

WORLD DETECTIVE STORIES

PARTNERS IN CRIME



Agatha Christie

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

外 文 出 版 社



图书在版编目(CIP)数据

同谋者:英文/(英)克里斯蒂(Christie, A.)著.

北京:外文出版社,1996

(世界著名侦探小说)

ISBN 7-119-01854-X

I.同… II.克… III.①长篇小说-英国-现代-英文

②侦探小说-英国-现代-英文 IV.I561.45

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(96)第01706号

英国休格曼西出版公司授权外文出版社

在中国独家出版发行英文版

世界著名侦探小说

同谋者

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外文出版社出版

(中国北京百万庄路24号)

邮政编码100037

煤炭工业出版社印刷厂印刷

1996年(36开)第一版

(英)

ISBN 7-119-01854-X /I·125(外)

著作权合同登记图字01-95-389

定价:7.80元

Partners in Crime

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

AGATHA CHRISTIE

PARTNERS IN CRIME



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

First Edition 1996

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ISBN 7-119-01854-x

Published by Foreign Languages Press
24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

Not for sale outside the People's Republic of China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

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CHAPTER 1

A FAIRY IN THE FLAT

Mrs Thomas Beresford shifted her position on the divan and looked gloomily out of the window of the flat. The prospect was not an extended one, consisting solely of a small block of flats on the other side of the road. Mrs Beresford sighed and then yawned.

'I wish,' she said, 'something would happen.'

Her husband looked up reprovingly.

'Be careful, Tuppence, this craving for vulgar sensation alarms me.'

Tuppence sighed and closed her eyes dreamily.

'So Tommy and Tuppence were married,' she chanted, 'and lived happily ever afterwards. And six years later they were still living together happily ever afterwards. It is extraordinary,' she said, 'how different everything always is from what you think it is going to be.'

'A very profound statement, Tuppence. But not original. Eminent poets and still more eminent divines have said it before — and if you will excuse me saying so, have said it better.'

'Six years ago,' continued Tuppence, 'I would have sworn that with sufficient money to buy things with, and with you for a husband, all life would have been one grand sweet song, as one of the poets you seem to know so much about puts it.'

'Is it me or the money that palls upon you?' inquired Tommy coldly.

'Palls isn't exactly the word,' said Tuppence kindly. 'I'm used to my blessings, that's all. Just as one never thinks what a boon it is to be able to breathe through one's nose until one has a cold in the head.'

'Shall I neglect you a little?' suggested Tommy. 'Take

other women about to night clubs. That sort of thing.'

'Useless,' said Tuppence. 'You would only meet me there with other men. And I should know perfectly well that you didn't care for the other women, whereas you would never be quite sure that I didn't care for the other men. Women are so much more thorough.'

'It's only in modesty that men score top marks,' murmured her husband. 'But what is the matter with you, Tuppence? Why this yearning discontent?'

'I don't know. I want things to happen. Exciting things. Wouldn't you like to go chasing German spies again, Tommy? Think of the wild days of peril we went through once. Of course I know you're more or less in the Secret Service now, but it's pure office work.'

'You mean you'd like them to send me into darkest Russia disguised as a Bolshevik bootlegger, or something of that sort?'

'That wouldn't be any good,' said Tuppence. 'They wouldn't let me go with you and I'm the person who wants something to do so badly. Something to do. That is what I keep saying all day long.'

'Women's sphere,' suggested Tommy, waving his hand.

'Twenty minutes' work after breakfast every morning keeps the flag going to perfection. You have nothing to complain of, have you?'

'Your housekeeping is so perfect, Tuppence, as to be almost monotonous.'

'I do like gratitude,' said Tuppence.

'You, of course, have got your work,' she continued, 'but tell me, Tommy, don't you ever have a secret yearning for excitement, for things to *happen*?'

'No,' said Tommy, 'at least I don't think so. It is all very well to want things to happen – they might not be pleasant things.'

'How prudent men are,' sighed Tuppence. 'Don't you ever have a wild secret yearning for romance – adventure – life?'

'What *have* you been reading, Tuppence?' asked Tommy.

'Think how exciting it would be,' went on Tuppence, 'if we heard a wild rapping at the door and went to open it and in staggered a dead man.'

'If he was dead he couldn't stagger,' said Tommy critically.

'You know what I mean,' said Tuppence. 'They always stagger in just before they die and fall at your feet, just gasping out a few enigmatic words. "The Spotted Leopard", or something like that.'

'I advise a course of Schopenhauer or Emmanuel Kant,' said Tommy.

'That sort of thing would be good for you,' said Tuppence. 'You are getting fat and comfortable.'

'I am not,' said Tommy indignantly. 'Anyway you do slimming exercises yourself.'

'Everybody does,' said Tuppence. 'When I said you were getting fat I was really speaking metaphorically, you are getting prosperous and sleek and comfortable.'

'I don't know what has come over you,' said her husband.

'The spirit of adventure,' murmured Tuppence. 'It is better than a longing for romance anyway. I have that sometimes too. I think of meeting a man, a really handsome man -'

'You have met me,' said Tommy. 'Isn't that enough for you?'

