

## The Tuesday Night Club – Agatha Christie

‘Unsolved mysteries.’

Raymond West blew out a cloud of smoke and repeated the words with a kind of deliberate self-conscious pleasure.

‘Unsolved mysteries.’

He looked round him with satisfaction. By profession Raymond West was a writer. His Aunt Jane’s house had always pleased him. He looked across the hearth to where she sat erect in the big grandfather chair.

Miss Marple was knitting – something white and soft and fleecy. Her faded blue eyes, benignant and kindly, surveyed her nephew and her nephew’s guests with gentle pleasure. They rested first on Raymond himself, self-consciously debonair, then on Joyce Lemprière, the artist, with her close-cropped black head and queer hazel-green eyes, then on that well-groomed man of the world, Sir Henry Clithering.

‘What is that you say, Raymond? Unsolved mysteries? What about them?’

‘Well,’ said Raymond, ‘it seems to me we are a pretty representative gathering. How would it be if we all formed a Club? What is today? Tuesday? We will call it The Tuesday Night Club. It is to meet every week, and each member in turn has to propound a problem. Some mystery of which they have personal knowledge, and to which, of course, they know the answer.’

‘I think it would be very interesting,’ said Miss Marple.

‘Who is going to start?’ said Joyce.

‘I think there is no doubt as to that,’ said Raymond, ‘when we have the great good fortune to have such a distinguished man as the newly retired Commissioner of Scotland Yard, Sir Henry staying with us...’

He left his sentence unfinished, making a courtly bow in the direction of Sir Henry.

The latter was silent for a minute or two. At last he sighed and recrossed his legs and began:

‘It is a little difficult for me to select just the kind of thing you want, but I think, as it happens, I know of an instance which fits these conditions very aptly. The facts are very simple. Three people, a husband and wife, Mr and Mrs Jones and her companion, Miss Clark sat down to a supper consisting of tinned lobster and trifle. Later in the night, all three were taken ill, and a doctor was called. Two of the people recovered, the third one died. Death was considered to be due to ptomaine poisoning, a certificate was given to that effect, and the victim was duly buried. But things did not rest at that. Mr Jones was a traveller for a firm of manufacturing chemists. He was a good-looking man in a kind of coarse, florid way, aged about fifty. His wife was a rather common-place woman, of about forty-five. The companion, Miss Clark, was a woman of sixty, a stout cheery woman with a beaming rubicund face. The husband, Mr Jones had been staying the previous night in a small hotel in Birmingham. It happened that the chambermaid looked at the blotter in the mirror just after Mr Jones had been writing a letter. A few days later there was a report in the papers of the death of Mrs Jones as the result of eating tinned lobster, and the chambermaid then told her fellow servants the words that she had seen on the blotting pad. They were, “*I am*

*dependent on my wife...when she is dead I will...hundreds and thousands...*”

One of the maids had relations living in the small market town where the Jones' lived. She wrote to them and tongues started to wag. An exhumation order was granted and as a result of the autopsy sufficient arsenic was found in Mrs Jones' body to make it quite clear that she had died of arsenic poisoning. Suspicion naturally fell on the husband. He benefited by his wife's death. Not to the extent of the hundreds of thousands romantically imagined by the hotel chambermaid, but to the very solid amount of £8000. He had no money of his own apart from what he earned, and he was a man of somewhat extravagant habits with a partiality for the society of women.

The doctor himself was convinced that Mrs Jones' death was due to a form of botulism. Supper that night had consisted of the tinned lobster and salad, trifle and bread and cheese. The Doctor had interrogated the young maid, a pretty young thing called Gladys Linch. She was terribly upset, very tearful and agitated but she declared again and again that the lobster had appeared to her in a perfectly good condition.

So, if Jones had administered arsenic to his wife, it seemed clear that it could not have been done in any of the things eaten at supper, as all three persons had partaken in the meal. Also – another point – Jones himself had returned from Birmingham just as supper was being brought to the table, so that he would have had no opportunity of doctoring any of the food beforehand.’

‘What about the companion?’ asked Joyce.

Sir Henry nodded.

‘We did not neglect Miss Clark, I can assure you. But what motive could she have had for the crime? The only result of her employer's death was that she would have to seek another situation.

Now one of my inspectors soon discovered a significant fact,’ went on Sir Henry. ‘After supper on that evening Mr Jones had gone down to the kitchen and had demanded a bowl of cornflour for his wife who had complained of not feeling well. He had waited in the kitchen until Gladys Linch prepared it, and then carried it up to his wife's room himself. That, I admit, seemed to clinch the case.’

Raymond West was staring at Sir Henry.

‘Why did you not arrest him?’ he asked.

Sir Henry smiled rather wryly.

‘Mr Jones was not arrested because on interrogating Miss Clark she told us that the whole of the bowl of cornflour was not drunk by Mrs Jones but by her.

It seems that she went to Mrs Jones's room as was her custom. Mrs Jones was sitting up in bed and the bowl of cornflour was beside her.

‘I am not feeling a bit well, Milly,’ she said. ‘Serves me right, I suppose, for touching lobster at night. I asked Albert to get me a bowl of cornflour, but now that I have got it I don't seem to fancy it.’

‘A pity,’ commented Miss Clark, ‘it is nicely made too, no lumps. Gladys is really quite a nice cook. I declare I quite fancy it myself, I am that hungry.’

‘I should think you were with your foolish ways,’ said Mrs Jones.’

I must explain,’ broke off Sir Henry, ‘that Miss Clark, alarmed at her increasing stoutness, was doing a slimming course.

