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Agatha Christie

The Moving Finger

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The following features are included after the story:

A List of characters to help the reader identify who is who, and how they are connected to each other. **Cultural notes** to explain historical and other references. **A Glossary** of words that some readers may not be familiar with are explained. There is also a **Recording** of the story.

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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.'

Chapter 2

I

Our anonymous letter did worry me a little but I soon stopped thinking about it. Then, about a week later, our servant, Partridge, told me that Beatrice, the girl who helped her, would not be coming today.

'She has been upset,' Partridge said.

I said I was sorry and hoped that Beatrice would soon be better.

'She is perfectly well,' said Partridge. 'It is her feelings that are upset. Because of a letter she has received, suggesting, well, that she is too friendly with you, Mr Burton.'

Since I hardly knew what Beatrice looked like I said, 'What nonsense!'

'That is just what I said to the girl's mother,' said Partridge. 'But Beatrice's boyfriend got one of those letters too, and he doesn't think it is nonsense at all. So I think it is a good thing Beatrice has left. Because she would not be so upset unless there was *something* she didn't want found out. There is no smoke without fire, Mr Burton.'

I did not know then how very tired I was going to get of that particular phrase.

II

That morning I had decided to walk down to Lymstock on my own for the first time. We had arranged that Joanna would meet me with the car and drive me back up the hill in time for lunch. The sun was shining, and there was the sweetness of spring in

the air. I picked up my walking sticks and started off. It felt like an adventure.

But I did not, after all, walk down to the town alone. I had not gone far, when I heard the sound of a bell behind me, and then Megan Hunter almost fell off her bicycle at my feet.

'Hello,' she said as she got up.

I rather liked Megan and always felt rather sorry for her. She was the lawyer Symmington's step-daughter – Mrs Symmington's daughter by a first marriage. Nobody talked much about Mr (or Captain) Hunter. I had heard that he had treated Mrs Symmington very badly. She had divorced him then came to Lymstock with Megan 'to forget', and had eventually married the only suitable unmarried man in the place, Richard Symmington. They had two little boys together whom they obviously loved very much, and I thought that Megan must sometimes feel a bit left out.

She wasn't at all like her mother, who was a small pretty woman. Megan was tall and awkward, and although she was actually twenty, she looked more like a schoolgirl. She had untidy brown hair, green eyes, a thin face, and a delightful smile. Her clothes were unattractive and she usually wore thick stockings with holes in them.

She looked, I thought this morning, much more like a horse than a human being. In fact she would have been a very nice horse if someone had brushed her.

'I've been up to the farm,' she said, 'to see if they had got any duck's eggs. They've got some sweet little pigs. Do you like pigs? I even like the smell.'

'Well-kept pigs shouldn't smell,' I said.

'Shouldn't they? Are you walking down to the town? I saw you were alone, so I thought I would stop and walk with you. But I stopped rather suddenly.'

'You've torn your stocking,' I said.

Megan looked at her right leg. 'Oh, yes. But there are two holes in it already, so it doesn't really matter, does it?'

'Don't you ever mend your stockings, Megan?'

'When Mummy tells me to. But she doesn't often notice what I do, so it's lucky in a way.'

'You don't seem to understand that you're grown up,' I said.

'You mean I ought to be more like your sister? All dressed up?'

I didn't much like this description of Joanna. 'She looks clean and tidy and good to look at,' I said.

'She's very pretty,' said Megan. 'She isn't a bit like you, is she? Why not?'

'Brothers and sisters aren't always alike.'

'No. My half-brothers Brian and Colin aren't like each other.'

We walked on in silence for a moment or two, then Megan said, 'You fly aeroplanes, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'That's how you got hurt?'

'Yes, I crashed.'

She paused, and then asked with the honesty of a child, 'Will you get better and be able to fly again, or will you always need sticks?'

'My doctor says I will get better.'

'I'm glad you're going to get better,' Megan said. 'I thought that you might look angry because you were never going to be well again.'

'I'm angry,' I said, 'because I'm in a hurry to get fit again – and these things can't be hurried.'

'Then why worry?'

I began to laugh. 'Megan, aren't you ever in a hurry for things to happen?'

'No. Why should I be? Nothing ever happens.'

I was struck by something sad in the words. 'Haven't you got any friends here?'

'There aren't many girls who live here, and they all think I'm awful.'

'Why?'

Megan shook her head.

'Did you enjoy school?'

'It wasn't bad. But the teachers could never answer questions properly.'

'Very few teachers can,' I said.

'Of course, I am rather stupid,' said Megan. 'And such a lot of things seem to me such nonsense. All that stuff those poets Shelley and Keats wrote about birds, and Wordsworth going all silly over some daffodils. And Shakespeare.'

'What's wrong with Shakespeare?'

'He says things in such a difficult way that you can't understand what he means. But I like some Shakespeare. I like Goneril and Regan.'

'Why these two?'

'Because, well *something* must have made them behave so badly.'

For the first time I really thought about them. I had always accepted that King Lear's elder daughters were two very unpleasant women and that was all. But Megan's demand for a reason interested me.

'I'll think about it,' I said. 'Wasn't there any subject you enjoyed at school, Megan?'

'Only Maths.' Her face suddenly looked happy. 'I loved Maths. I think numbers are beautiful.'

We were now entering the High Street and Dr Griffiths's sister, Aimée, called out to us, 'Hello, you two. Beautiful morning, isn't it?' She had all the confidence that her brother did not have and she was good-looking in a strong outdoor way. 'Megan, I'm so glad to see you,' she said in her deep voice. 'I want some help addressing envelopes for the Red Cross.'

Megan said something I could not hear, leant her bicycle against a wall, and went straight into a shop.

'She's a strange child,' said Miss Griffith. 'Very lazy. She needs an *interest* in life.'

I thought that was probably true. But I also felt that if I were Megan, I would have said no to any of Aimée Griffith's suggestions.

'Laziness is so wrong,' continued Miss Griffith, 'particularly in young people. Megan isn't even pretty. And she is very stupid. Of course it would be boring if we were all the same, but I don't like to see anyone not enjoying their life. I enjoy my life and I want everyone else to. I'm always busy, always happy!'