'A brown, lean man, terrifically strong, the kind of man who can ride anything and lassoes wild horses -'

'Complete with sheepskin trousers and a cowboy hat,' interpolated Tommy sarcastically.

'- and has lived in the Wilds,' continued Tuppence. 'I should like him to fall simply madly in love with me. I should, of course, rebuff him virtuously and be true to my marriage vows, but my heart would secretly go out to him.'

'Well,' said Tommy, 'I often wish that I may meet a really beautiful girl. A girl with corn coloured hair who will fall desperately in love with me. Only I don't think I rebuff her - in fact I am quite sure I don't.'

'That,' said Tuppence, 'is naughty temper.'

'What,' said Tommy, 'is really the matter with you, Tuppence? You have never talked like this before.'

'No, but I have been boiling up inside for a long time,' said Tuppence. 'You see it is very dangerous to have everything you want – including enough money to buy things. Of course there are always hats.'

'You have got about forty hats already,' said Tommy, 'and they all look alike.'

'Hats are like that,' said Tuppence. 'They are not really alike. There are *nuances* in them. I saw rather a nice one in Violette's this morning.'

'If you haven't anything better to do than going on buying hats you don't need –'

'That's it,' said Tuppence, 'that's exactly it. If I had something better to do. I suppose I ought to take up good works. Oh, Tommy, I do wish something exciting would happen. I feel – I really do feel it would be good for us. If we could find a fairy –'

'Ah!' said Tommy. 'It is curious your saying that.'

He got up and crossed the room. Opening a drawer of the writing table he took out a small snapshot print and brought it to Tuppence.

'Oh!' said Tuppence, 'so you have got them developed. Which is this, the one you took of this room or the one I took?'

'The one I took. Yours didn't come out. You under exposed it. You always do.'

'It is nice for you,' said Tuppence, 'to think that there is one thing you can do better than me.'

'A foolish remark,' said Tommy, 'but I will let it pass for the moment. What I wanted to show you was this.'

He pointed to a small white speck on the photograph.

'That is a scratch on the film,' said Tuppence.

'Not at all,' said Tommy. 'That, Tuppence, is a fairy.'

'Tommy, you idiot.'

'Look for yourself.'

He handed her a magnifying glass. Tuppence studied

the print attentively through it. Seen thus by a slight stretch of fancy the scratch on the film could be imagined to represent a small winged creature on the fender.

'It has got wings,' cried Tuppence. 'What fun, a real live fairy in our flat. Shall we write to Conan Doyle about it? Oh, Tommy. Do you think she'll give us wishes?'

'You will soon know,' said Tommy. 'You have been wishing hard enough for something to happen all the afternoon.'

At that minute the door opened, and a tall lad of fifteen who seemed undecided as to whether he was a butler or a page boy inquired in a truly magnificent manner.

'Are you at home, madam? The front-door bell has just rung.'

'I wish Albert wouldn't go to the Pictures,' sighed Tuppence, after she had signified her assent, and Albert had withdrawn. 'He's copying a Long Island butler now. Thank goodness I've cured him of asking for people's cards and bringing them to me on a salver.'

The door opened again, and Albert announced: 'Mr Carter,' much as though it were a Royal title.

'The Chief,' muttered Tommy, in great surprise.

Tuppence jumped up with a glad exclamation, and greeted a tall grey-haired man with piercing eyes and a tired smile.

'Mr Carter, I *am* glad to see you.'

'That's good, Mrs Tommy. Now answer me a question. How's life generally?'

'Satisfactory, but dull,' replied Tuppence with a twinkle.

'Better and better,' said Mr Carter. 'I'm evidently going to find you in the right mood.'

'This,' said Tuppence, 'sounds exciting.'

Albert, still copying the Long Island butler, brought in tea. When this operation was completed without mishap and the door had closed behind him Tuppence burst out once more.

'You did mean something, didn't you, Mr Carter? Are you going to send us on a mission into darkest Russia?'

'Not exactly that,' said Mr Carter.

'But there is something.'

'Yes – there is something. I don't think you are the kind who shrinks from risks, are you, Mrs Tommy?'

Tuppence's eyes sparkled with excitement.

'There is certain work to be done for the Department – and I fancied – I just fancied – that it might suit you two.'

'Go on,' said Tuppence.

'I see that you take the *Daily Leader*,' continued Mr Carter, picking up that journal from the table.

He turned to the advertisement column and indicating a certain advertisement with his finger pushed the paper across to Tommy.

'Read that out,' he said.

Tommy complied.

'The International Detective Agency, Theodore Blunt, Manager. Private Inquiries. Large staff of confidential and highly skilled Inquiry Agents. Utmost discretion. Consultations free. 118 Haleham St., W.C.'

He looked inquiringly at Mr Carter. The latter nodded. 'That detective agency has been on its last legs for some time,' he murmured. 'Friend of mine acquired it for a mere song. We're thinking of setting it going again – say, for a six months' trial. And during that time, of course, it will have to have a manager.'

'What about Mr Theodore Blunt?' asked Tommy.

