

## The Thumb Mark of St Peter – Agatha Christie

‘Unsolved mysteries.’

Raymond West blew out a cloud of smoke and turned to Miss Marple.

‘Unsolved mysteries. Your turn Aunt Jane.’

Miss Marple was knitting – something white and soft and fleecy.

‘Well,’ said Miss Marple, ‘the only experience I can remember that would be of interest to you is the one about my poor niece Mabel’s husband.’

Mabel was my niece. A nice girl, really, a very nice girl, but just a trifle what one might call *silly*. She married a Mr Denman when she was twenty-two, and I am afraid it was not a very happy marriage. Mr Denman was a man of very violent temper – not the kind of man who would be patient with Mabel’s foibles – and I also learned that there was insanity in his family. But Mabel married him.

They had been married ten years when Mr Denman died suddenly. There were no children, and he left all his money to Mabel. I wrote, of course, and offered to come to Mabel if she wanted me. It was not until about three months afterwards that I got a most hysterical letter from Mabel, begging me to come to her, and saying that things were going from bad to worse, and she couldn’t stand it much longer.

So, of course,’ continued Miss Marple, ‘I went off at once.

I found Mabel in a very nervous state. The house, Myrtle Dene, was a fairly large one, very comfortably furnished. There was a cook and a house-parlourmaid as well as nurse-attendant to look after old Mr Denman, Mabel’s husband’s father, who was what is called “not quite right in the head”.

He was quite peaceful and well behaved, but distinctly odd at times. As I say, there was insanity in the family.

I was really shocked to see the change in Mabel. She was a mass of nerves. I asked her about some friends of hers. She said, to my surprise, that she hardly ever saw them nowadays. Then she came bursting out with the truth.

“It is not my doing, it is theirs. There is not a soul in the place who will speak to me now. I am like a kind of leper. It is awful, and I can’t bear it any longer.”

“My dear Mabel,” I said, “you amaze me. But what is the cause of all this?”

Then it all came out.

It seemed that Geoffrey Denman’s death, being quite sudden and unexpected, gave rise to various rumours. In fact people were saying that she had poisoned her husband.

Now, I was quite certain of one thing: Mabel was quite incapable of poisoning anyone, so I asked her,

“What started people off on this tack?”

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Mabel was very incoherent, and declared there was nothing – nothing at all, except, of course, that Geoffrey's death had been very sudden. He had seemed quite well at supper that evening, and had taken violently ill in the night. The doctor had been sent for, but the poor man had died a few minutes after the doctor's arrival. Death had been thought to be the result of eating poisoned mushrooms.

"Well," I said, "I suppose a sudden death of that kind might start tongues wagging, but surely not without some additional facts. Did you have a quarrel with Geoffrey or anything that kind?"

She admitted that she had had a quarrel with him on the preceding morning at breakfast time.

"And the servants heard it, I suppose?" I asked.

I knew the carrying power of Mabel's high-pitched hysterical voice only too well. Geoffrey Denman too, was a man given to raising his voice loudly when angry.

To make matters worse she had gone down to the chemist's that morning and had brought some arsenic. She had intended to make away with herself, but had changed her mind and thrown the arsenic away.

"Who is your doctor?" I asked.

"Dr Rawlinson."

I knew him by sight. Mabel had pointed him out to me the other day.

I thought things over, and I put my bonnet on and went to call on Dr Rawlinson. He was on his high horse at once when I mentioned Geoffrey Denman's death, talked for a long time about various types of fungi, edible and otherwise. He had questioned the cook, and she had admitted that one or two of the mushrooms cooked had been 'a little queer'. The doctor seemed perfectly satisfied with the certificates he had given.

When I got home I asked Mabel

"What happened when Geoffrey was taken ill? Did he call you?"

"No." She shook her head. "He rang the bell violently. Dorothy, the house-parlourmaid, heard it, and she waked the cook up, and they came down. When Dorothy saw him she was frightened. He was rambling and delirious. She left the cook with him and came rushing to me. I got up and went to him. Of course, I saw at once he was dreadfully ill. Unfortunately Nurse Brewster, who looks after old Mr Denman, was away for the night, so there was no one who knew what to do. I sent Dorothy off for the doctor, and cook and I stayed with him, but after a few minutes I couldn't bear it any longer, it was too dreadful. I ran away back to my room and locked the door.

"Very selfish and unkind of you," I said, "and no doubt that conduct of yours had done nothing to help you since."

Next I spoke to the two servants. They both agreed that their master seemed to be in great agony, that he was unable to swallow, and he could only speak in a strangled voice, and when he did speak it was only rambling – nothing sensible.

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“What did he say when he was rambling?” I asked curiously.

