By the Pricking of My Thumbs 1968

(hardly any plot to spoil)

The fictional characters Thomas Beresford and Prudence Cowley, known as Tommy and Tuppence, crash into thriller literature in *The Secret Adversary* (1922). The Beresfords can be seen as the alter egos of Agatha and Archie Christie, just as much later in her career Christie develops Ariadne Oliver as a fictional detective novelist. In 1922 'their united ages would certainly not have totalled forty-five'. Tommy and Tuppence were childhood friends, they survived the Great War, were very much in love, and brimful of energy and enthusiasm for anything new the world could throw at them. They formed a detective agency *The Young Adventurers Ltd*, and recruit a liftboy, Albert, to work with them. Tuppence proposed to Tommy on the last page. Tommy and Tuppence then reappear in print eighteen years later, in the book Christie wrote as her contribution to the war effort in 1940, *N or M*. America was not yet drawn into the war, and Christie's US editors actually refused to publish it: because 'such a strongly anti-Nazi story would upset a substantial section of their readers'. Christie was furious.

Unlike Christie's other detectives, Poirot, Miss Marple and Ariadne Oliver, who are all stuck in ageless amber, Tommy and Tuppence do age, perhaps because Christie had invested so much of herself in Tuppence. At the beginning of *N or M* Tommy Beresford is forty-six, Agatha Christie in 1940 was fifty years old. The Beresfords, unlike any of Christie's other detectives, also have a family life – their twins, Deborah and Derek. By *N or M* Deborah and Derek are grown up, and fighting in the war. The Beresfords also adopted a toddler, Betty, in *N or M*. Christie's own daughter Rosalind, was a young widow by the end of the war, with a tiny baby.

Christie sets her novels contemporaneously, with one exception, and is one of the few novelists to do this over such a long period of time: from 1920-1976. By reading Christie's books you gain a feeling of how England changed over fifty years. Poirot in 1920 in 'The Mysterious Affair at Styles', was a Belgian refugee from World War1, and already has been a senior police officer, so must be middle aged. Yet in *Elephants Can Remember* fifty years later, he would be well over 90, but was still working. Miss Marple and Mrs. Oliver both start off old and rheumaticy, and become even older and rheumaticier.

As the dedication to *By The Pricking of my Thumbs* makes clear, and unlike any of her other books, Christie was stimulated by readership pressure to write another Tommy and Tuppence, forty-six years after the original. If strict about the chronology, Tommy Beresford should be seventy-four, and Tuppence very slightly younger. Albert is now in his 50s, still faithfully with them, although he appears to have become their 'domestic', rather than an office clerk. The Beresfords are grandparents, as Christie was herself. However, the intervening time between World War two and the swinging '60s has been kind to the Beresfords, as Christie describes them still in 'middle life', although in other parts of the book as 'elderly'.

Tommy in this novel, is still working, which would be highly unusual in one's 70s in the 1960s. He reminds aunt Ada he has been married 'more than 30 years', whereas strictly speaking it was 46 years, if time ticked accurately. The way Christie wrote about the Beresfords, is far more like a couple in their 50s, rather than their 60s or 70s. 'Mr and Mrs Beresford..were an ordinary couple. Mr Beresford had once had

red hair. Sandy-cum-grey colour that red-headed people arrive at in middle life. Mrs. Beresford had once had black hair..now..adulterated with streaks of grey laid on.'
Given that Christie herself was now in her late 70s, the authorial voice is most revealing. The Beresfords 'had not yet arrived at the time of life when they thought of themselves as old', and indeed later think they are 'just past the prime of life'.
Christie goes further:
A young onlooker 'would have added 'deadly dull, of course, like all old people.'
'Young people knew nothing about life. Poor dears, they were worrying about examinations, or their sex life, or buying some extraordinary clothes, or doing extraordinary things to their hair to make them more noticeable.' Christie is accurately describing that however much we age on the outside, our internal clocks lag many years behind.
Tommy's Aunt Ada was 83 years old, a wonderfully acerbic old woman, and lived in a Care Home. Tommy felt obliged to visit her at 'Sunny Ridge'.
'The days are past when Aunt Elizabeth, 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. 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.
For the Aunt Ada 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.'
In June 1971, Christie herself fell and fractured her hip when at her house, in Wallingford.

There is a rather interesting disagreement between Tommy and Tuppence about the elderly:
Tommy: 'Being a woman you're more ruthless.'
Tuppence 'Women haven't really got time to be anything but realistic over things....I don't see why one should be particularly sorry for people, just because they are old.'

When they do visit Aunt Ada, there are a number of interesting details. Tommy writes in advance to inform the Matron of their intended visit. The Beresfords are 'let into the Home by a 'rather harassed-looking young woman in a nylon overall', and 'shown into a sitting room to await the matron, Miss Packard, who personally escorts them to Aunt Ada's room and waits with them.' These were the days before free access into Old People's Homes, when everything was on a much more formal footing. Although during the Covid-19 crisis it has become strict once more, with Homes in lockdown.
Ada refused to have Tuppence or the Matron in her room, and will only speak to Tommy alone 'I don't want the woman. No good her pretending she's your wife. Shouldn't bring that type of woman in here.'
Aunt Ada was gleefully 'triumphant' at outliving her friends:
'Everyone seems to be dying. No stamina...Weak heart, coronary thrombosis, high blood pressure, chronic bronchitis, rheumatoid arthritis - ..Feeble folk, all of them.'
Ada reflects on the Victorian treatments of her youth:

