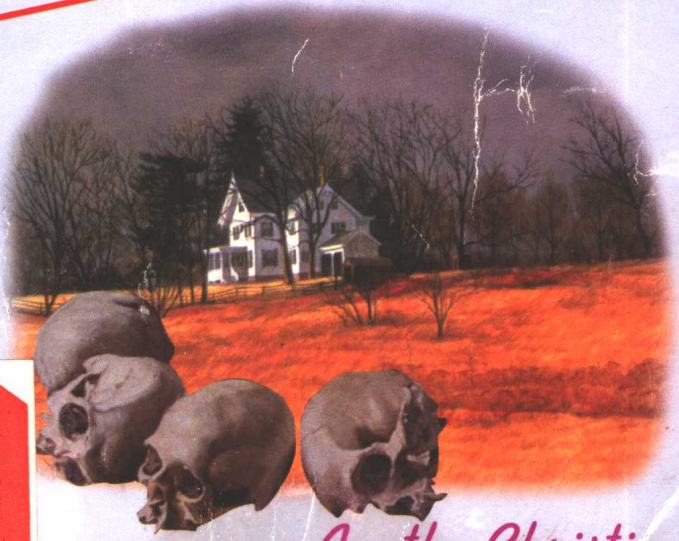
WORLD DETECTIVE STORIES

BY THE PRICKING OF MY THUMBS



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AGATHA CHRISTIE

BY THE PRICKING OF MY THUMBS

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.

MACBETH

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BOOK 1

Sunny Ridge

CHAPTER 1

Aunt Ada

Mr and Mrs Beresford were sitting at the breakfast table. They were an ordinary couple. Hundreds of elderly couples just like them were having breakfast all over England at that particular moment. It was an ordinary sort of day too, the kind of day that you get five days out of seven. It looked as though it might rain but wasn't quite sure of it.

Mr Beresford had once had red hair. There were traces of the red still, but most of it had gone that sandy-cum-grey colour that red-headed people so often arrive at in middle life. Mrs Beresford had once had black hair, a vigorous curling mop of it. Now the black was adulterated with streaks of grey laid on, apparently at random. It made a rather pleasant effect. Mrs Beresford had once thought of dyeing her hair, but in the end she had decided that she liked herself better as nature had made her. She had decided instead to try a new shade of lipstick so as to cheer herself up.

An elderly couple having breakfast together. A pleasant couple, but nothing remarkable about them. So an onlooker would have said. If the onlooker had been young he or she would have added, 'Oh yes, quite pleasant, but deadly dull, of course, like all old people.'

However, Mr and Mrs Beresford had not yet arrived at the time of life when they thought of themselves as old. And they had no idea that they and many others were automatically pronounced deadly dull solely on that account. Only by the young of course, but then, they would have thought indulgently, young people knew nothing about life. Poor dears, they were always worrying about examinations, or their sex life, or buying some extraordinary clothes, or doing extraordinary things to their hair to make them more noticeable. Mr and Mrs Beresford from their own point of view were just past the prime

of life. They liked themselves and liked each other and day succeeded day in a quiet but enjoyable fashion.

There were, of course, moments, everyone has moments. Mr Beresford opened a letter, glanced through it and laid it down, adding it to the small pile by his left hand. He picked up the next letter but forbore to open it. Instead he stayed with it in his hand. He was not looking at the letter, he was looking at the toast-rack. His wife observed him for a few moments before saying,

'What's the matter, Tommy?'

'Matter?' said Tommy vaguely. 'Matter?'

'That's what I said,' said Mrs Beresford.

'Nothing is the matter,' said Mr Beresford. 'What should it be?'

'You've thought of something,' said Tuppence accusingly.

'I don't think I was thinking of anything at all.'

'Oh yes, you were. Has anything happened?'

'No, of course not. What should happen?' He added, 'I got the plumber's bill.'

'Oh,' said Tuppence with the air of one enlightened. 'More than you expected, I suppose.'

'Naturally,' said Tommy, 'it always is.'

'I can't think why we didn't train as plumbers,' said Tuppence. 'If you'd only trained as a plumber, I could have been a plumber's mate and we'd be raking in money day by day.'

'Very short-sighted of us not to see these opportunities.'

'Was that the plumber's bill you were looking at just now?'

