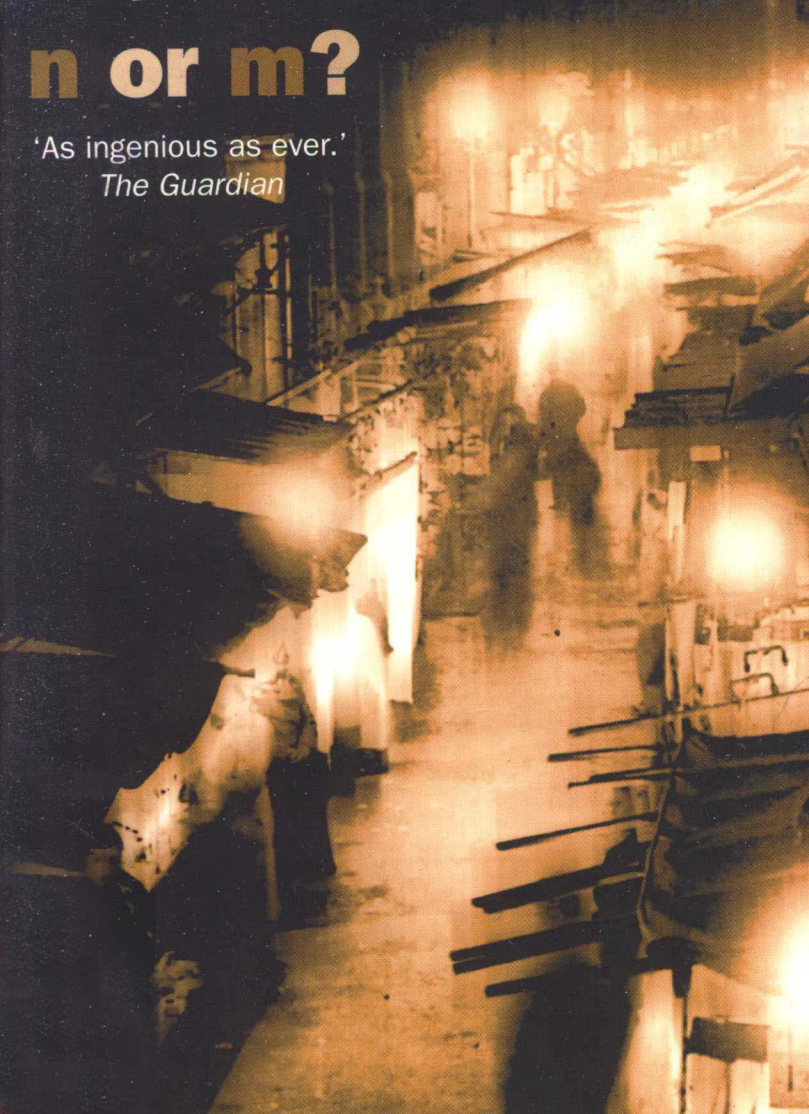


Agatha Christie

n or m?

'As ingenious as ever.'

The Guardian



N or M?

Agatha Christie is known throughout the world as the Queen of Crime. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English with another billion in 100 foreign languages. She is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. She is the author of 80 crime novels and short story collections, 19 plays and six novels written under the name of Mary Westmacott.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was written towards the end of the First World War, in which she served as a VAD. In it she created Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian detective who was destined to become the most popular detective in crime fiction since Sherlock Holmes. It was eventually published by The Bodley Head in 1920.

In 1926, after averaging a book a year, Agatha Christie wrote her masterpiece. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was the first of her books to be published by Collins and marked the beginning of an author-publisher relationship which lasted for 50 years and well over 70 books. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was also the first of Agatha Christie's books to be dramatized – under the name *Alibi* – and to have a successful run in London's West End. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play of all, opened in 1952 and is the longest-running play in history.

Agatha Christie was made a Dame in 1971. She died in 1976, since when a number of books have been published posthumously: the bestselling novel *Sleeping Murder* appeared later that year, followed by her autobiography and the short story collections *Miss Marple's Final Cases*, *Problem at Pollensa Bay* and *While the Light Lasts*. In 1998 *Black Coffee* was the first of her plays to be novelized by another author, Charles Osborne.