'Mr Blunt has been rather indiscreet, I'm afraid. In fact, Scotland Yard have had to interfere. Mr Blunt is being detained at Her Majesty's expense, and he won't tell us half of what we'd like to know.'

'I see, sir,' said Tommy. 'At least, I think I see.'

'I suggest that you have six months leave from the office. Ill health. And, of course, if you like to run a Detective Agency under the name of Theodore Blunt, it's nothing to do with me.'

Tommy eyed his Chief steadily.

'Any instructions, sir?'

'Mr Blunt did some foreign business, I believe. Look out for blue letters with a Russian stamp on them. From a ham merchant anxious to find his wife who came as a refugee to this country some years ago. Moisten the stamp and you'll find the number 16 written underneath. Make a copy of these letters and send the originals on to me. Also if any one comes to the office and makes a reference to the number 16, inform me immediately.'

'I understand, sir,' said Tommy. 'And apart from these instructions?'

Mr Carter picked up his gloves from the table and prepared to depart.

'You can run the Agency as you please. I fancied' – his eyes twinkled a little – 'that it might amuse Mrs Tommy to try her hand at a little detective work.'

CHAPTER 2

A POT OF TEA

Mr and Mrs Beresford took possession of the offices of the International Detective Agency a few days later. They were on the second floor of a somewhat dilapidated building in Bloomsbury. In the small outer office, Albert relinquished the role of a Long Island butler, and took up that of office boy, a part which he played to perfection. A paper bag of sweets, inky hands, and a tousled head was his conception of the character.

From the outer office, two doors led into inner offices. On one door was painted the legend 'Clerks'. On the other 'Private'. Behind the latter was a small comfortable room furnished with an immense business-like desk, a lot of artistically labelled files, all empty, and some solid leather-

seated chairs. Behind the desk sat the pseudo Mr Blunt trying to look as though he had run a Detective Agency all his life. A telephone, of course, stood at his elbow. Tuppence and he had rehearsed several good telephone effects, and Albert also had his instructions.

In the adjoining room was Tuppence, a typewriter, the necessary tables and chairs of an inferior type to those in the room of the great Chief, and a gas ring for making tea.

Nothing was wanting, in fact, save clients.

Tuppence, in the first ecstasies of initiation, had a few bright hopes.

'It will be too marvellous,' she declared. 'We will hunt down murderers, and discover the missing family jewels, and find people who've disappeared and detect embezzlers.'

At this point Tommy felt it his duty to strike a more discouraging note.

'Calm yourself, Tuppence, and try to forget the cheap fiction you are in the habit of reading. Our clientèle, if we have any clientèle at all – will consist solely of husbands who want their wives shadowed, and wives who want their husbands shadowed. Evidence for divorce is the sole prop of private inquiry agents.'

'Ugh!' said Tuppence, wrinkling a fastidious nose. 'We shan't touch divorce cases. We must raise the tone of our new profession.'

'Ye-es,' said Tommy doubtfully.

And now a week after installation they compared notes rather ruefully.

'Three idiotic women whose husbands go away for weekends,' sighed Tommy. 'Anyone come whilst I was out at lunch?'

'A fat old man with a flighty wife,' sighed Tuppence sadly. 'I've read in the papers for years that the divorce evil was growing, but somehow I never seemed to realise it until this last week. I'm sick and tired of saying, "We don't undertake divorce cases."'

'We've put it in the advertisements now,' Tommy reminded her. 'So it won't be so bad.'

'I'm sure we advertise in the most tempting way too,' said Tuppence in a melancholy voice. 'All the same, I'm not going to be beaten. If necessary, I shall commit a crime myself, and you will detect it.'

'And what good would that do? Think of my feelings when I bid you a tender farewell at Bow Street – or is it Vine Street?'

'You are thinking of your bachelor days,' said Tuppence pointedly.

'The Old Bailey, that is what I mean,' said Tommy.

'Well,' said Tuppence, 'something has got to be done about it. Here we are bursting with talent and no chance of exercising it.'

'I always like your cheery optimism, Tuppence. You seem to have no doubt whatever that you have talent to exercise.'

'Of course,' said Tuppence, opening her eyes very wide.

'And yet you have no expert knowledge whatever.'

'Well, I have read every detective novel that has been published in the last ten years.'

'So have I,' said Tommy, 'but I have a sort of feeling that that wouldn't really help us much.'

'You always were a pessimist, Tommy. Belief in oneself – that is the great thing.'

'Well, you have got it all right,' said her husband.

'Of course it is easy in detective stories,' said Tuppence thoughtfully, 'because one works backwards. I mean if one knows the solution one can arrange the clues. I wonder now –'

She paused wrinkling her brows.

'Yes?' said Tommy inquiringly.

'I have got a sort of idea,' said Tuppence. 'It hasn't quite come yet, but it's coming.' She rose resolutely. 'I think I shall go and buy that hat I told you about.'

'Oh, God!' said Tommy, 'another hat!'

'It's a very nice one,' said Tuppence with dignity.

She went out with a resolute look on her face.

Once or twice in the following days Tommy inquired