

TOMMY &
TUPPENCE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie



**BY THE
PRICKING
OF MY THUMBS**

A Tommy & Tuppence Mystery

Agatha Christie

By the Pricking
of My Thumbs

A Tommy and Tuppence Mystery

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WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the many readers in this and other countries who write to me asking: “What has happened to Tommy and Tuppence? What are they doing now?” My best wishes to you all, and I hope you will enjoy meeting Tommy and Tuppence again, years older, but with spirit unquenched!

Agatha Christie

Epigraph

By the pricking of my thumbs
Something wicked this way comes.
—Macbeth

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BOOK 1

SUNNY RIDGE

One

AUNT ADA

Mr. and Mrs. Beresford were sitting at the breakfast table. They were an ordinary couple. Hundreds of elderly couples just like them were having breakfast all over England at that particular moment. It was an ordinary sort of day too, the kind of day that you get five days out of seven. It looked as though it might rain but wasn't quite sure of it.

Mr. Beresford had once had red hair. There were traces of the red still, but most of it had gone that sandy-cum-grey colour that red-headed people so often arrive at in middle life. Mrs. Beresford had once had black hair, a vigorous curling mop of it. Now the black was adulterated with streaks of grey laid on, apparently at random. It made a rather pleasant effect. Mrs. Beresford had once thought of dyeing her hair, but in the end she had decided that she liked herself better as nature had made her. She had decided instead to try a new shade of lipstick so as to cheer herself up.

An elderly couple having breakfast together. A pleasant couple, but nothing remarkable about them. So an onlooker would have said. If the onlooker had been young he or she would have added, "Oh yes, quite pleasant, but deadly dull, of course, like all old people."

However, Mr. and Mrs. Beresford had not yet arrived at the time of life when they thought of themselves as old. And they had no idea that they and many others were automatically pronounced deadly dull solely on that account. Only by the young of course, but then, they would have thought indulgently, young people knew nothing about life. Poor dears, they were always worrying about examinations, or their sex life, or buying some extraordinary clothes, or doing extraordinary things to their

hair to make them more noticeable. Mr. and Mrs. Beresford from their own point of view were just past the prime of life. They liked themselves and liked each other and day succeeded day in a quiet but enjoyable fashion.

There were, of course, moments, everyone has moments. Mr. Beresford opened a letter, glanced through it and laid it down, adding it to the small pile by his left hand. He picked up the next letter but forbore to open it. Instead he stayed with it in his hand. He was not looking at the letter, he was looking at the toast rack. His wife observed him for a few moments before saying,

“What’s the matter, Tommy?”

“Matter?” said Tommy vaguely. “Matter?”

“That’s what I said,” said Mrs. Beresford.

“Nothing is the matter,” said Mr. Beresford. “What should it be?”

“You’ve thought of something,” said Tuppence accusingly.

“I don’t think I was thinking of anything at all.”

“Oh yes, you were. Has anything happened?”

“No, of course not. What should happen?” He added, “I got the plumber’s bill.”

“Oh,” said Tuppence with the air of one enlightened. “More than you expected, I suppose.”

“Naturally,” said Tommy, “it always is.”

“I can’t think why we didn’t train as plumbers,” said Tuppence. “If you’d only trained as a plumber, I could have been a plumber’s mate and we’d be raking in money day by day.”

“Very shortsighted of us not to see these opportunities.”

“Was that the plumber’s bill you were looking at just now?”

“Oh no, that was just an Appeal.”

“Delinquent boys—Racial integration?”

“No. Just another Home they’re opening for old people.”

“Well, that’s more sensible anyway,” said Tuppence, “but I don’t see why you have to have that worried look about it.”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking of that.”

“Well, what *were* you thinking of?”

“I suppose it put it into my mind,” said Mr. Beresford.

“What?” said Tuppence. “You know you’ll tell me in the end.”

“It really wasn’t anything important. I just thought that perhaps—well, it was Aunt Ada.”

“Oh, I see,” said Tuppence, with instant comprehension. “Yes,” she added, softly, meditatively. “Aunt Ada.”

Their eyes met. It is regrettably true that in these days there is in nearly every family, the problem of what might be called an “Aunt Ada.” The names are different—Aunt Amelia, Aunt Susan, Aunt Cathy, Aunt Joan. They are varied by grandmothers, aged cousins and even great-aunts. But they exist and present a problem in life which has to be dealt with. Arrangements have to be made. Suitable establishments for looking after the elderly have to be inspected and full questions asked about them. Recommendations are sought from doctors, from friends, who have Aunt Adas of their own who had been “perfectly happy until she had died” at “The Laurels, Bexhill,” or “Happy Meadows at Scarborough.”

The days are past when Aunt Elisabeth, Aunt Ada and the rest of them lived on happily in the homes where they had lived for many years previously, looked after by devoted if sometimes somewhat tyrannical old servants. Both sides were thoroughly satisfied with the arrangement. Or there were the innumerable poor relations, indigent nieces, semi-idiotic spinster cousins, all yearning for a good home with three good meals a day and a nice bedroom. Supply and demand complemented each other and all was well. Nowadays, things are different.

For the Aunt Adas of today arrangements have to be made suitable, not merely to an elderly lady who, owing to arthritis or other rheumatic difficulties, is liable to fall downstairs if she is left alone in a house, or who suffers from chronic bronchitis, or who quarrels with her neighbours and insults the tradespeople.

Unfortunately, the Aunt Adas are far more trouble than the opposite end of the age scale. Children can be provided with foster homes, foisted off on relations, or sent to suitable schools where they stay for the holidays, or arrangements can be made for pony treks or camps and on the whole very little objection is made by the children to the arrangements so made for them. The Aunt Adas are very different.