

## The Secret Adversary

1922

[N.B. This review contains **PLOT SPOILERS** for this novel, but not for other novels]

In her first published novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Christie's main model had been Conan Doyle. But Christie had a passion for the puzzle. In that novel, to a much greater extent than in the Sherlock Holmes stories, there were clues and misdirections and the central plot was a challenge for the reader to solve.

In this second novel Christie is trying out something different. Her model is more John Buchan than Conan Doyle. *The Secret Adversary* is primarily an adventure story, but again Christie's love of the puzzle shines through. Although much of the pace is provided by the action, the narrative is given direction by the central question: who is Mr Big? – or in this case, a Mr Brown. There are clues, and insights, and deductions to be made, but as a puzzle, it has to be said, this is not a satisfying novel. Perhaps, however, it is unfair to judge it as such. At this early stage in her writing Christie is experimenting with different *genres* of crime novel.



The Lusitania

The novel starts precisely at 2pm on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1915 with the sinking of the Lusitania. "Vital papers" of international importance at this stage of the War are passed from Mr. Danvers to Jane Flinn on the grounds that women and children will be the first on the lifeboats. This is startlingly similar to the opening of John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* [1915], in which the hero is accosted by an American who also fears for his life, and who also possesses the secrets of an anarchist plot to destabilise Europe.

For an adventure story Christie needed a rather different central character from the sedentary and rather intellectual Poirot of her first novel. Christie herself was an independent young woman who liked adventure. She was one of the first English women to take up surfing; she loved fast cars, and her (first) husband was a flying ace. During the First World War she worked as a cleaner in an Officer's Hospital, and then became an assistant in a hospital pharmacy. After the First World War she married but continued to work to earn her own living.

Prudence Cowley, known as Tuppence, the heroine of this, and several later novels, has a lot of Christie in her. We learn that during the War Tuppence drove a van, a motor-lorry, and a General. She smokes, her skirts are worn provocatively above the ankles, and her less than ladylike language shocks her father - an archdeacon. In 1922 women under the age of 30 years were not allowed the vote. Women with independence of thought, or finance or who

drove cars were intoxicatingly new, exciting and dangerous: Tuppence is a portrait of a thoroughly modern 1920s young woman.

Five years after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Tuppence bumps into a young man at Dover Street tube station just off Piccadilly in London. His name is Tommy Beresford. They are both looking for a job. "Money, money, money! I think about money morning, noon and night" says Tuppence. In an echo from *Twelfth Night* Tuppence suggests that there are only three ways to get money: "to be left it, to marry it, or to make it". Since the first two ways are not open to them Tommy and Tuppence, clearly attracted to each other, decide to *make* money. They are desperate enough to form a company, the *Young Adventurers Ltd*, a name perhaps inspired by the John Buchan novel *Salute to Adventurers*. Their aim is to hire themselves out for almost any job - even to commit crimes if the money is right. There is a brief discussion about the ethics!

Tuppence is accosted by a man, Edward Whittington, who offers her a job. He is described as having "shifty eyes". In a Christie whodunnit such a description might be a misdirection, but this is a thriller and so we know that Whittington is a bad egg. When he learns that Tuppence knows the name Jane Finn, a name she has overheard, Whittington explodes with anger, and buys her off with £50 - a year's salary for a servant in 1919. The next day Tommy and Tuppence go back to Whittington's office, but find him gone. And so the two young adventurers decide themselves to look for the mysterious Jane Finn.

Their adventures lead them to be employed by British Intelligence. They learn that a 'Mr Brown' is the master mind behind a plot to procure a Bolshevik revolution in Britain. They meet Julius P. Hersheimer, an American millionaire who has come to England to find Jane Finn. They also meet the wonderfully vampish Rita Vandemeyer: her face has "ethereal beauty" with "gimlet-like" eyes, and she looks "wickedly beautiful .. stretched on the divan".

In *A Christmas Carol* Dickens describes the rag and bone emporium of the corrupt 'Old Joe' as follows: "Far in this den of infamous resort, there was a low-browed, beetling shop". Christie describes the face of one of the villains in similar language: "The low beetling brows, and the criminal jaw, the bestiality of the whole countenance". When Tommy is captured and almost killed the prose becomes more like a pastiche of a British war film. "If that isn't a Hun, I'm a Dutchman", says Tommy. A little later one of the villains, Boris, says to Tommy, "Speak, you swine of an Englishman".

Eventually, after Rita Vandemeyer is murdered, Tommy escapes, Tuppence is captured, Jane Finn is found, and Jane and Tuppence are rescued. Phew! Jane and Tuppence go straight to Sir James Peel Edgerton, a Member of Parliament involved in British Intelligence. At last all are safe. But in a *dénouement* that predates Ian Fleming by thirty years, Sir James, with a boasting self-confidence, reveals that *he* is the evil Mr Brown. He is about to kill the two women when they are rescued by Tommy and Julius in the nick of time. Sir James takes cyanide rather than face humiliation at a public trial.



The clues that Mr Brown is Sir James are first that only he or Julius Hersheimer (or Tuppence) could have killed Rita Vandermeier. Secondly, after Rita's death Sir James uses his authority to prevent the police from being called, and an inquest from being ordered.

Sir James is the first of several Christie establishment figures who turn out to be the murderer or principal villain. It is a trope that many other writers have since used.

In the decade of the 1920s Christie alternated between writing whodunnits, and writing adventure stories often spiced with a generous sprinkling of romance. Although we have to wait twenty years for the next Tommy and Tuppence novel, in most of the adventure stories the lead characters are a young feisty and intelligent woman assisted by a brave but slightly dull man. After the 1920s Christie focuses on whodunnits, but the adventure stories pop up from time to time right until the end of her life.

In her next novel, *The Murder on the Links*, we are back again in the world of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the world of the whodunnit, with Poirot and his faithful narrator, Hastings. Hastings, however, at least for a while, turns out not to be so faithful, and Poirot, slowly, is transforming from the Belgian Sherlock Holmes into, well, Hercule Poirot.

[SH]