a mother who she thought did not care for or understand her. A remarkable talent for concealing the truth from the outside world was all that the two women had in common. Enid still stubbornly refused to be moulded into a younger version of her mother, and the more she rebelled, the more frustrated Theresa became with her difficult daughter.

Enid missed her father terribly, and although Theresa maintained sporadic contact with him he was never allowed to visit his children at home. According to Enid's daughter Gillian: 'She had lost her

dearest friend; occasional meetings could never replace the happy daily companionship they had shared.' They saw each other occasionally, when he would take the children on outings to the theatre and give them expensive gifts, but their relationship was never the same again because Enid refused to go to the house he shared with his new partner. Thomas continued to send money for the children, and paid all their school fees, so from the outside it looked as if their life could continue much as it had before the split. Wanting to avoid as much scurrilous gossip as possible, the family moved house once again, along with their maid Annie. They did not go far, just to a slightly more desirable part of Beckenham, but they could make a fresh start. Enid's room on the first floor of their new three-storey house in Elm Road overlooked the large garden, but after installing a lock and knocker on the door, she hid away from the harsh realities of family life and retreated into her own private world. Theresa made sure that Enid continued to practise the piano for an hour each day and they regularly attended Elm Road Baptist Church, where she had been baptised.

Life went on but Enid would never again be as happy as she had been in the carefree days before Thomas fell in love with someone else. She could not wait to leave home, when she would tell everyone that her mother was dead.

Chapter Two

Thomas and Theresa's decision to split up when she was a child affected Enid terribly for the rest of her life. And given the devastating impact of Thomas walking out on his family, it was hardly surprising that in many of Enid's later stories the children she wrote about were torn apart from their parents. The betrayal she felt at her own father leaving at such a pivotal time in her development proved to be a trauma from which Enid would never fully recover. Instead, she started to teach herself how to become detached from the people closest to her, and was able to compartmentalise relationships in this way throughout the rest of her life. It would influence many of her future decisions and adult relationships, and clearly paved the way for the sort of writer, wife and mother Enid would eventually become. When she was finished with relationships, she simply removed people from her life without a backward glance. While there can be no doubt that Thomas was a great inspiration to his daughter in many worthwhile and educational ways, the complex emotional damage he inflicted also left deep scars that would never heal.

But despite the upheaval at home, Enid continued to thrive at St Christopher's, where she threw herself into all aspects of school life. She worked hard, had plenty of friends and played the piano exceptionally well. She enjoyed maths, despite her lack of natural ability at the subject, excelled at most sports, and particularly loved tennis and was captain of the lacrosse team. Enid was also known for being daring and brave, and the girls who boarded at the school nicknamed her 'the hairless day girl' because she was among the first to cut off her long hair and wear it shoulder length. Enid had a reputation as something of a prankster and enjoyed playing practical

jokes on the staff, which she had usually learnt from her two younger brothers. Other pupils recalled Enid being very proud of a box of tricks she bought from the local toyshop. Many of her later 'jolly hockey sticks' stories about the high jinx of life at girls' schools were based on those years. As well as being popular among the other students, the staff were impressed with Enid's exemplary behaviour, and she was made head girl for her last two years at the school. She was top of the French class and when she was 16 in 1913 her teacher Madame Louise Bertraine took her abroad for the first time, to stay with her family near Lake Annecy, and the pair remained close friends for many years. She was the inspiration for Enid's warm-hearted but hot-headed character Mam'zelle Abominable in *The Twins at St Clare's*, the first book in that popular series.

Enid was very keen on drama at school too, and although she was rarely cast in school productions, she would write sketches and songs for herself to act out to entertain the other girls. She also found the time to set up a magazine called 'Dab', an acronym based on the surnames of her best friends Mirabel Davis and Mary Attenborough and herself. Enid wrote the stories, while the other two provided the poems and illustrations. The three stayed in contact throughout their time at school and delighted in sending each other secretly coded letters and poems during the holidays. Enid had always shown an early enthusiasm for writing, and started to submit her efforts to children's magazines in the faint hope they might one day be published. The rejections never put her off, and when she was 13, Enid was delighted to receive an encouraging letter from journalist Arthur Mee, author of the *Children's Encyclopaedia*, urging her to write more. She was an enthusiastic reader of his weekly magazine, and she was amazed when he told her she had a great talent for writing, and one of her poems appeared in print on the children's page of the next issue of the magazine. Mee was the first to spot Enid's potential, it was the first time she had seen her name in print and she was hooked: 'My words seemed quite different when they were printed, not written – they seemed so much more important', Enid recalled later.