By the same author

The ABC Murders
The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding
After the Funeral
And Then There Were None
Appointment with Death
At Bertram's Hotel
The Big Four
The Body in the Library
By the Pricking of My Thumbs
Cards on the Table
A Caribbean Mystery
Cat Among the Pigeons
The Clocks
Crooked House
Curtain: Poirot's Last Case
Dead Man's Folly
Death Comes as the End
Death in the Clouds
Death on the Nile
Destination Unknown
Dumb Witness
Elephants Can Remember
Endless Night
Evil Under the Sun
Five Little Pigs
4.50 from Paddington
Hallowe'en Party
Hercule Poirot's Christmas
Hickory Dickory Dock
The Hollow
The Hound of Death
The Labours of Hercules
The Listerdale Mystery
Lord Edgware Dies
The Man in the Brown Suit
The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side
Miss Marple's Final Cases
The Moving Finger
Mrs McGinty's Dead
The Murder at the Vicarage
Murder in Mesopotamia
Murder in the Mews
A Murder is Announced
Murder is Easy
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd
Murder on the Links
Murder on the Orient Express
The Mysterious Affair at Styles
The Mysterious Mr Quin

The Mystery of the Blue Train
Nemesis
N or M?
One, Two, Buckle My Shoe
Ordeal by Innocence
The Pale Horse
Parker Pyne Investigates
Partners in Crime
Passenger to Frankfurt
Peril at End House
A Pocket Full of Rye
Poirot Investigates
Poirot's Early Cases
Postern of Fate
Problem at Pollensa Bay
Sad Cypress
The Secret Adversary
The Secret of Chimneys
The Seven Dials Mystery
The Sittaford Mystery
Sleeping Murder
Sparkling Cyanide
Taken at the Flood
They Came to Baghdad
They Do It With Mirrors
Third Girl
The Thirteen Problems
Three Act Tragedy
Towards Zero
While the Light Lasts
Why Didn't They Ask Evans?

Novels under the Nom de Plume of 'Mary Westmacott'

Absent in the Spring
The Burden
A Daughter's A Daughter
Giant's Bread
The Rose and the Yew Tree
Unfinished Portrait

Plays novelized by Charles Osborne

Black Coffee
Spider's Web
The Unexpected Guest

Memoirs

Agatha Christie: An Autobiography
Come, Tell Me How You Live

Agatha Christie

N or M?

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollins Publishers
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB
www.fireandwater.com

This *Agatha Christie Signature Edition* published 2001

5

First published in Great Britain by Collins 1941

Copyright Agatha Christie Mallowan 1941

ISBN 0 00 711145 2

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Chapter 1

Tommy Beresford removed his overcoat in the hall of the flat. He hung it up with some care, taking time over it. His hat went carefully on the next peg.

He squared his shoulders, affixed a resolute smile to his face and walked into the sitting-room, where his wife sat knitting a Balaclava helmet in khaki wool.

It was the spring of 1940.

Mrs Beresford gave him a quick glance and then busied herself by knitting at a furious rate. She said after a minute or two:

‘Any news in the evening paper?’

Tommy said:

‘The Blitzkrieg is coming, hurray, hurray! Things look bad in France.’

Tuppence said:

‘It’s a depressing world at the moment.’

There was a pause and then Tommy said:

Agatha Christie

'Well, why don't you ask? No need to be so damned tactful.'

'I know,' admitted Tuppence. 'There is something about conscious tact that is very irritating. But then it irritates you if I do ask. And anyway I don't *need* to ask. It's written all over you.'

'I wasn't conscious of looking a Dismal Desmond.'

'No, darling,' said Tuppence. 'You had a kind of nailed to the mast smile which was one of the most heartrending things I have ever seen.'

Tommy said with a grin:

'No, was it really as bad as all that?'

'And more! Well, come on, out with it. Nothing doing?'

'Nothing doing. They don't want me in any capacity. I tell you, Tuppence, it's pretty thick when a man of forty-six is made to feel like a doddering grandfather. Army, Navy, Air Force, Foreign Office, one and all say the same thing – I'm too old. I *may* be required later.'

Tuppence said:

'Well, it's the same for me. They don't want people of my age for nursing – no, thank you. Nor for anything else. They'd rather have a fluffy chit who's never seen a wound or sterilised a dressing than they would have me who worked for three years, 1915 to 1918, in various capacities, nurse in the surgical ward and operating theatre, driver of a trade delivery van and

later of a General. This, that and the other – all, I assert firmly, with conspicuous success. And now I'm a poor, pushing, tiresome, middle-aged woman who won't sit at home quietly and knit as she ought to do.'

Tommy said gloomily:

'This war is hell.'

'It's bad enough having a war,' said Tuppence, 'but not being allowed to do anything in it just puts the lid on.'

Tommy said consolingly:

'Well, at any rate Deborah has got a job.'

Deborah's mother said:

'Oh, she's all right. I expect she's good at it, too. But I still think, Tommy, that I could hold my own with Deborah.'

Tommy grinned.

'She wouldn't think so.'

Tuppence said:

'Daughters can be very trying. Especially when they *will* be so kind to you.'

Tommy murmured:

'The way young Derek makes allowances for me is sometimes rather hard to bear. That "poor old Dad" look in his eye.'