Suddenly Miss Griffith saw a friend on the other side of the street, and with a shout, she ran across the road, leaving me free to continue on my way to Messrs Galbraith, Galbraith and Symmington.

I was shown into Richard Symmington's inner office. Watching the lawyer as he bent over the documents I had brought, I thought that if Mrs Symmington had experienced a very difficult first marriage, she had certainly chosen safety for her second. Richard Symmington was an example of calm respectability. He had a long neck, a long expressionless face and a long thin nose. A kind man, no doubt, a good husband and father, but not a man to make a heart beat faster.

We quickly settled the matter I had come to ask him about and as I got up I said, 'I walked down the hill with your step-daughter.'

For a moment Mr Symmington looked as though he did not know who his step-daughter was, then he smiled. 'Oh, yes, of course, Megan. We're trying to find something for her to do – yes. But of course she's still very young. And some people think that she's not very clever.'

I left through the outer office where a middle-aged woman with a big nose and large glasses was working at a typewriter. If this was Miss Ginch, I agreed with Owen Griffith that any sexual relations between her and her employer were very unlikely.

I went into the street and looked around, hoping to see Joanna with the car. The walk had made me very tired. But she had not arrived yet.

Then suddenly my eyes widened with surprise and delight. Along the pavement there came floating towards me *a goddess*. There is really no other word for it. Her perfect face, the curling golden hair, the tall beautifully shaped body! And she walked like a goddess, without effort, coming nearer and nearer.

I was so excited that I dropped one of my sticks on the pavement, and I nearly fell down myself. It was the strong arm of the goddess that caught and held me.

'Thanks so much,' I said. 'I'm very sorry.'

Then she handed me the stick, smiled kindly and said, 'That's all right. It was no trouble, I promise you.' And the magic died completely with the sound of her very ordinary voice. She was a nice healthy-looking girl, nothing more.

Joanna had now driven up and stopped in the road beside me. She asked if there was anything the matter.

'Nothing,' I said. 'I've had a shock, that's all. Do you know who that is?' I pointed to the girl's back as she floated away.

'That's the Symmingtons' governess.' Joanna opened the door of the car and I got in. 'It's funny, isn't it? Some people have the most perfect looks and absolutely no sex appeal.'

I said that if she was a governess, having no sex appeal was probably a good thing.

Chapter 3

I

That afternoon we went to tea with Mr Pye.

He was a small fat man who lived at Prior's Lodge, a very beautiful house and made even more beautiful by Mr Pye. Every piece of furniture was polished and set in the perfect place. The curtains, too, were all made in perfectly chosen colours and of the most expensive silks. I thought that living there would be rather like living in a museum. Mr Pye's greatest pleasure was taking people round his house. His small hands shook as he described his treasures. Luckily, Joanna and I are both interested in beautiful old furniture.

'It is so fortunate', Mr Pye said, 'to have you here in Lymstock. The good people of the town are so, well – they don't know anything about style. The insides of their houses would make you cry, dear lady. Perhaps they have already done so?'

Joanna said that she hadn't gone quite as far as that.

'But I'm sure you agree,' he said, 'that beauty is the only thing worth living for. So why do people surround themselves with ugliness?'

Joanna said it was very strange.

'Strange? It's *criminal*! And they give such stupid excuses. They even say that something is *comfortable*! Now, the house you are renting, Miss Emily Barton's house, has some quite nice pieces in it. But sometimes, I think, it looks uncared for because she likes to keep things looking the same as when her mother was alive.'

He turned to me and his voice changed from that of a sensitive artist to that of a gossip.

'You didn't know the family at all? No, well, the old mother was an extraordinary person – quite extraordinary! A *monster*! "The girls"! That's what she always called her five daughters. And the eldest was well over sixty then. Every night they had to go to bed at ten o'clock. And they were never allowed to invite friends home. She had no respect for them because they were not married. But she arranged their lives so that it was impossible for them to meet anybody!'

'It sounds like a book,' said Joanna.

'Oh, it was. And then the awful old woman died, but of course it was far too late then. And soon they just died one after the other. All except Emily. It is so sad that she now has money problems.'

'We feel rather awful being in her house,' said Joanna.

'No, no, my dear. You mustn't feel like that. She told me herself how happy she was to have got such nice tenants.'

It was time to leave and we all went out into the hall. As we reached the front door a letter came through the letterbox and fell on the floor.

Mr Pye picked it up. 'My dear young people, such a pleasure to meet some lively minds for a change. Lymstock is beautiful, but nothing ever happens.' He helped me into the car. Then Joanna drove off and I turned to wave goodbye to Mr Pye.

But he did not see me, for he had just opened his letter. And his face was twisted with anger and shock. At that moment I knew that there had been something familiar about that envelope.

'Goodness,' said Joanna, looking in the car mirror. 'What's upset the poor old boy?'

'I think,' I said, 'that it's the letter.'

'You mean a letter like the one you got? But who writes these things, Jerry? And why?'

'You must read Freud and Jung to find that out,' I said. 'Or ask Dr Griffith.'

Joanna shook her head. 'Dr Griffith doesn't like me.'

'He's hardly seen you.'

'He's seen quite enough, it seems, to make him cross over the road if he sees me coming. But seriously, Jerry, why do people write anonymous letters?'

'I suppose that if others have been unkind to you, or just not noticed you, and your life is dull and empty, you might get a sense of power from hurting people who are happy.'

As we drove through the town, I looked at the few men and women in the High Street. Was one of those healthy country people really filled with hate behind their calm expression, planning perhaps even now another evil letter?

But I still did not take it seriously.

II

Two days later, on Saturday afternoon, we went to a card party at the Symmingtons'. There were two tables. The players were the Symmingtons, ourselves, Miss Griffith, Mr Pye, Miss Barton and a Colonel Appleton who lived in a nearby village.

When we arrived, Elsie Holland, the children's governess, was searching for some extra notebooks in the desk. She floated across the floor with them in the same way as when I had first seen her, but the magic was gone. I now noticed how large her teeth were, and the way she opened her mouth very wide when she laughed. Which she did a lot.

