Agatha Christie

NOW THE MAJOR TV SERIES

PARTNERS IN CRIME


Agatha Christie
N OR M?
NOW THE MAJOR TV SERIES
PARTNERS IN CRIME

Agatha Christie

N or M?

A Tommy and Tuppence Mystery

WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Contents

One

Tommy Beresford removed his overcoat in the hall of the flat. He hung it up with some care, taking time over it. His hat went carefully on the next peg.

He squared his shoulders, affixed a resolute smile to his face and walked into the sitting room, where his wife sat knitting a Balaclava helmet in khaki wool.

It was the spring of 1940.

Mrs. Beresford gave him a quick glance and then busied herself by knitting at a furious rate. She said after a minute or two:

“Any news in the evening paper?”

Tommy said:

“The Blitzkrieg is coming, hurray, hurray! Things look bad in France.”

Tuppence said:

“It’s a depressing world at the moment.”

There was a pause and then Tommy said:

“Well, why don’t you ask? No need to be so damned tactful.”

“I know,” admitted Tuppence. “There is something about conscious tact that is very irritating. But then it irritates you if I do ask. And anyway I don’t *need* to ask. It’s written all over you.”

“I wasn’t conscious of looking a Dismal Desmond.”

“No, darling,” said Tuppence. “You had a kind of nailed to the mast smile which was one of the most heartrending things I have ever seen.”

Tommy said with a grin:

“No, was it really as bad as all that?”

“And more! Well, come on, out with it. Nothing doing?”

“Nothing doing. They don’t want me in any capacity. I tell you, Tuppence, it’s pretty thick when a man of forty-six is made to feel like a doddering grandfather. Army, Navy, Air Force, Foreign Office, one and all say the same thing—I’m too old. I *may* be required later.”

Tuppence said:

“Well, it’s the same for me. They don’t want people of my age for nursing—no, thank you. Nor for anything else. They’d rather have a fluffy chit who’s never seen a wound or sterilised a dressing than they would have me who worked for three years, 1915 to 1918, in various capacities, nurse in the surgical ward and operating theatre, driver of a trade delivery van and later of a General. This, that and the other—all, I assert firmly, with conspicuous success. And now I’m a poor, pushing, tiresome, middle-aged woman who won’t sit at home quietly and knit as she ought to do.”

Tommy said gloomily:

“This war is hell.”

“It’s bad enough having a war,” said Tuppence, “but not being allowed to do anything in it just puts the lid on.”

Tommy said consolingly:

“Well, at any rate Deborah has got a job.”

Deborah’s mother said:

“Oh, she’s all right. I expect she’s good at it, too. But I still think, Tommy, that I could hold my own with Deborah.”

Tommy grinned.

“She wouldn’t think so.”

Tuppence said:

“Daughters can be very trying. Especially when they *will* be so kind to you.”

Tommy murmured:

“The way young Derek makes allowances for me is sometimes rather hard to bear. That ‘poor old Dad’ look in his eye.”

“In fact,” said Tuppence, “our children, although quite adorable, are also quite maddening.”

But at the mention of the twins, Derek and Deborah, her eyes were very tender.

"I suppose," said Tommy thoughtfully, "that it's always hard for people themselves to realise that they're getting middle-aged and past doing things."

Tuppence gave a snort of rage, tossed her glossy dark head, and sent her ball of khaki wool spinning from her lap.

"Are we past doing things? *Are* we? Or is it only that everyone keeps insinuating that we are. Sometimes I feel that we never were any use."

"Quite likely," said Tommy.

"Perhaps so. But at any rate we did once feel important. And now I'm beginning to feel that all that never really happened. Did it happen, Tommy? Is it true that you were once crashed on the head and kidnapped by German agents? Is it true that we once tracked down a dangerous criminal—and got him! Is it true that we rescued a girl and got hold of important secret papers, and were practically thanked by a grateful country? Us! You and me! Despised, unwanted Mr. and Mrs. Beresford."