'In fact,' said Tuppence, 'our children, although quite adorable, are also quite maddening.'

Agatha Christie

But at the mention of the twins, Derek and Deborah, her eyes were very tender.

'I suppose,' said Tommy thoughtfully, 'that it's always hard for people themselves to realise that they're getting middle-aged and past doing things.'

Tuppence gave a snort of rage, tossed her glossy dark head, and sent her ball of khaki wool spinning from her lap.

'Are we past doing things? *Are* we? Or is it only that everyone keeps insinuating that we are. Sometimes I feel that we never were any use.'

'Quite likely,' said Tommy.

'Perhaps so. But at any rate we did once feel important. And now I'm beginning to feel that all that never really happened. Did it happen, Tommy? Is it true that you were once crashed on the head and kidnapped by German agents? Is it true that we once tracked down a dangerous criminal – and got him! Is it true that we rescued a girl and got hold of important secret papers, and were practically thanked by a grateful country? Us! You and me! Despised, unwanted Mr and Mrs Beresford.'

'Now dry up, darling. All this does no good.'

'All the same,' said Tuppence, blinking back a tear, 'I'm disappointed in our Mr Carter.'

'He wrote us a very nice letter.'

'He didn't *do* anything – he didn't even hold out any hope.'

'Well, he's out of it all nowadays. Like us. He's quite old. Lives in Scotland and fishes.'

Tuppence said wistfully:

'They might have let us do *something* in the Intelligence.'

'Perhaps we couldn't,' said Tommy. 'Perhaps, nowadays, we wouldn't have the nerve.'

'I wonder,' said Tuppence. 'One feels just the same. But perhaps, as you say, when it came to the point —'

She sighed. She said:

'I wish we could find a job of some kind. It's so rotten when one has so much time to think.'

Her eyes rested just for a minute on the photograph of the very young man in the Air Force uniform, with the wide grinning smile so like Tommy's.

Tommy said:

'It's worse for a man. Women can knit, after all — and do up parcels and help at canteens.'

Tuppence said:

'I can do all that twenty years from now. I'm not old enough to be content with that. I'm neither one thing nor the other.'

The front door bell rang. Tuppence got up. The flat was a small service one.

She opened the door to find a broad-shouldered man with a big fair moustache and a cheerful red face, standing on the mat.

Agatha Christie

His glance, a quick one, took her in as he asked in a pleasant voice:

‘Are you Mrs Beresford?’

‘Yes.’

‘My name’s Grant. I’m a friend of Lord Easthampton’s. He suggested I should look you and your husband up.’

‘Oh, how nice, do come in.’

She preceded him into the sitting-room.

‘My husband, er – Captain –’

‘Mr’

‘Mr Grant. He’s a friend of Mr Car – of Lord Easthampton’s.’

The old *nom de guerre* of the former Chief of the Intelligence, ‘Mr Carter’, always came more easily to her lips than their old friend’s proper title.

For a few minutes the three talked happily together. Grant was an attractive person with an easy manner.

Presently Tuppence left the room. She returned a few minutes later with the sherry and some glasses.

After a few minutes, when a pause came, Mr Grant said to Tommy:

‘I hear you’re looking for a job, Beresford?’

An eager light came into Tommy’s eye.

‘Yes, indeed. You don’t mean –’

Grant laughed, and shook his head.

‘Oh, nothing of that kind. No, I’m afraid that has to

be left to the young active men – or to those who've been at it for years. The only things I can suggest are rather stodgy, I'm afraid. Office work. Filing papers. Tying them up in red tape and pigeon-holing them. That sort of thing.'

Tommy's face fell.

'Oh, I see!'

Grant said encouragingly:

'Oh well, it's better than nothing. Anyway, come and see me at my office one day. Ministry of Requirements. Room 22. We'll fix you up with something.'

The telephone rang. Tuppence picked up the receiver.

'Hallo – yes – *what?*' A squeaky voice spoke agitatedly from the other end. Tuppence's face changed. 'When? – Oh, my dear – of course – I'll come over right away . . .'

She put back the receiver.

She said to Tommy:

'That was Maureen.'

'I thought so – I recognised her voice from here.'

Tuppence explained breathlessly:

'I'm so sorry, Mr Grant. But I must go round to this friend of mine. She's fallen and twisted her ankle and there's no one with her but her little girl, so I must go round and fix up things for her and get hold of someone to come in and look after her. Do forgive me.'

Agatha Christie

'Of course, Mrs Beresford. I quite understand.'

Tuppence smiled at him, picked up a coat which had been lying over the sofa, slipped her arms into it and hurried out. The flat door banged.

Tommy poured out another glass of sherry for his guest.

'Don't go yet,' he said.