'Are these notebooks all right, Mrs Symmington? Oh, they are a bit yellow round the edges. Anyway, I'm taking the boys to Long Barrow so there won't be any noise.'

We sat down and began to play a game of bridge. Everyone was very friendly and the afternoon passed quickly and enjoyably. We then had tea in the dining-room. Suddenly, two excited little boys ran in. Mrs Symmington smiled with pride as she introduced her sons to us.

Then, just as we were finishing our tea, I heard a sound and turned my head to see Megan standing between the open French windows.

'Oh,' said her mother, sounding surprised. 'Here's Megan. I'm sorry but I forgot about your tea, dear. Miss Holland and the boys took theirs out with them.'

'That's all right. I'll go to the kitchen.' Megan moved silently across the room.

Mrs Symmington said with a little laugh, 'Poor Megan. Girls are so awkward when they've just left school.'

Joanna looked up. 'But Megan's twenty, isn't she?'

'Oh, yes, yes. She is. But she's very young for her age. Which is so nice. I expect all mothers want their children to remain babies.'

'I can't think why,' said Joanna. 'It would be a bit difficult to have a child who had a six year old brain in a grown-up body.'

'Oh, you mustn't take things so seriously,' said Mrs Symmington.

As we drove home, Joanna said, 'I feel very sorry for Megan. Her mother doesn't like her.'

'Oh, Joanna, it's not as bad as that.'

'Yes, it is. Megan does not fit into the Symmington family. It's complete without her. And that's a very unhappy feeling for a sensitive girl to have – and she is sensitive.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I think she is.'

Joanna suddenly laughed. 'Bad luck for you about the governess.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Nonsense. And I agree with you. It is a waste. She is so beautiful, until she opens her mouth, to talk or laugh! But I'm glad you noticed her. It is a sign that you are coming alive again. I was quite worried about you at the hospital. You never even looked at that very pretty nurse you had.'

I smiled. 'But what about you?'

'Me?'

'Yes. You'll need someone to give you some excitement down here. So what about Owen Griffith? He's the only unmarried man in the place.'

Joanna drove in silence through the gate and round to the garage. Then she said, 'I don't understand why any man would cross the street to avoid me. It's rude, apart from anything else.'

I got carefully out of the car, then stood leaning on my sticks. 'I'll tell you this. Owen Griffith is not one of those weak, artistic young men you've always liked. So be careful. He could be dangerous.'

'Oh, do you think so?' Joanna said with obvious pleasure at the thought. 'But how dare he cross the street when he saw me coming?'

'We have come down here,' I said, 'for peace and quiet, and I am determined that we will get it.'

But peace and quiet were the last things we were to have.

Chapter 4

I

It was about a week later that Partridge told me that Mrs Baker, the mother of the servant girl Beatrice, would like to speak to me. I hoped that I was not going to be accused of being too friendly with her daughter, as the anonymous letter had said.

But when I had offered her a chair, Mrs Baker said, 'It is very good of you to see me, Mr Burton. When Beatrice was on her bed, crying, I told her that you would know what to do.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But what has happened?'

'It is the letters. The evil letters.'

'Has your daughter received more letters?'

'Not her, Mr Burton. But now George, Beatrice's boyfriend, he's got one of them, saying how Beatrice is seeing Tom Ledbetter. George is mad with anger, and he came round and told Beatrice he didn't want to see her any more.'

'But why come to me?' I asked.

'I heard that you'd had one of these letters yourself, and I thought that, being a London gentleman, you'd know what to do about them.'

'If I were you,' I said, 'I would go to the police.'

Mrs Baker looked shocked. 'Me, go into a police station? I've never been near the police.'

'Well, they are the only people who can do something about these letters. It's their job.'

Mrs Baker said, 'These letters ought to be stopped. Young fellows like George get very violent – and so do the older ones.'

I leaned forward. 'Mrs Baker, have you any idea who is writing these letters?'

I was very surprised when she said, 'Yes, we've all got a good idea. Mrs Cleat – that's what we all think.'

'And who is Mrs Cleat?'

She was, Mrs Baker said, the wife of an old gardener. But when I asked her why Mrs Cleat would write these letters, Mrs Baker would only say that 'It would be like her.'

In the end she left, and I then decided to go and talk to Dr Griffith. He would almost certainly know this Cleat woman.

But when I arrived and told him about my conversation with Mrs Baker, Griffith shook his head. 'It's most unlikely.'

'Then why do they all think it is her?'

He smiled. 'Oh, because Mrs Cleat is the local witch.'

'Goodness!' I said.

'Yes, it does sound rather strange in this modern world. But Mrs Cleat is an unusual woman with a bitter sense of humour. If a child cuts its finger, she nods and says, "Yes, he stole my apples last week," or "He pulled my cat's tail." So mothers give her honey and cakes to make sure she won't make something bad happen to them. It's very silly, but now of course they think she must be writing the letters.'

'But she isn't?'

'Oh, no. She's not that sort of person.'

II

When I got back to the house, I found Megan sitting on the veranda steps.

'Hello,' she said. 'Could I come to lunch?'

'Of course. If you like Irish stew.'

'A bit. I mean, it's like a dogs' dinner isn't it, mostly potato and flavour?'

'Exactly,' I said.

Megan stretched out a long dusty leg. 'Look, I've mended my stockings,' she said proudly. 'Is your sister good at mending?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'Well, what does she do when she gets a hole in her stocking?'

Rather embarrassed, I said, 'I think that she throws them away and buys another pair.'

'Very sensible,' said Megan. 'But I can't do that. I only get a very small allowance.' She paused. 'I suppose you think I'm awful, like everyone else?'

'Don't be stupid,' I said.

Megan shook her head. 'That's just it. I'm not stupid. People think I am. They don't understand that inside I know just what they're like, and that all the time I hate them.'

'You *hate* them?'

'Yes.' Her sad, eyes, looked straight into mine. 'You would hate people if you were like me, if you weren't wanted.'

'Don't you think you're being rather negative?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Megan. 'That's what people always say when you speak the truth. And I understand why I'm not wanted. Mummy doesn't like me because I remind her of my father. What Mummy would really like is to be just herself with my stepfather and the boys.'