Even though Theresa thought that sending off endless copies of her verses, most of which were rejected, was a waste of time, Enid persisted. Her mother said they could not afford to spend money on stamps and packaging, but Enid unexpectedly found herself being supported by her friend Mary's aunt Mabel Attenborough who also saw talent in her early on. Mabel was an artist who knew Enid well, and she was the first adult to whom she dared to confide her secret ambition to be a writer. Mabel's advice was to persevere, so Enid continued to post her poems without her mother realising. To conceal the truth she had to wake up early each morning and sneak downstairs to intercept the mail and retrieve any unwanted manuscripts before her mother discovered they had been returned. The fact that Enid was never disheartened by the steady stream of rejection letters that landed on the doormat was an early sign of her dogged determination to succeed which would serve her so well in later life. She said: 'It is partly the struggle that helps you so much, that gives you determination, character, self-reliance – all things that help in any profession or trade, and most certainly in writing'.

Enid read constantly and kept daily diaries, which she guarded fiercely, but after Theresa discovered them and read her private thoughts, Enid destroyed them all. Theresa said that instead she should be doing her piano practice or helping with domestic duties. From then on Enid avoided writing down any record of her personal feelings, and just noted her day-to-day activities instead. She clashed frequently with her mother who chose to live a puritan and suburban life, which held no interest for Enid at all. There were also battles with her brothers, although she would still make up stories for them at bedtime, just as she had done when their parents were fighting. Enid was finding the house increasingly claustrophobic, and started to spend as much time as possible at the Attenboroughs' house where she felt much more welcome, and her already resentful relationship with Theresa deteriorated drastically. Enid was frustrated by her mother only being interested in housework, and felt that she was critical of her daughter's growing passion for writing, and did nothing to encourage her. By her late teens, Enid had managed to get a few pieces of poetry published but with little sign of her earning

any money from her modest literary success, both her parents were still absolutely determined that she should become a professional musician, and urged her to spend hours every day practising the piano. Enid reluctantly obeyed for a while and passed her Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music exam and was offered a place to study at the prestigious Guildhall School of Music in London, which was exactly what her father had always wanted for his daughter.

But Enid's heart was not in music and by 1916 she was showing real signs of rebellion. When Mabel offered her the chance to take a break from her mother and join them on holiday that summer, Enid leapt at it. She had finished her final term at school and was due to take up her place at music school in London in September, but Mabel invited Enid to stay with her great friends George and Emily Hunt at their farm in Suffolk first. Seckford Hall, the Hunts' rambling fifteenth-century farmhouse just outside Ipswich, enchanted Enid from the first moment she laid eyes on it, and would prove so inspirational that it became the setting for many of her future stories. Before they set off for Suffolk, Mabel had told Enid that Seckford Hall had a secret passageway and a haunted bedroom, and Enid was thrilled by the idea. She loved life on the farm and relished the opportunity to help care for the animals. She spent long carefree days riding the Hunts' horses and walking their dogs. There were also bike rides and trips to the beach with their daughters Marjory and Ida, as well as several young army officers who were billeted at the farm. On Sunday afternoons Enid went along to help at Woodbridge Congregational Sunday School, and enjoyed herself so much that she started to contemplate working as a teacher while she carried on writing in her spare time.

It was during that summer at Seckford Hall that Enid realised what she wanted to do with her life, and she vowed to turn her back on the future that had been mapped out for her. Working with children would supply her with a constant source of information about what they liked and did not like, as well as ideas and material for stories. She had struck up a great friendship with Ida who was already a trainee teacher at Ipswich Girls' High School and, having watched Enid with the Sunday school children, admitted she was

surprised at how quickly they responded to her style of teaching. Enid related to the class straight away, communicated easily and captivated them with her relaxed attitude to art and storytelling. However many stories she told the children, they were always eager for more. Enid was bursting with enthusiasm and could not wait to share all the knowledge of nature that her father had taught her as a young child. Ida suggested a career in teaching would still give her time to continue with her writing in the school holidays. It made perfect sense to Enid. After discussing the idea at length with Ida, Enid decided she would like to train to become a Froebel teacher, and investigated the possibility of starting a course in Ipswich that September. After making a few enquiries, she was offered a place as an apprentice teacher at the school's kindergarten.

