

Postern of Fate

1973

(Plot spoilers ahead)

In *The Secret Adversary* (1922) a carrot-haired Thomas Beresford and a Miss Prudence Cowley, known as Tuppence, set up the 'Young Adventurers Ltd', to do anything for money. They have a thrilling time. Tommy and Tuppence are the fictional alter egos of the young Agatha and Archie Christie of the early 1920s. They have survived the Great War; they are still young, in love, brimful of energy and zest for life.

Half a century later, in *Postern of Fate*, Tommy and Tuppence are in their seventies and deciding to retire to the country, with their faithful servant, Albert. Unlike Marple and Poirot, who start off old and hardly change over the next fifty years, Tommy and Tuppence have aged almost exactly with external time.

Tuppence says 'we are, getting older...definitely rheumatic, especially when stretching'. Later on an elderly friend accosts Tommy in London: 'How's your health?' Tommy replies 'Decomposing by degrees.' They discuss aging: 'When you talk about old friends, either they are dead, which surprises you enormously because you didn't think they would be, or else they're not dead and that surprises you even more. It's a very difficult world.'

Clearly Christie saw this as her last Tommy and Tuppence, as the Beresfords reminisce on their past successful sleuthing. Tuppence is praised by other characters for her detective skills. The local children who hero-worship Mrs Beresford for her bravery somehow know their secret Wartime mission in 'N or M'.

In previous Christie books it is usually true that when the reader hits a seemingly irrelevant chapter or a long, tedious descriptive passage, it is the brilliance of authorial misdirection that fools you into missing several vital clues, buried in the text, like plums in a Christmas pudding. However, the first 200 pages of this book are full of opinions but only one obvious clue 'Mary Jordan did not die naturally. It was one of us. I think I know *which one*', that Tuppence finds in an old children's book.

Tuppence's cleaner buys a coat for £3.70, and when she gets it home she finds a label saying £6. There are three pages of text about this coat and its price, with no plot clues at all, just a long rant about decimalisation, introduced into Britain in February 1971, since Christie's previous novel. Similarly Tuppence enjoys herself re-reading many childhood books left in this old house, which the Beresfords are refurbishing. Over twenty children's books are described lovingly, but only *one* of the books contained the message about Mary Jordan's murder that happened in about 1914.

The octogenarian Christie is like a favourite elderly aunt who repeats the same story, forgetting she has already mentioned it. Tuppence waxes lyrical about *The Prisoner of Zenda*: 'One's first introduction to the romantic novel. The romance of Princess Flavia. The King of Ruritania. Rudolph Rassendyll, some name like that, whom one dreamt of at night.' Later Tuppence has tea with the elderly Mrs Griffin, who also mentions this same book: 'The Prisoner of Zenda. Really very enjoyable. Romantic,

you know. The first romantic book, I imagine, one is allowed to read. Novel reading was not encouraged.. My mother and my grandmother never approved of reading anything like a novel in the mornings...you could read history of something serious, but novels were only *pleasurable* and so to be read in the afternoon.’ Compare these passages with Lady Matilda in Christie’s previous novel *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970): ‘Did you ever read *The Prisoner of Zenda*?..Just a romantic novel. We weren’t allowed to read novels when I was young. Not in the mornings anyway. You could read them in the afternoon....*The Prisoner of Zenda* was very romantic. One fell in love, usually, with the hero, Rudolf Rassendyll.’

Tuppence says ‘All those poor children who went off to the Children’s Crusade so full of joy and pleasure and vanity, poor little souls. Thinking they’d been appointed by the Lord to deliver Jerusalem’. In *Passenger to Frankfurt* ‘this whole business is rather like the Children’s Crusade. Starting with idealism, starting with the ideas of the Christian world delivering the holy city from pagans, and ending with death, death and again death.’

The continuity of the text gets lost in places. Miss Mullins, a prospective new gardener, described as ‘a tall masculine-looking woman in tweed trousers and Fair Isle pullover’ greets Tuppence with ‘Chilly wind this morning’. Four pages later Tuppence invites Miss Mullins back to the house to ‘have something to drink? It’s rather a hot morning.’ One feels Mullins must be exceedingly sweaty in her Fair Isle pullover and tweeds.

The Beresfords have two grown up twins, Deborah and Derek. In the 1941 book ‘*N or M*’ both twins are working for the war effort, so must have been over eighteen at the time. This would also fit with the Beresfords getting married at the end of *The Secret Adversary* (1922), and Tuppence getting pregnant straight away. In *Postern of Fate*, Deborah and her three children visit the new house. ‘Deborah still a very handsome woman, nearly forty, and Andrew, fifteen, Janet, eleven and Rosalie, seven.’ If Deborah was over eighteen in 1941, she would be over forty-eight in 1973, rather than thirty-eight. However, this is much more accurate than Poirot or Marple, who must both be well over one hundred by the end of their careers. Indeed it is interesting that the Beresfords and their family *do age*, as does Albert. Jane Marple and Hercule Poirot must live through time, since their novels are always set contemporaneously, whilst remaining essentially unchanged.

After two hundred pages, poor old Isaac, the gardener, is murdered by the ‘KK’: a lean-to conservatory, which inexplicably has lots of junk from pre World War I days. Just how this ‘KK’ is still full of toys like rocking horses from sixty years ago, when the house has gone through several different owners over half a century, is never explained. Nor why Isaac is murdered at all. Isaac was never remotely a threat. Perhaps Christie remembered someone ought to die to keep the suspense going, or even started. There is an inquest but no police seem to be involved. It is only when Tuppence is shot, but of course not seriously wounded, that Tommy goes to speak to Inspector Norris. A Special Branch man is then put to watch over the Beresfords, posing as a gardener, just as ‘Adam’ does in *Cat among The Pigeons* [1959].

It is Hannibal, the Beresford's Manchester terrier, who saves the day and Tuppence's life. He recognises the same person he chased out of the garden, after Tuppence was shot, when the perpetrator makes a second attempt to kill the convalescent Tuppence. Hannibal sprang from the shut bathroom 'like a Bengal tiger'.

There is no real plot. All the people involved in Mary Jordan's murder died long ago, and were fascist sympathisers. The present murderer is a direct descendant of Mary Jordan's murderer, and neo-fascist too. There is no explanation for why the aged, harmless gardener, Isaac, was murdered, nor the attempts on Tuppence's life. Unlike *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970) there seems to be no significant evil organisation for taking over the world.

It is a sad end to the best literary career of all time. Some people have speculated that this book shows early signs of Christie developing dementia.

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