I said slowly, 'If some of what you say is true, why don't you go away and have a life of your own?'

'You mean earn my living? What at? I am stupid when I try to do things. And also . . .'

'Well?'

There were tears in her eyes. 'Why should I go away? They don't want me, so I'll *stay* and make everyone sorry. I hate everyone in Lymstock. They all think I'm stupid and ugly. But I'll show them. I'll . . .'

I heard a step on the path round the side of the house. 'Get up,' I said roughly. 'Go up to the bathroom and wash your face. Quick.'

She jumped up and disappeared through the French windows just as Joanna came round the corner.

Chapter 5

I

The Reverend Caleb Dane-Calthrop and his wife Maud Dane-Calthrop were both unusual personalities. Dane-Calthrop lived for his books and in his study. Mrs Dane-Calthrop was quite the opposite. She was frighteningly aware of everything around her. She had a long thin face, and always spoke in a very sincere way. I soon learned that almost everyone in the village was slightly afraid of her.

The day after Megan had come to lunch, Mrs Dane-Calthrop stopped me in the High Street. 'Oh, Mr Burton! Now what did I want to see you about? Something rather unpleasant, I think.'

'I'm sorry about that,' I said.

'Ah. Anonymous letters! That's it. Why have you brought anonymous letters to Lymstock?'

'I didn't bring them,' I said. 'They were here already.'

'Nobody got any until you came, though!'

'Yes they did. Several people got them.'

'Oh dear,' she said. 'That's all *wrong*. We're not like that here. And it upsets me because I ought to know about it.'

'How could you know?' I asked.

'Because I usually do. And they are such silly letters, too.'

'Have you had any yourself?'

Her eyes opened wider. 'Oh yes, two – no, three. I forget exactly what they said. It was something about Caleb and the schoolteacher. Very silly.' She paused. 'And there are so many things the letters might say, but don't. That's what is so strange. They don't seem to know any of the *real* things.'

'What do you mean exactly?'

'Well, of course. There is plenty of adultery here, and more – so why doesn't the writer use those secrets? What did they say in your letter?'

'They suggested that my sister wasn't my sister.'

'And is she?'

'Joanna is certainly my sister.'

She nodded. 'That just shows you what I mean. I expect there are other things –' She looked at me thoughtfully, and I suddenly understood why Lymstock was afraid of Mrs Dane-Calthrop.

For once, I was delighted when Aimée Griffith's loud voice called, 'Hello, Maud, I'm glad I've seen you. I want to change the date for the Red Cross sale. I must just go into the grocer's, then we'll talk, if that suits you? Good morning, Mr Burton.'

'Yes, that will do quite well,' said Mrs Dane-Calthrop. But Aimée Griffith had already gone, and she shook her head. 'Poor thing.'

I was confused. Surely she could not feel sorry for Aimée?

But she went on, 'You know, Mr Burton, I'm rather afraid . . .'

'About this letter business?'

'Yes, you see it must mean –' She paused, then she said slowly as though she was solving a problem, 'It must mean that it was caused by blind hatred . . . yes, blind hatred. But even a blind man might put a knife in the heart purely by chance – and what would happen then, Mr Burton?'

We were to know that before another day had passed.

II

It was Partridge who brought the news of the tragedy.

She came into Joanna's bedroom in the morning. 'There's awful news, Miss Burton,' she said as she pulled back the curtains. 'Shocking! I couldn't believe it when I heard.'

'What's awful?' said Joanna, trying to wake up.

'Poor Mrs Symmington.' She paused. 'Dead.'

'Dead?' Joanna sat up in bed, now wide awake.

'Yes, and what's worse, she committed suicide.'

'Oh no, Partridge!' Joanna was really shocked.

'Yes, it's the truth. But she was driven to it, poor thing.'

'Not . . .?' Joanna's eyes questioned Partridge and Partridge nodded.

'That's right. One of those evil letters!'

'What did it say?'

But unfortunately Partridge had not been able to find out.

'They're unpleasant things,' said Joanna. 'But I don't see why they would make someone want to commit suicide.'

'Not unless they were *true*, Miss Burton.' And Partridge left the room.

When Joanna came in to tell me the news, I thought of what Dr Griffith had said, that sooner or later the letter writer would hit the mark. Now they had with Mrs Symmington. She, the woman you would least suspect, had had a secret . . .

'How awful for her husband,' Joanna said. 'And for Megan. Do you think . . .' She paused. 'I wonder if she'd like to come and stay with us for a day or two?'

'We'll go and ask her,' I said.

We went down to the Symmingtons' house after breakfast. We were a little nervous because we did not want to seem too interested in what had happened. Luckily we met Owen Griffith just coming out through the gate.

'Oh, hello, Burton. I'm glad to see you. What an awful business!'

'Good morning, Dr Griffith,' said Joanna loudly.

Griffith's face went red. 'Oh, good morning, Miss Burton.'

'I thought perhaps,' said Joanna, 'that you didn't see me.'

Owen Griffith got redder still. 'I'm – I'm so sorry – I was thinking.'

Joanna went on, 'After all, I *am* standing right in front of you.'

I interrupted quickly, 'My sister and I wondered whether it would be a good thing if Megan came and stayed with us for a day or two? What do you think?'

'I think it would be an excellent thing,' he said. 'It would be good for her to get away. Miss Holland is doing very well, but she really has quite enough to do with the two boys and Symmington himself. He's quite heart-broken –'

'It was –' I paused – 'suicide?'

Griffith nodded. 'Oh yes. She wrote, "I can't go on" on a torn bit of paper, and the anonymous letter was found in the fireplace.'

'What did –' I stopped. 'Sorry,' I said.

Griffith gave a quick unhappy smile. 'It will have to be read at the inquest. But the suggestion was that the second boy, Colin, was not Symmington's child.'

'Do you think that was true?' I asked.

'I've only been here five years. But I thought the Symmingtons were a happy couple who loved each other and their boys. It's true that Colin doesn't look very much like his parents – he's got red hair, for one thing – but that's not unusual.'