She could not wait to move into Ida's lodgings and sever any last remaining family ties to her mother. But first she needed her father's permission to give up music school. Enid vowed to never abandon her dream of becoming a writer, but she realised that she needed to earn money if she was to be able to leave home. After her taste of freedom that summer in Suffolk, she never wanted to return to her mother's house again. Her father was surprised when Enid telephoned him out of the blue and begged him to sign an application form for her to attend a Froebel teaching course, but she would not take no for an answer. Eventually Thomas laughed at his daughter's typically headstrong determination, and agreed that she could try a different career path from the one he had hoped for. Enid was astounded that he agreed so readily, but Thomas was eerily reminded of what turned out to be an uncannily accurate prediction made years earlier by a phrenologist who had analysed the bumps on Enid's head when she was 8. Thomas had expected to be told that his daughter was a naturally gifted musician but after the examination, the doctor sent a report, which read: 'This child will turn to teaching as she develops. It is, and will be, her great gift.'

Thomas had never forgotten it and accepted that decisions about Enid's future were not his to make. Theresa on the other hand was furious about the unexpected change of plan, and fired off a series of angry letters to her daughter in a bid to convince her to keep

pursuing a career in music as they had always intended. But Enid was obstinate and her mind was made up. Theresa was worried about what her friends would think about an unmarried girl leaving home to live alone in a strange city, so she invented another elaborate story to hide the truth again. Theresa feared that people would gossip about Enid having something to hide, such as an unplanned pregnancy, so instead she told them that while on holiday in Suffolk Enid had decided to join the Women's Land Army to help the war effort. The First World War had broken out and many young girls were helping on farms while the men were away fighting. Theresa further embellished the lie by also claiming that the Land Army had proved too tough for Enid but she was too afraid to come home and admit that her mother had been right all along.

Enid stopped responding to letters from her mother and her brothers shortly after her 19th birthday, and they had no communication at all for many years after that. Enid was glad to have Theresa out of her life at last; she threw herself into her training course in Ipswich and loved every aspect of teaching from the start. She was fascinated by the psychology of it, and was always cheerful with the children. She fitted into her new life so successfully that she described herself as 'a round peg in a round hole'. She had great respect for her lecturers on the course, Sophie Flear, Kathleen Fryer and Kathleen Gibbons, who shared her father's love of nature, and Enid excelled particularly in zoology, botany and geography. If Enid ever allowed herself a moment of homesickness or regret about cutting off her family, she never let it show. Theresa had taught her to hide her emotions well, and in any case she was too busy to dwell on the loss. Enid dismissed the idea of returning to her family at the end of term, having decided she would not be welcome there again, so during breaks from her course she went back to stay with the Hunt family at Seckford Hall or with her old chum Mary Attenborough. But her closest friends, especially Ida, suspected that Enid missed having regular contact with her family. Years later, when writing to her own daughters, Enid admitted that she had been hurt by her mother's coldness: 'You would much rather I did worry about

you than not care what happened – which is what I always felt was the case with my own mother’.

While she juggled the demands of her training course, Enid kept up her writing as much as she could during the holidays and at weekends, and was often inspired by bike rides, trips to the seaside and picnics she enjoyed with Ida, who she gave the nickname ‘Cap’n’. In March 1917 Enid’s efforts were given a huge boost when *Nash’s Magazine* agreed to print three of her poems in the following month’s edition. Enid was excited but did not let the success derail her studies, and continued to focus until she completed her course in December 1919, at the age of 22, with first-class passes. She secured her first job at Bickley Park Preparatory School, a small school close to her family home in Beckenham, teaching boys between 6 and 8-years-old. She returned to Kent in the New Year but not to live with Theresa, instead moving into a small flat in the grounds of the school, after spending another Christmas with the Attenboroughs.

She only stayed at Bickley for a year, but the headmaster Richard Brandram was sorry to see her leave so soon, and wrote a glowing reference, in which he said: ‘To be able to lead small boys and to understand their way is a gift given to few, but Miss Blyton has the secret.’

