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English Readers

Agatha Christie

**The
MOVING
Finger**

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Chapter 1

I

When at last my broken bones had mended, and the nurses had helped me to walk again, and I was tired of being treated like a child, my doctor, Marcus Kent told me I must go and live in the country. 'Good air, quiet life, nothing to do – that's what you need. Your sister will look after you.'

I didn't ask him if I would ever be able to fly an aeroplane again. There are questions that you don't ask because you are afraid you won't like the answers. But Marcus Kent answered anyway. 'You're going to recover completely,' he said. 'But it's going to take a long time. You've got to live slowly and easily. That's why I am telling you to go to the country, rent a house, get interested in local people, local scandal, and local gossip. And go to a village where you haven't got any friends living nearby.'

I agreed. 'I had already thought of that.' I did not want friends calling to give me sympathy, and then talking about themselves for hours.

So it happened that Joanna and I eventually decided to look at a house called Little Furze, in Lymstock, mainly because we had never been to Lymstock. And when Joanna saw Little Furze she decided at once that it was the house we wanted.

It was a low white house, with a Victorian veranda. It was about half a mile out of the town and had a pleasant view over the countryside with the Lymstock church tower down below.

It had belonged to a family of unmarried ladies, but now there was only one still alive, the youngest, Miss Emily Barton. She told Joanna that she had never rented her house before, 'but you see, my dear, I do not have enough money to live in such a

big house any more. And, now I have met you, I shall be very *happy* to know that you are here. I really did hate the idea of having *Men* in the house!’

At this point Joanna had to tell her about me.

And Miss Emily said, ‘Oh, how sad! A flying accident? But your brother will be unable to move very much –’ The thought seemed to cheer her. And she told Joanna that she was going to live with a woman who had once been her servant, ‘Dear Florence’ who had married a builder. ‘They now have a nice house in the High Street and two beautiful rooms on the top floor where I shall be very comfortable.’

So Joanna and I agreed to rent Little Furze for six months, and we moved in. Miss Barton’s servant, Partridge, a thin, humourless woman, who cooked very well, stayed to look after us. And she was helped by a girl who came in every morning.

When we had been at Little Furze for a week Mrs Symmington, the lawyer’s wife; Miss Griffith, the doctor’s sister; Mrs Dane-Calthrop, the vicar’s wife, and Mr Pye of Prior’s End all came to visit us and leave us their address cards.

Joanna was very excited. ‘I didn’t know that people really called – with *cards*.’

‘That is because you know nothing about the country,’ I said.

‘Nonsense. I’ve stayed for lots of weekends with people in the country.’

‘That is not at all the same thing,’ I said.

Then I suddenly knew how selfish my accident had made me. For my younger sister is very pretty, and she likes dancing, and driving around in fast cars. ‘This is going to be awful for you,’ I said to her. ‘You are going to miss London so much.’

Joanna laughed and said she didn’t mind at all. ‘In fact, I’m glad to get away from it all. I was really very upset about Paul and it will take me a long time to get over him.’

I didn't believe this. Joanna's love affairs are always the same. She falls madly in love with some weak young man who is really very clever, but no one understands him. She listens to all his complaints and works hard to get him respect. Then, when he is ungrateful, she says her heart is broken – until the next weak young man comes along!

So I did not take Joanna's pain very seriously. But I did understand that living in the country was like a new game to my beautiful sister.

'This is a nice place, Jerry!' she said. 'So sweet and funny and old-fashioned. You just can't think of anything awful happening here, can you?'

And I agreed with her. In a place like Lymstock nothing awful could happen. It is strange to think that it was just a week later that we got the first letter.

II

The letter arrived while we were having breakfast. It was a local letter with a typewritten address. I opened it. Inside, words had been cut out from a book and stuck to a sheet of paper. For a minute or two I looked at the words without understanding them. Then I gasped.

Joanna looked up. 'What is it?'

The letter, using very unpleasant language, expressed the writer's opinion that Joanna and I were not brother and sister.

'It's a disgusting anonymous letter,' I said, very shocked.

Joanna was immediately interested. 'What does it say?'

I handed the letter to her.

