

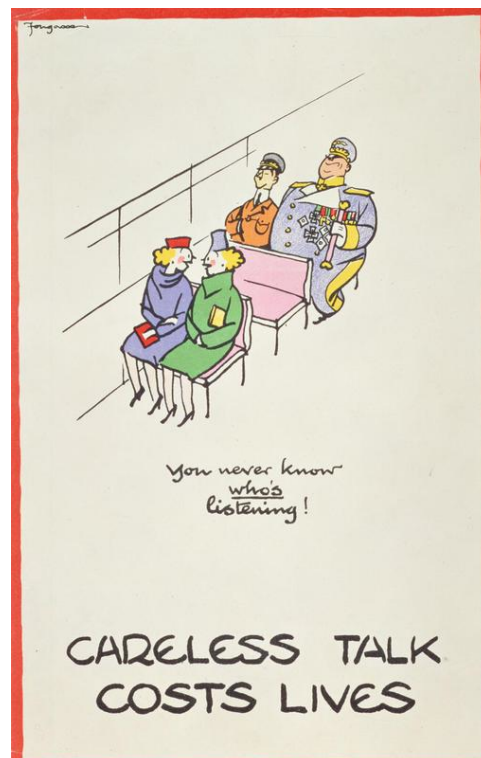
N or M
1941

[This contains plot spoilers for this novel but no other]

'I am FURIOUS,' Agatha Christie told her agent, Edmund Cork, on hearing that the American editors *rejected* this book manuscript in 1940 because 'such a strongly anti-Nazi story would upset a substantial section of their readers'. The USA did not join Britain against Germany and Japan until Japan bombed the American fleet in Pearl Harbour, on December 7, 1941.

This is not a murder-mystery, but a spy-thriller written in 1940 in the midst of the Blitz. The first appearance of Tommy and Tuppence Beresford was in *The Secret Adversary* (1922). In the 1920s they are both trying to make a new life after the traumas of World War 1. Tommy saw active service and had been wounded. Tuppence was a modern, independently minded woman, who had worked during the War. In the 1920s they were both in their 20s. They were Agatha and Archie Christie's alter egos.

The Famous War Poster
'Careless Talk Costs Lives'
The Imperial War Museum



Unlike any other of Christie's detectives, Tommy and Tuppence have aged in real time, so they are now a comfortable middle-aged couple [mid 40s], with grown up twins, Derek and Deborah. This is also true of their faithful sidekick, Albert, who was a teenager in *The Secret Adversary*, but is now a respectable family man too.

When writing a book about this new, terrible world war, only twenty-two years after The Great War, Christie recalls her amateur sleuths into active service. There is none of the joyful, youthful exuberance found in *The Secret Adversary*, which exuded fun,

with its flamboyant Russian revolutionaries, vampish women and American millionaires. *The Secret Adversary* is an immediately post-war book, rather than during the war, but it is surprisingly upbeat. In stark contrast, a grim misery pervades 1940 Britain at war with Germany in *N or M?* The plot turns around 'Fifth Columnists': the danger of the spy within. The setting is 'Sans Souci', a shabby seaside boarding house in the fictional Leahampton on the South Coast of England, smelling of 'dust and cooking' with worn carpets, and the terrifying possibility of an imminent Nazi invasion. Food and clothing rationing was the harsh reality for Christie at the time of writing, and for those reading this book when it first came out: 'the difficulty the butchers had in getting the meat'. Compare this to the elaborate celebratory private supper party at the Savoy, in *The Secret Adversary*.

Tommy is recruited by British Intelligence to go 'under cover' to find the fifth columnists believed to be operating in Leahampton. The only clue is that an agent, Farquhar, was killed the week before, managing to say '*N or M Song Susie*' before he expired with a return ticket to Leahampton in his pocket. The book sets the puzzle to winkle out the spies from a variety of 'old ladies, old Colonels, unimpeachable spinsters, and a foreigner or two.'