'Oh no, that was just an Appeal.'

'Delinquent boys – Racial integration?'

'No. Just another Home they're opening for old people.'

'Well, that's more sensible anyway,' said Tuppence, 'but I don't see why you have to have that worried look about it.'

'Oh, I wasn't thinking of that.'

'Well, what *were* you thinking of?'

'I suppose it put it into my mind,' said Mr Beresford.

'What?' said Tuppence. 'You know you'll tell me in the end.'

'It really wasn't anything important. I just thought that perhaps – well, it was Aunt Ada.'

'Oh, I see,' said Tuppence, with instant comprehension. 'Yes,' she added, softly, meditatively. 'Aunt Ada.'

Their eyes met. It is regrettably true that in these days there is in nearly every family, the problem of what might be called an 'Aunt Ada'. The names are different – Aunt Amelia, Aunt Susan, Aunt Cathy, Aunt Joan. They are varied by grandmothers, aged cousins and even great-aunts. But they exist and present a problem in life which has to be dealt with. Arrangements have to be made. Suitable establishments for looking after the elderly have to be inspected and full questions asked about them. Recommendations are sought from doctors, from friends, who have Aunt Adas of their own who had been 'perfectly happy until she had died' at 'The Laurels, Bexhill', or 'Happy Meadows at Scarborough'.

The days are past when Aunt Elisabeth, 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. Both sides were thoroughly satisfied with the arrangement. 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. Nowadays, things are different.

For the Aunt Adas 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, or who suffers from chronic bronchitis, or who quarrels with her neighbours and insults the tradespeople.

Unfortunately, the Aunt Adas are far more trouble than the opposite end of the age scale. Children can be provided with foster homes, foisted off on relations, or sent to suitable schools where they stay for the holidays, or arrangements can be made for pony treks or camps and on the whole very little objection is made by the children to the arrangements so made for them.

The Aunt Adas are very different. Tuppence Beresford's own aunt - Great-aunt Primrose - had been a notable trouble-maker. Impossible to satisfy her. No sooner did she enter an establishment guaranteed to provide a good home and all comforts for elderly ladies than after writing a few highly complimentary letters to her niece praising this particular establishment, the next news would be that she had indignantly walked out of it without notice.

'Impossible. I couldn't stay there another minute!'

Within the space of a year Aunt Primrose had been in and out of eleven such establishments, finally writing to say that she had now met a very charming young man. 'Really a very devoted boy. He lost his mother at a young age and he badly needs looking after. I have rented a flat and he is coming to live with me. This arrangement will suit us both perfectly. We are natural affinities. You need have no more anxieties, dear Prudence. My future is settled. I am seeing my lawyer tomorrow as it is necessary that I should make some provision for Mervyn if I should pre-decease him which is, of course, the natural course of events, though I assure you at the moment I feel in the pink of health.'

Tuppence had hurried north (the incident had taken place in Aberdeen). But as it happened, the police had arrived there first and had removed the glamorous Mervyn, for whom they had been seeking for some time, on a charge of obtaining money under false pretences. Aunt Primrose had been highly indignant, and had called it persecution - but after attending the Court proceedings (where twenty-five other cases were taken into account) - had been forced to change her views of her *protégé*.

'I think I ought to go and see Aunt Ada, you know, Tuppence,' said Tommy. 'It's been some time.'

'I suppose so,' said Tuppence, without enthusiasm. 'How long has it been?'

Tommy considered. 'It must be nearly a year,' he said.

'It's more than that,' said Tuppence. 'I think it's over a year.'

'Oh dear,' said Tommy, 'the time does go so fast, doesn't it? I can't believe it's been as long as that. Still, I believe you're

right, Tuppence.' He calculated. 'It's awful the way one forgets, isn't it? I really feel very badly about it.'

'I don't think you need,' said Tuppence. 'After all, we send her things and we write letters.'

'Oh yes, I know. You're awfully good about those sort of things, Tuppence. But all the same, one does read things sometimes that are very upsetting.'

'You're thinking of that dreadful book we got from the library,' said Tuppence, 'and how awful it was for the poor old dears. How they suffered.'

'I suppose it was true – taken from life.'

'Oh yes,' said Tuppence, 'there must be places like that. And there are people who are terribly unhappy, who can't help being unhappy. But what else is one to do, Tommy?'