'Thank you.' The other accepted the glass. He sipped it for a moment in silence. Then he said, 'In a way, you know, your wife's being called away is a fortunate occurrence. It will save time.'

Tommy stared.

'I don't understand.'

Grant said deliberately:

'You see, Beresford, if you had come to see me at the Ministry, I was empowered to put a certain proposition before you.'

The colour came slowly up in Tommy's freckled face. He said:

'You don't mean —'

Grant nodded.

'Easthampton suggested you,' he said. 'He told us you were the man for the job.'

Tommy gave a deep sigh.

'Tell me,' he said.

'This is strictly confidential, of course.'

Tommy nodded.

‘Not even your wife must know. You understand?’

‘Very well – if you say so. But we worked together before.’

‘Yes, I know. But this proposition is solely for you.’

‘I see. All right.’

‘Ostensibly you will be offered work – as I said just now – office work – in a branch of the Ministry functioning in Scotland – in a prohibited area where your wife cannot accompany you. Actually you will be somewhere very different.’

Tommy merely waited.

Grant said:

‘You’ve read in the newspapers of the Fifth Column? You know, roughly at any rate, just what that term implies.’

Tommy murmured:

‘The enemy within.’

‘Exactly. This war, Beresford, started in an optimistic spirit. Oh, I don’t mean the people who really knew – we’ve known all along what we were up against – the efficiency of the enemy, his aerial strength, his deadly determination, and the co-ordination of his well-planned war machine. I mean the people as a whole. The good-hearted, muddle-headed democratic fellow who believes what he wants to believe – that Germany will crack up, that she’s on the verge of revolution, that her weapons of war are made of tin and that her men are

Agatha Christie

so underfed that they'll fall down if they try to march – all that sort of stuff. Wishful thinking as the saying goes.

'Well, the war didn't go that way. It started badly and it went on worse. The men were all right – the men on the battleships and in the planes and in the dug-outs. But there was mismanagement and unpreparedness – the defects, perhaps, of our qualities. We don't want war, haven't considered it seriously, weren't good at preparing for it.

'The worst of that is over. We've corrected our mistakes, we're slowly getting the right men in the right place. We're beginning to run the war as it should be run – and we can win the war – make no mistake about that – but only if we don't lose it first. And the danger of losing it comes, not from outside – not from the might of Germany's bombers, not from her seizure of neutral countries and fresh vantage points from which to attack – but from within. Our danger is the danger of Troy – the wooden horse within our walls. Call it the Fifth Column if you like. It is here, among us. Men and women, some of them highly placed, some of them obscure, but all believing genuinely in the Nazi aims and the Nazi creed and desiring to substitute that sternly efficient creed for the muddled easy-going liberty of our democratic institutions.'

Grant leant forward. He said, still in that same pleasant unemotional voice:

'And we don't know who they are . . .'

Tommy said: 'But surely –'

Grant said with a touch of impatience:

'Oh, we can round up the small fry. That's easy enough. But it's the others. We know about them. We know that there are at least two highly placed in the Admiralty – that one must be a member of General G –'s staff – that there are three or more in the Air Force, and that two, at least, are members of the Intelligence, and have access to Cabinet secrets. We know that because it must be so from the way things have happened. The leakage – a leakage from the top – of information to the enemy, shows us that.'

Tommy said helplessly, his pleasant face perplexed:

'But what good should I be to you? I don't know any of these people.'

Grant nodded.

'Exactly. You don't know any of them – *and they don't know you.*'

He paused to let it sink in and then went on:

'These people, these high-up people, know most of our lot. Information can't be very well refused to them. I am at my wits' end. I went to Easthampton. He's out of it all now – a sick man – but his brain's the best I've ever known. He thought of you. Over twenty years since you worked for the department. Name quite unconnected

Agatha Christie

with it. Your face not known. What do you say – will you take it on?’

Tommy’s face was almost split in two by the magnitude of his ecstatic grin.

‘Take it on? You bet I’ll take it on. Though I can’t see how I can be of any use. I’m just a blasted amateur.’

‘My dear Beresford, amateur status is just what is needed. The professional is handicapped here. You’ll take the place of the best man we had or are likely to have.’

Tommy looked a question. Grant nodded.

‘Yes. Died in St Bridget’s Hospital last Tuesday. Run down by a lorry – only lived a few hours. Accident case – but it wasn’t an accident.’

Tommy said slowly: ‘I see.’

Grant said quietly:

‘And that’s why we have reason to believe that Farquhar was on to something – that he was getting somewhere at last. By his death that wasn’t an accident.’

Tommy looked a question.

Grant went on:

‘Unfortunately we know next to nothing of what he had discovered. Farquhar had been methodically following up one line after another. Most of them led nowhere.’