Tuppence, who always had the brains and panache, overhears the secret briefing Mr Grant gives Tommy and decides to get to Leahampton first, so that she and Tommy can be reunited in a 'joint venture', just as in *The Secret Adversary*.

'Is it coding – or code breaking? Is it like Deborah's job?' Tuppence asks Tommy. Under the Official Secrets Act neither Tommy nor Tuppence should *know* that their daughter, Deborah, is working in this area. Neither should Tuppence have asked Tommy about the coding, nor should she have listened to his secret briefing! Tuppence is incurably inquisitive: her greatest strength as a detective, but it always gets her into trouble. None of the Beresford family seems able to keep secrets.

The novel is clued so that the reader might suspect *all* the inhabitants of 'Sans Souci'. Mr. Cayley had worked in Germany: 'constantly to and fro Berlin, Hamburg, Munich'. Mrs. Cayley cannot possibly be as meek, stupid and obedient as she is made out to be: one thinks it must be acting. Mr Cayley is also by himself in the garden when Tommy is attacked there: highly suspicious. Oddly, there is no mention that he heard any cry or scuffle in the garden, whereas Mrs. Cayley is distracted enough by a sound to get up from the card game to go outside and check that Cayley is all right. This inconsistency never has an explanation. Indeed Mr Cayley claims to have walked all round the garden by himself, at the time of the attack.

'N' could be Mrs O'Rourke, a huge woman, 'with that deep voice and the beard', and the parody of an Irish brogue 'Tis a language of their own they have, the little angels', and 'The top of the morning to you', with her deep twinkling intelligent eyes that miss nothing. She *had* to be a man in disguise! Again Christie fooled me. Perhaps, Christie was saying that spies these days, in 1939, take more care in their appearance than they did in the 1920s?

The too obvious candidate is the handsome Carl von Deinim, who escaped Germany a month before war broke out, but his family, sadly, did not. It is interesting that he expressed a wish to be interned as he is getting so much abuse from the people of the town. He was also seen talking to a foreign blonde woman with high cheekbones. It could be a double bluff: the German who has been cleared to work in chemicals being an enemy agent after all. He and Sheila Perenna are in love. It is a triple bluff, as in the end, he is an English agent, but there are no good clues for this.



Old Map of Bournemouth: Leahampton, showing The Pier

The British shot Sheila Perenna's father, because he was an IRA activist. There is an interesting discussion about patriotism, and if it is ever worth dying for ideals. Could there be an IRA link with Germany, perhaps with a criminal mastermind, in drag as 'Mrs O'Rourke'? Carl von Deinim, Sheila and Mrs. Perenna, and Mrs. O'Rourke could be the spy cell, working together.

Miss Sophia Minton, a thin spinster, is the least filled out character in the book, literally and metaphorically. We do not know her age, or her background. All we know is she is kind: she dresses baby Betty and takes her out for a walk to buy a celluloid duck for Betty's bath. She is also an expert knitter, helping Tuppence out with her Balaklava. On the grounds that in Christie's novels, the villains are well described, I ruled Miss Minton out.

Tommy bonds with a fellow retired Army officer at Sans Souci, called Major Bletchley. I was extremely surprised to read his name, since Bletchley Park was the top-secret code-cracking unit (see Trivia) working on Enigma machines. The role of Alan Turing, and the many other brilliant mathematicians and linguists cracking the Enigma code only came into the public domain in the 1970s because of the time delay in the Official Secrets Act. Could this possibly be a clue that Major Bletchley was in M15, or that he was N? Deborah, Tommy and Tuppence's daughter, mentions she is in code cracking to her parents. Anthony Marsdon, Deborah's senior officer in Intelligence is at the 'code-cracking centre', presumably Bletchley Park. Marsdon takes such an interest in Tuppence being in Leahampton that he goes there for a visit. This is a clue, but not a specific one. Tuppence brilliantly tests out Marsdon, to see if he is a traitor, by giving him a false code, when Tommy has disappeared. Tuppence bravely walks 5 miles into the trap of her own making with her eyes open

'if anyone is going to be liquidated it is much better it should be the middle-aged who have had the best part of their lives.' Tuppence is astoundingly courageous, being the bait to catch N or M. She hopes Mr Carter and his team will rescue her in time.