"Now dry up, darling. All this does no good."

"All the same," said Tuppence, blinking back a tear, "I'm disappointed in our Mr. Carter."

"He wrote us a very nice letter."

"He didn't *do* anything—he didn't even hold out any hope."

"Well, he's out of it all nowadays. Like us. He's quite old. Lives in Scotland and fishes."

Tuppence said wistfully:

"They might have let us do *something* in the Intelligence."

"Perhaps we couldn't," said Tommy. "Perhaps, nowadays, we wouldn't have the nerve."

"I wonder," said Tuppence. "One feels just the same. But perhaps, as you say, when it came to the point—"

She sighed. She said:

"I wish we could find a job of some kind. It's so rotten when one has so much time to think."

Her eyes rested just for a minute on the photograph of the very young man in the Air Force uniform, with the wide grinning smile so like

Tommy's.

Tommy said:

"It's worse for a man. Women can knit, after all—and do up parcels and help at canteens."

Tuppence said:

"I can do all that twenty years from now. I'm not old enough to be content with that. I'm neither one thing nor the other."

The front door bell rang. Tuppence got up. The flat was a small service one.

She opened the door to find a broad-shouldered man with a big fair moustache and a cheerful red face, standing on the mat.

His glance, a quick one, took her in as he asked in a pleasant voice:

"Are you Mrs. Beresford?"

"Yes."

"My name's Grant. I'm a friend of Lord Easthampton's. He suggested I should look you and your husband up."

"Oh, how nice, do come in."

She preceded him into the sitting room.

"My husband, er—Captain—"

"Mr."

"Mr. Grant. He's a friend of Mr. Car—of Lord Easthampton's."

The old *nom de guerre* of the former Chief of the Intelligence, "Mr. Carter," always came more easily to her lips than their old friend's proper title.

For a few minutes the three talked happily together. Grant was an attractive person with an easy manner.

Presently Tuppence left the room. She returned a few minutes later with the sherry and some glasses.

After a few minutes, when a pause came, Mr. Grant said to Tommy:

"I hear you're looking for a job, Beresford?"

An eager light came into Tommy's eye.

"Yes, indeed. You don't mean—"

Grant laughed, and shook his head.

"Oh, nothing of that kind. No, I'm afraid that has to be left to the young active men—or to those who've been at it for years. The only

things I can suggest are rather stodgy, I'm afraid. Office work. Filing papers. Tying them up in red tape and pigeonholing them. That sort of thing."

Tommy's face fell.

"Oh, I see!"

Grant said encouragingly:

"Oh well, it's better than nothing. Anyway, come and see me at my office one day. Ministry of Requirements. Room 22. We'll fix you up with something."

The telephone rang. Tuppence picked up the receiver.

"Hallo—yes—*what?*" A squeaky voice spoke agitatedly from the other end. Tuppence's face changed. "When?—Oh, my dear—of course—I'll come over right away. . . ."

She put back the receiver.

She said to Tommy:

"That was Maureen."

"I thought so—I recognised her voice from here."

Tuppence explained breathlessly:

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Grant. But I must go round to this friend of mine. She's fallen and twisted her ankle and there's no one with her but her little girl, so I must go round and fix up things for her and get hold of someone to come in and look after her. Do forgive me."

"Of course, Mrs. Beresford. I quite understand."

Tuppence smiled at him, picked up a coat which had been lying over the sofa, slipped her arms into it and hurried out. The flat door banged.

Tommy poured out another glass of sherry for his guest.

"Don't go yet," he said.

"Thank you." The other accepted the glass. He sipped it for a moment in silence. Then he said, "In a way, you know, your wife's being called away is a fortunate occurrence. It will save time."

Tommy stared.

"I don't understand."

Grant said deliberately:

"You see, Beresford, if you had come to see me at the Ministry, I was empowered to put a certain proposition before you."