'His red hair may have been the reason for the suggestion.'

'It probably was.'

'But it just happened to be correct,' said Joanna, 'or she wouldn't have killed herself, would she?'

Griffith said, 'I'm not sure. I've been treating her for a nervous condition, so she may have thought that her husband would not believe her when she said the story wasn't true.' And Owen walked away slowly down the street.

Joanna and I went on into the house. The front door was open and it seemed easier than ringing the bell, especially when we heard Elsie Holland's voice from inside the sitting room.

'But, Mr Symmington, you must eat something. You haven't had anything since lunchtime yesterday, and you will be ill if you don't eat or drink.'

Symmington said, 'You're very kind, Miss Holland, but –'

'A nice cup of hot tea,' said Elsie Holland.

Personally I would have given the poor fellow something stronger. He was sitting in a chair, looking very confused. But he took the tea, and said, 'Thank you so much, Miss Holland. You are being so good to me.'

'It's nice of you to say that, Mr Symmington. And don't worry about the children – I'll look after them. Also, if I can help in any other ways, like letter writing or telephoning, please do ask me.'

Then, as Elsie Holland turned to go, she saw us and hurried out into the hall.

'Isn't it terrible?' she whispered.

'Can we speak to you for a moment?' asked Joanna.

Elsie Holland led the way into the dining room. 'It's been awful for Mr Symmington. It's been such a shock. But, of course, Mrs Symington had been behaving strangely for some time. She had been very nervous, and often crying.'

'What we really came for,' said Joanna, 'was to ask if Megan could stay with us for a few days – that is if she'd like to come?'

Elsie Holland looked surprised. 'Megan? I don't know. I mean, one never knows what she is going to feel about anything.'

Joanna said, 'We thought it might be a help.'

'Oh well, of course it would. I mean, I haven't really had time to pay much attention to Megan. I think she's upstairs somewhere. I don't know if –'

Joanna looked at me and I went quickly out into the hall.

I found Megan in a room at the top of the house. The curtains were drawn across the windows and she was curled up on a bed in the dark like a frightened animal.

'Megan,' I said gently.

She looked at me, but she did not move.

'Megan,' I said again. 'Joanna and I have come to ask you if you would like to come and stay with us for a few days.'

'Stay with you? In your house?' Her expression did not change.

'Yes.'

'You mean, you'll take me away from here?'

'Yes, Megan.'

Suddenly she began to shake all over. 'Oh, do take me away! Please. It's so awful, being here, and feeling so evil. Can we go now?'

'Well, when you've packed a few things that you'll need. I'll be downstairs.'

I returned to the dining room. 'Megan's coming,' I said.

'Oh, that *is* good,' Elsie Holland replied. 'It will stop her thinking about herself all the time. And it will be so good for me not to have to think about her as well as everything else. I hope she won't be too difficult. Oh dear, there's the telephone. I must go and answer it.' She hurried out of the room.

Joanna said, 'What an angel!'

'You said that rather unkindly,' I told her. 'And Miss Holland is obviously very dependable.'

'Very. And she knows it.'

Before I could reply there was the sound of a suitcase bumping down the stairs. It annoyed me that Joanna had to lift it into the car. I could manage with one stick now, but I couldn't do anything that needed real strength. Anyway, we all got in and she drove off.

But, as soon as we reached Little Furze and went into the sitting room, Megan sat down and burst into tears. She cried loudly, like a small child so I quickly left the room and went to find something that might cheer her up.

When I came back I handed Megan a glass.

'What is it?'

'A cocktail,' I said.

Her tears immediately stopped. 'I've never drunk a cocktail.' She tasted the drink carefully, then a big smile spread over her face, and she swallowed the rest all at once. 'It's lovely. Can I have another?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'In about ten minutes you'll probably understand.'

'Oh!' Megan turned to Joanna. 'It is so kind of you to have me here. I am really very grateful.'

'Please don't be grateful,' said Joanna. 'We are glad to have you here. Jerry and I are so bored because we can't think of any more things to say to each other.'

'But now,' I said, 'we shall be able to have lots of interesting discussions about Shakespeare's characters – Goneril and Regan perhaps.'

Megan suddenly smiled. 'I've been thinking about that. They behaved badly because that awful old father of theirs always forced them to be so grateful. When you have to keep saying "thank you" and "how very kind", it would make you want to be very unpleasant for a change.'

'I'm afraid I always find Shakespeare very boring,' said Joanna. 'All those long scenes where everybody is drunk and it's supposed to be funny.'

'Talking of drink,' I said. 'How are you feeling, Megan?'

'Very well, thank you.'

'Not at all confused? You can't see two Joannas or anything like that?'

'No. I just feel as though I'd like to talk rather a lot.'

'Perfect,' I said. 'Keeping a clear mind while enjoying alcohol is a great advantage to any human being.'

Chapter 6

I

The inquest was held three days later.

The time of Mrs Symmington's death was put at between three and four o'clock. She was alone in the house, Symmington was at his office, the maids were having their day off, Elsie Holland and the children were out walking and Megan had gone for a bicycle ride.

The letter must have come by the afternoon post. Mrs Symmington must have read it and been very upset, so she had gone to the garden shed, found some of the cyanide kept there for killing wasps, mixed it with water and drunk it after writing those last words, 'I can't go on . . .'

The coroner said that whoever had written that evil anonymous letter was morally guilty of murder. The verdict was: Suicide while temporarily insane.

The coroner had done his best. Dr Griffith also had done his best when he spoke about Mrs Symmington's nervous condition. But afterwards, walking through the High Street, I heard the same hateful whisper I had begun to know so well, 'No smoke without fire!' 'There must have been something that was true in the letter. She wouldn't have done it otherwise . . .'

And just for a moment I hated Lymstock.

II

It is difficult to remember exactly what happened next. But I do know that several people called on us. Aimée Griffith came on

the morning after the inquest and managed, as usual, to annoy me immediately. Joanna and Megan were out, so I saw her alone.

'Good morning,' she said. 'I hear you've got Megan Hunter here?'

'We have.'

'It's very good of you. But it must be so difficult for you, so I came up to say she can come to us if you like. I can easily make her useful in the house.'