Tommy suspected the 'almost absurdly typical' Major Bletchley, who does seem too stereotyped to be true: 'Women are all very well in their place, but not before breakfast.' Bletchley introduces Tommy to Commander Haydock at the Golf Club. Haydock is another typical Officer, now the air raid warden. Tommy literally blunders into the spy centre with his typical clumsiness by slipping on a cake of soap. He hits the bathroom taps and panels accidentally which reveals the secret communications room, rather like a James Bond thriller. One does wonder why Commander Haydock doesn't insist Tommy uses the guest bathroom?

Commander Haydock's 'hearty Englishman' mask slips to reveal 'a bad-tempered, overbearing Prussian officer'. It was suspicious that an enemy agent, Hahn, fitted up Smugglers Rest with the latest wireless communication, and was then unmasked by Commander Haydock who buys the place. One never gets the full back-story on Commander Haydock. How could Haydock and Appledore pass themselves off so successfully as British, when they are Prussian? One feels that immersed as they are in the Golf Club society, surrounded by real ex-Naval Officers, they would have been caught out immediately. I was surprised at being told they *were* Prussians: I had assumed they were true British Naval Officers who were fifth columnists.

The most interesting clue is around Betty Sprot. This is not discussed in the book by any of the characters, nor in any other analysis that I have read, but it is there. There is no other Christie where a two-year-old takes such an important part, and indeed helps the reader solve the riddle. This book could have the subtitled 'Betty saves Britain'. Mrs Sprot says 'She's just over two...I'm afraid most of what she says is just Bosh.' This is rather a witty, truthful clue. Christie makes it sound like baby babble 'Ga ga Bouch'. But then Betty says 'Putsch' with emphasis: how could she have picked up this German word for a plot attempt to overthrow a government? Betty 'talks busily in her own language'. She also calls Mrs O'Rourke a 'Nazer' [Nazi]; which Mrs Sprot brushes away, in embarrassment. How can Betty know these German words? Christie uses humour to misdirect the reader into thinking this is all meaningless babble. Betty says, "Damn" for "Jam" at tea. However, Betty can string a simple sentence together 'Hide! Bow wow. Hide', when she wants to play hide and seek with her toy dog. Or the sophisticated request: 'Byaduck. For Bettibar' {buy a duck for Betty's bath}. Why does Betty 'have her own language' and yet manage to speak perfectly understandable English? She was actually bilingual, brought up Polish, but now suddenly plunged into British society, rapidly picking up English too. Christie tries to misdirect the reader with the spelling of these words, but they are good sentences a bright child of two years would say. We will skip over the issue that Betty ought to be speaking Polish and not German, and assume that is what she is prattling away to herself, when described as 'busily in her own language'.



Mrs Sprot plays the part of a young mother, but as Mr Cayley complains 'That woman is always plumping that child down and expecting people to look after it.' Indeed, Miss Minton and Tuppence both look after Betty for separate parts of the story. Mrs. Sprot doesn't notice when Betty goes missing, and is only reminded with a jerk about being a mother when Tuppence is chatting to her: 'Goodness, it's nearly seven. I ought to have put that child to bed hours ago.' Mrs. Sprot does not seem the

loving and devoted mother she pretended to be, when Betty is abducted. This is suspicious.

When Tuppence meets Vanda Polonska (a Polish refugee), who is described as beautiful and between 40 and 50 years old, she has a feeling the 'face was somehow familiar', a clue that this woman is Betty's real mother. Given Betty is only two years old it means Vanda must have had Betty in her 40s [see a similar theme in *Sad Cypress*]. These three separate clues line up to make the reader guess that Mrs. Sprot is not Betty's real mother.