Chapter Three

In January 1921 Enid left Bickley to take up a new role as a private tutor to Mabel's cousin's son David Thompson, an 8-year-old boy who had missed a long period of schooling due to a bout of diphtheria. During her own holiday from school, Mabel herself had been helping David to catch up on the lessons he had missed, but she felt that Enid would be much better suited to the job. And so Enid moved in with the Thompson family to become governess to all four of their children. Her employers, Horace and Gertrude, were thrilled to welcome Enid to Southernhay, their home in Surbiton, Surrey, and she slotted happily into suburban life straight away.

As well as teaching David, Enid was also responsible for his younger brothers Brian and twins Peter and John. A neighbour's daughter Mollie Sayer also joined them for lessons, which Enid conducted either in the nursery or outside in the gardens where she preferred to spend as much time as possible. The children adored her instantly, and as word of the new arrival quickly spread around the area, several other parents living nearby soon wanted their children included in Enid's imaginative classes. Before long Enid seemed to be running a small school from the Thompson's house, and over the four years she spent at Southernhay she found herself teaching fourteen boys and girls aged between 4 and 10. Enid was delighted with her newfound popularity, and luckily the Thompsons were happy with the arrangement too. Managing lessons to suit the various age ranges was tough, but Enid rose to the challenge with her usual enthusiasm, and made sure every child in her care received equal attention. The children loved her lessons, which she filled with plenty of laughter and good humour, and she was sure to shower them all with plenty of praise and encouragement.

She preferred the children to call her Auntie Enid, rather than the more formal Miss Blyton. And whenever a child did particularly well they were allowed to choose which picture would be hung on the wall of the classroom that week – from a selection of brightly coloured posters Enid had spotted on display in a London Tube station. She covered all the basic academic subjects including maths, reading, handwriting, music and art, as well as making sure the older children learnt history, geography, French and nature studies. For one of her more memorable geography lessons Enid attached the address of the house to a hot air balloon and floated it off into the sky. They were all thrilled when somebody in Belgium returned the label a few weeks later. Together she and the children studied maps of Europe to try and work out the route the balloon must have taken before it landed. Enid also factored painting and crafts into the children's school day, teaching them how to weave baskets and make jewellery out of dried seeds.

She certainly kept the children on track academically, but Enid never forgot her great sense of fun, and on top of all her other responsibilities she also relished the opportunity to tackle sports, organising action-packed sessions of football in the winter and cricket matches in the summer months. She was hugely creative when it came to planning her timetable, and made sure she found the time each day to make up stories to tell the children, holding them spellbound, and her pupils always said her storytelling was the absolute high spot of each day. Enid would also write imaginative plays for her pupils to perform, as well as penning poems and songs which they would recite at concerts she staged for their parents and friends. She even whipped up the costumes and designed programmes to be sold at the door to raise funds for charity. Enid felt that regular nature walks were essential too, and would take the children on long rambles in the countryside, through the surrounding woods and meadows, to identify plants, insects and pond life. The children would collect specimens of butterflies, caterpillars and moths.

Enjoying family life for the first time in years, she affectionately started to call her employers Uncle Horace and Aunt Gertrude, and

was always more than happy to pull her weight around the house. Once when the family's maid was unexpectedly taken ill shortly before an important business dinner party, Enid cheerfully took her place and saved the day, changing into the maid's uniform so she could wait on the guests before anyone suspected there was a problem. The family all adored Enid, and she was delighted to be among such a close-knit group, but then she received the unexpected news from her Uncle Charles that her father had died suddenly of a heart attack while out fishing on the Thames. Thomas was just 50-years-old, and his death came as a complete shock to Enid. Despite his bitter betrayal a decade earlier, Enid had stayed in touch with her father sporadically since leaving home, and although she refused to visit his new house, as she dreaded any form of contact with his new partner, from time to time they would have conversations on the telephone when he was in his London office and she occasionally met him there too. Thomas and Theresa had been separated for a long time, but never officially divorced because Enid's mother could not bear the shame, so he had to be buried as her husband and his funeral was to be held in her local church in Beckenham. The thought of facing Theresa after all that had happened was too traumatic for Enid. She still blamed her mother for driving her father away, and certainly did not want to meet the other woman he had chosen either, so Enid stayed away.

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