'How kind of you,' I replied. 'But we like having her. And she wanders about quite happily.'

'I'm sure that's true. Wandering is all she ever does. But, being so stupid, I suppose she can't help it.'

'Oh, I think she's rather an intelligent girl.'

Aimée Griffith gave me a long look. 'That's the first time I've ever heard anyone say that. When you talk to her, she looks through you as though she doesn't understand what you are saying!'

'She probably just isn't interested,' I said.

'If so, she's extremely rude.'

'That may be. But not stupid.'

Miss Griffith replied, 'What Megan needs is good hard work, something to give her an interest in life. She's much too old to spend her time doing nothing.'

'It's been rather difficult for her to do anything much so far,' I said. 'Mrs Symmington always seemed to think that Megan was about twelve years old.'

'I know,' Miss Griffith agreed. 'Of course she's dead now, poor woman, but I'm afraid I had little respect for Mrs Symmington, although of course I never suspected the truth.'

'The truth?' I said sharply.

Miss Griffith's face went red. 'I was very sorry for Dick Symmington when everyone heard about it at the inquest. It was awful for him.'

'But you must have heard him say that there was not a word of truth in that letter?'

'Of course he *said* so. A man's got to protect his wife. And Dick would.' She paused. 'You see, I've known Dick Symmington a long time.'

'Really? But your brother told me that you only came to Lymstock a few years ago.'

'Oh yes, but when we lived in the north of England, Dick Symmington used to come and stay near us. I've known him for years.' Her voice had softened. 'I know Dick very well. . . . He's a proud man, and very private. But he's the sort of man who could be very jealous.'

'That would explain,' I said, 'why Mrs Symmington was afraid to show him the letter. She was afraid that he might not believe it wasn't true.'

Miss Griffith looked at me angrily. 'Do you really think that any woman would swallow cyanide because of something that wasn't true? If an innocent woman gets some unpleasant anonymous letter, she laughs and throws it away. That's what I –' she paused suddenly, and then finished, 'would do.'

But I had noticed that pause. 'I see,' I said. 'So you've had one, too?'

Aimée Griffith looked straight into my eyes. 'Well, yes. But I didn't let it worry me! I read a few words of it, then threw it straight into the wastepaper bin.'

I wanted to reply, 'No smoke without fire!' but I stopped myself and went back to talking about Megan.

'Do you know anything about Megan's financial position? Will it be necessary for her to earn her living?'

'I don't think it's necessary. Her father's mother left her a small income, I believe. And Dick Symmington would always give her a home. No, it's the principle that matters.'

'What principle?'

'Work, Mr Burton. Work is good for men and for women. The one unforgivable sin is idleness.'

'Have you never thought, Miss Griffith,' I replied, 'that you would probably not be able to take a fast train to London if little George Stephenson, who invented the steam engine, had been out working instead of standing about, bored, in his mother's kitchen. For it was then that he suddenly became interested in the strange behaviour of the kettle lid?'

But Aimée Griffith was not persuaded. 'You are like most men, Mr Burton, you dislike the idea of women working. And you are just like my parents. I wanted to study to be a doctor. But they refused to pay for me to do that, although they paid happily for Owen to become a doctor.'

'I'm sorry about that,' I said. 'It was hard on you –'

She went on quickly, 'Oh, I'm not upset about it now. My life is busy and active. But I do still speak out against that stupid idea that a woman's place is always in the home.'

'I'm sorry if I offended you,' I said. 'And I don't think Megan's place is being in the home at all.'

'No, poor child. She doesn't fit in anywhere, I'm afraid. Her father, you know –'

She paused and I said, 'I *don't* know. Everyone says "her father" very quietly, and that is all. What did the man *do*? Is he alive still?'

'I really don't know. But he went to prison, I believe. And he was very strange. That's why Megan is rather difficult to be with.'

'Joanna is very fond of Megan,' I said.

Aimée said, 'Your sister must find it so boring down here.' And as she said it, I learnt that Aimée Griffith disliked my sister. It was there in the smooth sound of her voice. 'We all wonder why you have both chosen to bury yourselves in such an out-of-the-way place.'

It was a question and I answered it. 'It was because of my doctor's orders. He told me to come somewhere very quiet where nothing ever happened.' I paused. 'Not quite true of Lymstock now.'

'No, no.' She sounded worried and got up to go, then stopped. 'You know, we must try to stop it, all this unpleasantness!'

'Aren't the police doing anything?'

'I suppose so. But we ought to take control of it *ourselves*.' She said goodbye quickly and went away.

III

Emily Barton, the owner of our house, also called on us just after we had finished tea to talk about the garden. As we walked back towards the house she said, 'I do hope that Megan hasn't been too *upset* by this awful business?'

'Her mother's death, you mean?'

'That, of course. But I really meant, the unpleasantness *behind* it.'

I was interested. 'What do you think about that letter? Was it true?'

'Oh, no, no. I'm quite sure that Mrs Symmington never – but why would anyone want to write such a thing?'

'A twisted mind.'

'That seems very sad.'

'It doesn't seem sad to me. It just seems evil.'

'But why, Mr Burton, *why*? What pleasure can anyone get out of it?' She lowered her voice. 'They say that *Mrs Cleat* – but I really cannot believe it. Nothing like this has ever happened before in Lymstock.'

I said, 'You've not – er – received any letters yourself?'

Her face went very red. 'Oh, no – oh, no. Oh! That would be dreadful.'

I quickly apologized, but she went away looking upset and I went into the house.

Joanna was standing by the sitting room fire. She had a letter in her hand. 'Jerry! I found this in the letterbox. It begins, "You are an evil painted woman . . . "'

'What else does it say?'

'Same but worse.' She dropped it onto the flames.

With a quick move that hurt my back I picked it up just before it caught fire. 'Don't,' I said. 'We may need it.'

'Need it?'

'For the police.'

IV

Superintendent Nash came to see me the next morning. From the first moment I saw him I liked him. He was tall, and had thoughtful eyes and a quiet manner.

'Good morning, Mr Burton,' he said. 'I expect you can guess what I've come to see you about.'