When the desperate Vanda Polonska snatches her daughter back, and runs off with Betty, the residents of Sans Souci want to call the police. Mrs. Sprot dashes upstairs to 'find' a note preventing them from going to the police about this 'kidnapping'. Presumably Mrs. Sprot writes it. Mrs. Sprot also steals the gun from Major Bletchley's room. Why would weak, shy Mrs. Sprot put a gun in her handbag, when Major Bletchley did not think to bring it? She has to shoot Vanda before the truth comes out that Betty is Vanda's child, so blowing Sprot's cover. When Vanda and Betty are on the cliff hugging each other so tightly 'the two figures were moulded into one', even Haydock 'daren't shoot. I'd hit the child.' Yet, Mrs. Sprot kills Vanda. There is a clue here about Haydock and Sprot working together as Haydock says 'Bloody miracle. I couldn't have brought off a shot like that. Don't believe the woman's ever handled a pistol before.' This misdirects the onlookers, and the reader. Everyone else on the cliff top is too shocked to say anything. Later, Tuppence feels this is like the Judgement of Solomon: the false mother, Sprot, prepared to risk killing Betty to silence Betty's true mother, Vanda. 'Mrs. Sprot' is not Betty's mother, and she can handle a gun. She must be 'N'.

All the top secret information on navy, air force, army and 'prominent personages pledged to assist a German invasion', written in invisible ink, are in a battered copy of Nursery Rhymes: which is why 'Mrs Sprot' has to buy Betty a new copy, so as not to destroy or lose the vital information with bread-and milk spatters. Betty gives the

clue about invisible ink from the shoelaces by carefully immersing Tuppence's laces in water, although this can only be understood in retrospect.

It is actually Betty who saves Britain by hiding the old book with all the secret information under the Cayleys' mattress. Fortunately Tuppence had noticed Betty running out of their room that morning so is able to retrieve it. Mrs. Sprout ransacked Tuppence's room, believing it to be secreted there. It is rather touching, at the end of this book, that Tommy and Tuppence agree to adopt Betty, who is now an orphan.

An amusing part of the book is Albert rescuing Tommy. Tommy's outlook is desperate: bound and gagged in the cellar of Smuggler's Rest. He is about to be taken out to sea and drowned. Tommy hears Albert humming *If you were the only girl in the world* outside in the garden, 'like a 20th C Blondel in search of his master', and Tommy managed to snort out an S.O.S. to him. Albert brilliantly understands, and 'tapped a soft message on the iron grille', so Tommy knows he will be rescued in the nick of time.

N or M is an immensely interesting read, seen in the context of Britain in 1939/40, as Christie's heroic War effort book. She reached out to the British reading public, sharing their grief and hardship, empathising with mothers whose children were in the front line. Tommy and Tuppence's twins were both away doing war work. Christie herself defied the Blitz to stay in London alone. Christie could have been killed; her house in Sheffield Terrace was the only house left standing after a direct bomb blast. Max Mallowan, Christie's second husband, was in the Middle East working for the Army Intelligence. Mallowan had extensive knowledge of the terrain from over ten years of archaeological digs in Mesopotamia, and could speak Arabic. Christie's son-in-law, Hubert, was in the Air Force. Hubert was shot down in 1944 leaving Christie's daughter a young war widow with a small baby.

There is no other Christie with so many topical details and references: 'Peace in our time', the soldiers back from France after the evacuation at Dunkerque, what Stalin will do, rationing, and the Blitzkrieg. Nazi concentration camps are also mentioned. Edith Cavell is quoted 'Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred in my heart'.

N or M was Christie's only pointed current political thriller written during the Second World War. Please see trivia for her brush with M15. Christie did try an anti-Nazi theme once more in her career: in *Passenger to Frankfurt*, but that was not written until 1970, after three decades of peace.

After *N or M*, Christie returned to her traditional whodunnits with no hint of current political events, rather like Jane Austen never mentioning the French Revolution. Perhaps Christie realised that her best war effort for Britain would be to distract millions of readers into the happy world of 'Cosy Crime', and away from the real world, with its utter despair and misery that she and her family knew all too well.

[SH]