'What a piece of dirt!' She began to laugh. 'You were obviously right about my wearing too much make-up, Jerry. I suppose they think I'm an evil woman!'

‘Perhaps,’ I said. ‘But, of course, our father was tall and dark-haired and our mother was fair-haired with blue eyes. And since I look like him and you look like her . . .’

Joanna nodded. ‘Nobody would think we were brother and sister. So what shall we do with the letter?’

‘The correct thing, I believe, is to throw it into the fire.’ I did so, and Joanna watched.

Then she got up and went to the window. ‘I wonder who wrote it?’

‘We will probably never know.’

Joanna was silent for a moment. ‘When I think about it, I’m not sure that it’s so funny after all. I thought they . . . liked us down here.’

‘They do,’ I said. ‘This is just some half-mad stupid person.’

‘I suppose so. But it’s cruel!’

As she went out into the sunshine, I thought that she was quite right. It was cruel. Someone hated us living here – someone hated Joanna’s stylish beauty – somebody wanted to hurt us. To laugh was perhaps the best thing to do. But it still wasn’t funny . . .

Dr Griffith came to the house that morning. I had arranged for him to examine me once a week. I liked Owen Griffith. He was awkward in the way he moved, but he had very gentle hands.

His report on my progress was encouraging. Then he said, ‘Are you feeling all right? I sense that something has upset you today?’

‘Not really,’ I said. ‘But a rather unpleasant anonymous letter arrived this morning.’

He dropped his bag on the floor. ‘Are you telling me that you’ve also had one of them?’

I was interested. 'There have been other such letters, then?'

'Oh, yes.'

'I see,' I said. 'I thought that someone didn't like strangers living here.'

'No, no, it's nothing to do with that. It's just . . . What did it say?' Suddenly his face went red. 'Sorry, perhaps I should not ask?'

'I am happy to tell you,' I said. 'It just suggested that the very lively girl I had brought here to live with me was not my sister! And that is a polite translation.'

'How disgusting! I do hope your sister is not too upset.'

'Joanna', I said, 'found it very funny. And that is the best way to treat something so totally stupid.'

'Yes,' said Owen Griffith. 'But the trouble is, that once this sort of thing starts, it just gets bigger. It is a type of madness, of course.'

I nodded. 'Have you any idea who is doing it?'

'No, I wish I had. You see, there are usually two reasons for sending anonymous letters. Either it is *particular* and the letters are sent to one person or group of people, by someone who is angry with them for something that has happened. It is unkind and disgusting, but it's not always mad, and it's usually fairly easy to find out who the writer is. But if it is *general* and not particular, then it is more serious. The letters are sent to lots of people who are not connected by any bad treatment of the writer. This is because the main purpose of such letters is to express some deep problem in the writer's mind. And that is definitely a form of madness. Also, when you eventually find out who the writer is, it is often a real shock, and rather frightening. I remember some anonymous letters being sent when I was working in the north of England, and although they were simply about personal hatred, the situation still frightened me.'

‘Have people in Lymstock been receiving these letters for a long time?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think so. But, of course, people who get these letters don’t usually tell anyone.’ He paused. ‘I’ve had one myself. Symmington, the lawyer, he’s had one. And one or two of my patients have told me about them.’

‘Are they all about the same sort of thing?’

‘Oh yes. Sex is always the main subject.’ He smiled. ‘Symmington was accused of being involved with his secretary, Miss Ginch, who wears big glasses and has a nose like a bird’s beak. Symmington took it straight to the police. My letters said that I had been involved with several of my lady patients. They’re all quite childish, but they can still be dangerous.’

‘I suppose they can.’

‘You see,’ he said, ‘one day, one of these letters will, by chance, be accurate. And then, goodness knows what may happen! Also, some people see something written down and immediately believe that it’s true. Then things can become very unpleasant.’



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Lymstock is a small town with lots of secrets. Recently several people in the town have received anonymous hate-mail. When Mrs Symmington receives one of the letters and then dies in mysterious circumstances, the people of the town no longer know whom they can trust.

Who is writing the letters? And why? Miss Marple helps solve the mystery.

Agatha Christie

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