'Yes, I think so. This letter business.'

He nodded. 'I understand you had one of them?'

'Yes, soon after we arrived here.'

'What did it say exactly?'

I thought for a minute, then repeated the words of the letter as accurately as possible.

When I had finished, he said, 'I see. You didn't keep the letter, Mr Burton?'

'I'm sorry. I didn't. However, my sister got one yesterday. I just stopped her putting it in the fire.' I went across to my desk, took it out and gave it to Nash.

He read it. Then he looked up and asked me, 'Does this look the same as the last one?'

'I think so.' I said. 'The envelope was typed. The letter had printed words stuck onto a piece of paper.'

Nash nodded and put it in his pocket. Then he said, 'Mr Burton, would you be able to come down to the police station with me? We could have a discussion there and it would save a lot of time.'

'Certainly,' I said.

There was a car waiting outside and we drove down in it. At the police station I found Symmington and Dr Griffith were already there. I was also introduced to another tall man who did not wear a uniform.

'Inspector Graves,' explained Nash, 'has come down from London to help us. He's an expert on anonymous letters.'

'They're all the same, these cases,' Graves said in a deep, sad voice. 'You'd be surprised. The words they use and the things they say.' Some of the letters were spread out on the table and he had obviously been examining them.

'The difficulty is,' said Nash, 'to get to see the letters. Either people put them in the fire, or they won't admit to having received any.' He took the letter I had given him from his pocket and gave it to Graves who read it then put it on the table with the others.

'We've got enough, I think, to go on with,' said Inspector Graves, 'and if you gentlemen get any more, would you please bring them to me at once. Also, if you hear of someone else getting one, please do your best to get them to come here with them. I've already got one sent to Mr Symmington, which he received two months ago, one to Dr Griffith, one to Mr Symmington's secretary Miss Ginch, one to Mrs Mudge, the butcher's wife, one to Jennifer Clark, who works at the Three Crowns, the one received by Mrs Symmington, and this one now to Miss Burton – oh yes, and one sent to the bank manager.'

Symmington asked, 'Have you learned anything about the writer?'

Graves coughed and then gave us a small lecture. 'There are certain things that are the same in all these letters. The words are made from separate letters cut out of a book. It's an old book, printed in about the year 1830. There are no fingerprints on the letters, but the envelopes which have been handled by the post office, have some fingerprints, but none that match. The envelopes are typewritten by an old Windsor 7 machine. Most of them have been posted locally, or put in the box of a house by hand. It is therefore obvious that they have been sent by someone from the local area. They were written by a woman, and in my opinion a woman of middle age or over, and probably, though not certainly, unmarried.'

We were silent for a minute or two. Then I said, 'The typewriter won't be difficult to find in a little place like this.'

But Inspector Graves shook his head. 'I am sorry to say that you are wrong, Mr Burton.'

'The typewriter,' said Superintendent Nash, 'came from Mr Symmington's office, and was given by him to the Women's Institute where anyone can use it. But what we do know is that

these letters were written by an educated woman, who can spell, and use words well enough to say exactly what she wants to.'

I was shocked. I had imagined the writer as someone like Mrs Cleat, someone determined, but not clever.

Symmington put my thoughts into words. 'But there are only about twelve people like that in the whole town!'

'That's right.'

'I can't believe it.' Then he continued, 'You heard what I said at the inquest. I should like to repeat now that I am certain the words in the letter my wife received were absolutely untrue.'

Graves answered immediately. 'That's probably right, Mr Symmington. None of these letters show any signs of real knowledge. They are just about sex and cruelty! And that's going to help us find the writer.'

Symmington got up. 'Well I hope you find her soon. She murdered my wife as surely as if she had put a knife into her.' He paused. 'How does she feel now, I wonder?'

He went out, leaving that question unanswered.

'How does she feel, Griffith?' I asked.

'I don't know. She may feel sorry, perhaps. Or she may be enjoying her power. Mrs Symmington's death may have fed her madness.'

'I hope not,' I said. 'Because if so, she'll –'

'She'll go on,' said Graves. 'They always do.' He paused. 'I wonder if perhaps you know of anyone who, definitely, *hasn't* had a letter?'

'What an extraordinary question! But, yes, I do, in a way.' And I told him about my conversation with Emily Barton and what she had said.

Graves said, 'Well, that may be useful.'

I went out into the afternoon sunshine and walked along to the house agents as I needed to pay our rent in advance. A woman, who was typing, got up and came towards me. She had a long nose and large glasses and I recognized her as Miss Ginch, who had recently worked for Mr Symmington.

When I asked her about it she said, 'Yes, I did work there, but I thought it was better to leave. This is not quite so well paid, but there are things that are more valuable than money, don't you think?'

'Certainly,' I said.

'Those letters,' Miss Ginch whispered. 'I got one. Saying the most *awful* things about me and Mr Symmington! And I felt that if people were talking – and they *must* have been, or where did the writer get the idea from? – then I must avoid even the appearance of immorality, though there has never been anything *wrong* between me and Mr Symmington.'

I felt rather embarrassed. 'No, no, of course not.'

'But people have such evil minds!'

I had been trying to avoid looking into her eyes, but when I did I made a most unpleasant discovery. Miss Ginch was enjoying herself.

And suddenly an idea came into my mind. Had Miss Ginch written these letters herself?

Chapter 7

I

When I got home I found Mrs Dane-Calthrop sitting talking to Joanna. She looked ill.

'This has been such a shock, Mr Burton,' she said. 'Poor thing, poor thing.'

'Yes,' I said. 'It's awful to think of someone being so unhappy that they take their own life.'

'Oh, you mean Mrs Symmington?' she asked.

'Didn't you?'

Mrs Dane-Calthrop shook her head. 'Of course I am sorry for her, but it was going to happen some time, wasn't it?'

'Was it?' said Joanna.

Mrs Dane-Calthrop turned to her. 'Oh, I think so. If you think suicide is the best way to escape from trouble, then it doesn't much matter what the trouble is. She would have killed herself one day, because she was that kind of woman. Although she always seemed rather selfish to me, as though her life was more important than other people's. But I'm beginning to understand how little I really know anyone.'