'What can anyone do except be as careful as possible. Be very careful what you choose, find out all about it and make sure she's got a nice doctor looking after her.'

'Nobody could be nicer than Dr Murray, you must admit that.'

'Yes,' said Tommy, the worried look receding from his face. 'Murray's a first class chap. Kind, patient. If anything was going wrong he'd let us know.'

'So I don't think you need worry about it,' said Tuppence. 'How old is she by now?'

'Eighty-two,' said Tommy. 'No – no. I think it's eighty-three,' he added. 'It must be rather awful when you've outlived everybody.'

'That's only what *we* feel,' said Tuppence. '*They* don't feel it.'

'You can't really tell.'

'Well, your Aunt Ada doesn't. Don't you remember the glee with which she told us the number of her old friends that she'd already outlived? She finished up by saying "and as for Amy Morgan, I've heard she won't last more than another six months. She always used to say I was so delicate and now it's practically a certainty that I shall outlive her. Outlive her by a good many years too." Triumphant, that's what she was at the prospect.'

'All the same –' said Tommy.

'I know,' said Tuppence, 'I know. All the same you feel it's your duty and so you've got to go.'

'Don't you think I'm right?'

'Unfortunately,' said Tuppence, 'I do think you're right. Absolutely right. And I'll come too,' she added, with a slight note of heroism in her voice.

'No,' said Tommy. 'Why should you? She's not your aunt. No, I'll go.'

'Not at all,' said Mrs Beresford. 'I like to suffer too. We'll suffer together. You won't enjoy it and I shan't enjoy it and I don't think for one moment that Aunt Ada will enjoy it. But I quite see it is one of those things that has got to be done.'

'No, I don't want you to go. After all, the last time, remember how frightfully rude she was to you?'

'Oh, I didn't mind that,' said Tuppence. 'It's probably the only bit of the visit that the poor old girl enjoyed. I don't grudge it to her, not for a moment.'

'You've always been nice to her,' said Tommy, 'even though you don't like her very much'.

'Nobody could like Aunt Ada,' said Tuppence. 'If you ask me I don't think anyone ever has.'

'One can't help feeling sorry for people when they get old,' said Tommy.

'I can,' said Tuppence. 'I haven't got as nice a nature as you have.'

'Being a woman you're more ruthless,' said Tommy.

'I suppose that might be it. After all, women haven't really got time to be anything but realistic over things. I mean I'm very sorry for people if they're old or sick or anything, if they're nice people. But if they're not nice people, well, it's different, you must admit. If you're pretty nasty when you're twenty and just as nasty when you're forty and nastier still when you're sixty, and a perfect devil by the time you're eighty – well, really, I don't see why one should be particularly sorry for people, just because they're old. You can't change yourself really. I know some absolute ducks who are seventy and eighty. Old Mrs Beauchamp, and Mary Carr and the baker's grandmother, dear

old Mrs Poplett, who used to come in and clean for us. They were all dears and sweet and I'd do anything I could for them.'

'All right, all right,' said Tommy, 'be realistic. But if you really want to be noble and come with me –'

'I want to come with you,' said Tuppence. 'After all, I married you for better or for worse and Aunt Ada is decidedly the worse. So I shall go with you hand in hand. And we'll take her a bunch of flowers and a box of chocolates with soft centres and perhaps a magazine or two. You might write to Miss What's-her-name and say we're coming.'

'One day next week? I could manage Tuesday,' said Tommy, 'if that's all right for you.'

'Tuesday it is,' said Tuppence. 'What's the name of the woman? I can't remember – the matron or the superintendent or whoever she is. Begins with a P.'

'Miss Packard.'

'That's right.'

'Perhaps it'll be different this time,' said Tommy.

'Different? In what way?'

'Oh, I don't know. Something interesting might happen.'

'We might be in a railway accident on the way there,' said Tuppence, brightening up a little.

'Why on earth do you want to be in a railway accident?'

'Well I don't really, of course. It was just –'

'Just what?'

'Well, it would be an adventure of some kind, wouldn't it? Perhaps we could save lives or do something useful. Useful and at the same time exciting.'

'What a hope!' said Mr Beresford.

'I know,' agreed Tuppence. 'It's just that these sort of ideas come to one sometimes.'