‘It is not good for you, Milly, it really isn't,’ urged Mrs Jones. ‘If the Lord made you

stout he meant you to be stout. You drink up that bowl of cornflour. It will do you all the good in the world.”

And straight away Miss Clark set to and did in actual fact finish the bowl. So, you see, that knocked our case against the husband to pieces. Asked for an explanation of the words on the blotting book Jones gave one readily enough. The letter, he explained, was in answer to one written from his brother in Australia who had applied to him for money. He had written, pointing out that he was entirely dependent on his wife. When his wife was dead he would have control of money and would assist his brother if possible. He regretted his inability to help but pointed out that there were hundreds and thousands of people in the world in the same unfortunate plight.’

‘And so the case fell to pieces?’ said Dr Pender.

‘And so the case fell to pieces,’ said Sir Henry gravely. ‘That is the case as it has stood for the last year. The true solution is now in the hands of Scotland Yard, and in two or three days time you will probably read of it in the newspapers.’

Raymond West looked over at Dr Pender.

‘Will you speak first?’ he said.

The old man shook his head. ‘I confess,’ he said, ‘that I am utterly baffled. I can think that the husband in some way must be the guilty party, but how he did it I cannot imagine. I can only suggest that he must have given her the poison in some way that has not yet been discovered, although how in that case it should have come to light after all this time I cannot imagine.’

‘Joyce?’

‘The companion!’ said Joyce decidedly. ‘The companion every time! Think of being a companion – always having to be pleasant and agree and stifle yourself and bottle yourself up. One day she couldn’t bear it any longer and then she killed her. She probably put the arsenic in the bowl of cornflour and all that story about eating it herself is a lie.’

‘Mr Petherick?’

The lawyer joined the tips of his fingers together professionally.

‘It is my private opinion, having seen, alas, too many cases of this kind, that the husband was guilty. The only explanation that will cover the facts seems to be that Miss Clark for some reason or other deliberately sheltered him. There may have been some financial agreement made between them. He might realize that he would be suspected, and she, seeing only a future of poverty before her, may have agreed to tell the story of drinking the cornflour in return for a substantial sum to be paid to her privately. If that was the case it was of course most irregular. Most irregular indeed.’

‘I disagree with you all,’ said Raymond. ‘You have forgotten the one important factor in the case. The doctor’s daughter. I will give you my reading of the case. The tinned lobster was bad. It accounted for the poisoning symptoms. The doctor was sent for. He finds Mrs Jones, who has eaten more lobster than the others, in great pain, and he sends, as you told us, for some opium pills. He does not go himself, he sends. Who will give the messenger the opium pills? Clearly his daughter. Very likely she dispenses his medicines for him. She is in love with Jones and at this moment all the worst instincts in her nature rise and she realizes that the means to procure his freedom are in her hands. The pills she sends contain pure white arsenic. That is my

solution.

‘And now, Sir Henry, tell us,’ said Joyce eagerly.

‘One moment,’ said Sir Henry. ‘Miss Marple has not yet spoken.’

Miss Marple was shaking her head sadly.

‘Dear, dear,’ she said. ‘I have dropped another stitch. I have been so interested in the story. A sad case, a very sad case. I suppose the poor girl has confessed now, and that is how you know, Sir Henry?’

‘What girl?’ said Raymond. ‘My dear Aunt, what *are* you talking about?’

‘That poor girl, Gladys Linch, of course – the one who was so terribly agitated when the doctor spoke to her – and well she might be poor thing. I hope that wicked Jones is hanged, I am sure, making that poor girl a murderess. I suppose they will hang her too, poor thing.’

Miss Marple looked across at Sir Henry.

‘I am right, am I not? It seems clear to me. The hundreds and thousands – and the trifle – I mean, one cannot miss it.’

‘What about the trifle and the hundreds and thousands?’ cried Raymond.

His aunt turned to him.

‘Cooks nearly always put hundreds and thousands on trifle, dear,’ she said. ‘Those little pink and white sugar things. Of course when I heard that they had trifle for supper and that the husband had been writing to someone about hundreds and thousands, I naturally connected the two things together. That is where the arsenic was – in the hundreds and thousands. He left it with the girl and told her to put it on the trifle.’

‘But that is impossible,’ said Joyce quickly. ‘They all ate the trifle.’

‘Oh no,’ said Miss Marple. ‘The companion was slimming, you remember. You never eat anything like trifle if you are slimming, and I expect Jones just scraped the hundreds and thousands off his share and left them at the side of the plate. It was a very clever idea, but a very wicked one.’

The eyes of all the others were fixed on Sir Henry.

‘It is a very curious thing,’ he said slowly, ‘but Miss Marple happens to have hit upon the truth. Jones had got the maid, Gladys Linch into trouble, as the saying goes. She was nearly desperate. He wanted his wife out of the way and promised to marry Gladys when his wife was dead. He doctored the hundreds and thousands and gave them to her with instructions how to use them. Gladys Linch died a week ago. Her child died at birth and Jones had deserted her for another woman. When she was dying she confessed the truth.’

There was a few moments silence and then Raymond said,

‘Well, Aunt Jane, this is one up to you. I can’t think how on earth you managed to hit upon the truth. I should never have thought of the little maid in the kitchen being connected to the case.’

‘No dear,’ said Miss Marple, ‘but you don’t know as much of life as I do. A man of that Jones’ type – coarse and jovial. As soon as I heard there was a pretty young girl in the house I felt sure that he would not have left her alone. It is all very distressing and painful, and not a very nice thing to talk about.’