‘With the choice of getting well or having brimstone and treacle to drink, you chose getting well every time...Can’t really trust doctors, can you?’
Because Tuppence was waiting in Sunny Ridge nursing home, she made the acquaintance of another resident, Mrs. Lancaster, who unsettled Tuppence by asking:
‘Was it your poor child? That’s where it is, you know, behind the fireplace.’
Tuppence thinks Mrs Lancaster is ‘bats’.
The Matron says: ‘We don’t take mental patients..we do take what you might call borderline cases. I mean, people who are rather senile- can’t look after themselves properly, or who have certain fancies and imaginations. Sometimes they imagine themselves to be historical personages...We’ve had two Marie Antoinettes...and one dear old soul who insisted that she was Madame Curie.’
‘Harmless delusions are things that manage to keep you very happy when you’re elderly....You’re not Marie Antoinette every day.. Usually it comes on about once a fortnight. Then I suppose presumably one gets tired of keeping the play-acting up’.
This is a very strange view of dementia, both implying that the delusions are play-acting which is a complete misunderstanding of a true delusion, and that these delusions are common in dementia. There is one good description of a resident who keeps demanding her cocoa, having forgotten that she has just had it, which chimes with my clinical experience of dementia in old peoples’ homes.
Tuppence stayed in the village of Sutton Chancellor with Mr and Mrs. Copleigh as a paying guest, a reminder that this was common decades before Air B+B became fashionable. Sutton Chancellor was a very small village, yet it boasted a shop and a post office and about a dozen small houses or cottages..there were six council houses at the end of the village street looking slightly self-conscious.’ Whist staying with the Copleighs, Tuppence discovers that three children were strangled in less than a year, ‘a long time ago’, and no one was ever convicted of the crime. It is assumed by the inhabitants that the perpetrator moved away or died.
Mr Copleigh’s opinions are forthright: ‘They ought to be shot. They ought to be strangled themselves..Any man who kills children and assaults them. What’s the good of putting them in loony bins and treating them with all the home comforts and living soft. And then sooner or later they let ‘em out again, say they’re cured and send them home..somewhere in Norfolk. He went back home and two days later he’d done in someone else. Crazy they are, these doctors, saying these men are cured when they are not.’ This is still Christie showing her skill at misdirection. She inserts into the reader’s brain the idea that a child murder *has to be male*.
Tuppence meets the efficient spinster, Miss Bligh, who is secretary to the local landowner, Sir Philip Starke. Tuppence sees Bligh has written a letter to a ‘Mrs. Yorke’, as opposed to ‘Mrs. Lancaster’, at Rosetrellis Court for Elderly Ladies, Cumberland, which is one of the few clues in this book. Sir Philip has estates in Cumberland. Tuppence has been told that Lady Starke suddenly left Sir Philip, although they were happy and in love, ‘a long time ago’, and died abroad in 1938.
There is a half-hearted additional clue that Yorke and Lancaster must be tied with the Starks 125 pages later, when Tuppence remembers the ‘red and white striped rose’ at the Canal House, owned by the Starkes, but this is a very tentative hint. It

relies on the reader knowing about the English War of the Roses, between the Royal Houses of York {an Heraldic White Rose} and Lancaster {a Red Rose} 1455-1485, which would be lost on the millions who read Christie in translation. Also there is the use of 'Rosetrellis' as the name of the Home, to put the reader on track about the War of the Roses, possibly, but it is a very tentative clue.

The most shocking aspect of this novel is the complete lack of justice for the three children and unspecified number of adults killed, and their grieving families. No Police come into this novel, and the main characters seem perfectly content to hush the whole thing up, without a moral qualm.
Tommy met Aunt Ada's GP for a confidential chat at Tommy's London club. Ada's GP has discovered that another old lady at Sunny Ridge, died 'from an overdose of morphine.' The GP asks Tommy if Aunt Ada ever disclosed to Tommy anything that might help him and the Matron find out who the multiple-murderer might be! Neither the doctor, nor Tommy discuss that the Police *must* be involved after the autopsy findings. Sunny Ridge and its doctor want to avoid scandal and keep this inquiry confidential. Christie seems to have an elderly moment, and forgotten about Coroner's Courts. Once a pathologist has issued such a death certificate, obligatory procedures must follow.
At the end of the book, Tuppence cheerfully agreed with Sir Philip Starke not to mention any of the information about Lady Starke being a mass murderer, since Lady Starke committed suicide when she failed to kill Tuppence. Or possibly, Sir Philip killed his own wife. The reader never knows. But what does murder matter to any character in this book? They seem to shrug it off and go home for supper.
Just like every dénouement of a Fleming book, the evil criminal mastermind, Mrs. Lancaster alias Lady Starke, confessed to all the murders and of having been an assassin for a huge criminal gang, just before attempting to kill Tuppence. It is faintly ludicrous to have two women in their late 60s fighting each other, with a stiletto blade. Sir Philip broke a window to rescue Tuppence in the nick of time.
One might view this novel, as a thought experiment about the problems of knowingly protecting a criminally insane loved one from justice, and failing to keep them 'safe' within society. This can be seen as an extreme extension of stories Christie had already written in *Towards Zero* and *Hickory Dickory Dock*. The story is so improbable that the plot is impossible to swallow. How could Sir Philip Starke and Miss Bligh, who kept moving Lady Starke around the country to avoid prosecution when she murdered people, packing and unpacking her things, allow Lady Starke to be in possession of large amounts of morphine and a stiletto, when they are well aware she was Killer Kate? The criminal gang secondary theme is never finished or explained.

Tuppence's conclusion about Lady Starke was:
'She doesn't look mad because in her own mind she's sane.'

Sad to say, Christie failed to work any aspects to weave a plausible plot, or to convince on the psychology, either of dementia or criminal insanity.

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