“Something about some fish. A heap of fish,” she said, “some nonsense like that.”

There didn’t seem to be any sense to be made out of that. As a last resource I went up to see Nurse Brewster, who was a gaunt, middle-aged woman of about fifty.

I asked her how the patient, Mr Denman, was getting on.

She shook her head.

“He is strong enough physically but his eyesight is failing badly. However he may outlive us all. But his mind is also failing very fast. I have already told both Mr and Mrs Denman that he ought to be in an institution. Mr Denman agreed but Mrs Denman wouldn’t hear of it at any price.”

I will say for Mabel that she always had a kindly heart.

Next, I went to see the pathologist who had done the post-mortem, and asked him several questions. I got out of him that he considered it highly unlikely that the poisoned mushrooms were the cause of death. He made a long explanation to me which amounted to this: That death might have been due to some strong vegetable alkaloid.

. Now, when I am really in bad trouble I always say a little prayer to myself.

On the morning I am telling you about, I was walking along the High Street, and I was praying hard. I shut my eyes, and when I opened them, what do you think was the first thing I saw?

I saw,’ said Miss Marple impressively, ‘*the window of the fishmonger’s shop*. There was only one thing in it, a *fresh haddock*.’

She looked round triumphantly.

‘Oh my God!’ said Raymond West. ‘An answer to prayer – a fresh haddock!’

‘Yes, Raymond,’ said Miss Marple severely, ‘and there is no need to be profane about it. The hand of God is everywhere. The first thing I saw were the black spots - the marks of St Peter’s thumb. That is the legend, you know, St Peter’s thumb. I connected the two things together, faith – and fish.

Now, what did that bring to my mind? Of course, both the cook and house-parlourmaid mentioned fish as being one of the things spoken of by the dying man. I went home determined to get to the bottom of the matter.

I saw both the cook and Dorothy separately. I asked the cook if she was quite sure that her master had really mentioned a heap of fish. She said she was quite sure.

“Were those his exact words,” I asked, “or did he mention some particular kind of fish?”

“That’s it,” said the cook, “it was some particular kind of fish, A pile of...the fish began with C; but it wasn’t a cod or a crayfish,” she said.

The next part is where I am really proud of myself,’ said Miss Marple, ‘You see, my idea was that Geoffrey had mistakenly taken some particular poison, and was trying to say the name of the antidote.

Well, I looked down the list of H’s, beginning He. Nothing there sounded that likely; than I began on the P’s, and almost at once, I came to- what do you think?’

She looked round, postponing her moment of triumph.

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‘Pilocarpine. Can you imagine a man who could hardly speak trying to drag that word out? What would that sound like to a cook who had never heard the word? Wouldn’t it convey the impression “pile of carp”?’

‘By Jove!’ said Sir Henry.

‘I turned quickly to the page indicated in the index. I read about pilocarpine and its effect on the eyes, and at last I came to a significant phrase: *Has been tried with success as an antidote for atropine poisoning.*

This new solution was not only possible, but I was absolutely sure it was the correct one, because all the pieces fitted in logically. I don’t know anything about medicine of course. But I do remember that when my eyesight was failing the Doctor ordered me drops with atropine sulphate in them.

I went straight upstairs to old Mr Denman’s room. I didn’t beat about the bush.

“Mr Denman,” I said, “I know everything. Why did you poison your son?”

He looked at me for a minute or two and then he burst out laughing. It was one of the most vicious laughs I have ever heard.

“Yes,” he said, “I got even with Geoffrey. He was going to put me away, was he? Have me shut up in an asylum? I heard then talking about it. Mabel is a good girl – Mabel stuck up for me, but I knew she wouldn’t be able to stand up against Geoffrey. In the end he would have his own way; he always did.

But I settled him – I settled my kind, loving son!

Ha, ha! I crept down in the night. It was quite easy. Nurse Brewster was away.

My dear son was asleep; he had a glass of water by the side of his bed; he always woke up in the middle of the night and drank it off. I poured it away – ha ha! – and I emptied the bottle of eyedrops into the glass.

He would wake up and swill it down before he knew what it was. There was only a table-spoonful of it – quite enough, quite enough. And so he did!

They came to me in the morning and broke it to me very gently. They were afraid it would upset me. Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

‘Well,’ said Miss Marple, ‘that is the end of the story. Of course, the poor old man was put in an asylum. He wasn’t really responsible for what he had done, and the truth was known, and everyone was sorry for Mabel and could not do enough to make up to her for the unjust suspicions they had had.

But if it hadn’t been for Geoffrey realizing what the stuff was he had swallowed and trying to get everybody to get hold of the antidote without delay, it might never have been found out.

Since then, I have never seen a pile of fresh haddock without thinking of the thumb mark of St Peter.’