'So who were you talking about when you said "Poor thing"?' I asked.

'The woman who wrote the letters, of course. Think how unhappy someone must be to do that. How lonely. That's why I feel so upset. Somebody in this town has been filled with that terrible unhappiness, and I did not know about it. I should have known. Poor thing!' She got up to go.

I felt unable to agree with her, so I asked, 'Have you any idea who this woman is?'

'Well, I can guess, but then I might be wrong, mightn't I?' She went quickly to the door, then turned. 'Why have you never married, Mr Burton?'

From anyone else this would have been rude, but with Mrs Dane-Calthrop I felt that she really wanted to know.

'Shall we say,' I said, 'Because I have never met the right woman?'

'We can say so,' said Mrs Dane-Calthrop, 'but it wouldn't be a very good answer, because so many men have obviously married the wrong woman.' And then she left.

Joanna said, 'I really do think she's mad, but I like her. The people in the village are afraid of her.'

'So am I, a little.'

'Do you really think whoever wrote these letters is very unhappy?' Joanna asked.

'I don't know what she's thinking or feeling! And I don't care. It's her victims I feel sorry for.'

It seems strange to me now that in our discussions about Poison Pen's state of mind, we missed the most obvious one. Griffith had thought she would be pleased with what she had done. I had thought she must be sorry. Mrs Dane-Calthrop had been certain that she was suffering.

Yet the obvious reaction we did not consider was Fear.

Because with the death of Mrs Symmington, the position of the writer of the letters was much more serious. The police were now involved, so it was even more important for the anonymous writer to remain anonymous.

And if Fear was the main reaction of the writer, other things would naturally happen. Things that I did not think about either, yet they should have been obvious.

II

Joanna and I came down rather late to breakfast the next morning. That is to say, late for Lymstock. And I was annoyed to see Aimée Griffith standing on the doorstep talking to Megan. Nine-thirty is not the time for a morning call.

'Hello, there, you lazy pair!' she called. 'I just wanted to ask Miss Burton if she had any vegetables she could give to our Red Cross sale. If so, I'll get Owen to call for them in the car.'

Megan came back into the house and went into the dining room. At that moment the telephone rang and I went into the hall to answer it. 'Yes?' I said.

The noise of deep breathing came from the other end and a female voice said 'Oh!'

'Yes?' I said again.

'Oh,' said the voice again. 'Is that – is it Little Furze?'

'This is Little Furze.'

'Oh!' the voice said once more, then asked, 'Could I speak to Miss Partridge for a minute?'

'Certainly,' I said. 'Who shall I say?'

'Oh. Tell her it's Agnes, would you? Agnes Woddell.'

I put down the telephone and called up the stairs, 'Partridge. Agnes Woddell wants to speak to you.'

Partridge appeared with a brush in her hand. 'Agnes Woddell – whatever can she want now?' She put down her brush and came down the stairs looking very angry.

I escaped into the dining room where Megan was eating bacon and eggs alone. So I opened the morning newspaper and a little later Joanna entered.

'Whew!' she said. 'Is it true that there are no green beans at this time of year?'

'August,' said Megan and got up and went out of the French doors on to the veranda.

'Well, one has them any time in London,' said Joanna.

When I had finished my breakfast, I followed Megan outside. Standing on the veranda, I heard Partridge enter the dining room.

'Can I speak to you a minute, Miss Burton?' she said. 'I am very sorry that someone called me on your telephone. The young person who did it should have known better because Agnes used to work here. She was only sixteen then, but she hasn't got a mother or any family. And that's why I'm asking if you would allow her to come here to tea with me this afternoon. It's her day off, you see, and she's worried about something and wants to talk to me about it.'

Joanna said, 'But why shouldn't she come to tea with you?'

Partridge stood up very straight, as she replied, 'It has never been allowed in this house, Miss.'

'It's no good, Joanna,' I said when Partridge had gone and my sister had come outside. 'Your sympathy is not welcome. You are not respected for it.'

Joanna said, 'I'm a complete failure today – with Aimée for knowing nothing about vegetables, and with Partridge for being a human.'

Then Megan, who was now standing in the middle of the lawn, came back towards us and said, 'I must go home now.'

'What?' I said.

She went on, 'It's been very good of you to have me and I have enjoyed it, but I must go back because, well, it's my home and I can't stay away for ever, so I think I'll go this morning.'

Both Joanna and I tried to make her stay, but she was determined, so finally Joanna got out the car and drove her back to Mr Symmington's house.

III

Owen Griffith arrived just before lunch time, and while the gardener was loading the vegetables into his car, I brought Owen indoors for a drink. He said he wouldn't stay to lunch.

When I came into the sitting room with the glasses I found Joanna on the sofa asking Owen questions about his work. She said she thought that being a doctor was one of the most interesting jobs in the world.

Then she said, 'Do change your mind and stay to lunch with us, Dr Griffith,' and Griffith said that his sister was expecting him . . .

'We'll ring her up and explain,' said Joanna and went out into the hall. She came back smiling and said that it was all right.

And Owen Griffith stayed to lunch and seemed to enjoy himself. We talked about books and about music and painting. We didn't talk about Lymstock at all, or about anonymous letters, or Mrs Symmington's suicide.

When he had gone I said to Joanna, 'That fellow's too good for your usual female tricks.'

Joanna said, 'That's what you always say! What are you men so frightened of?'

IV

That afternoon we were going to tea with Miss Emily Barton at her rooms in the village. We must have got there early, for the door was opened to us by a tall fierce-looking woman who told us that Miss Barton wasn't in yet. 'But she's expecting you, I know, so if you'll come up and wait, please.'

This obviously was Miss Barton's former servant, faithful Florence. We followed her up the stairs and she showed us into

a pleasant sitting room. 'I make her as comfortable as I can,' she said, 'but she ought to be in her own house.'

Joanna, said, 'Well, Miss Barton wanted to rent out the house. She went to the house agents.'

'Forced into it,' said Florence. And looking hard at us for some moments she left the room.

'We don't seem to be very popular,' I said. 'Megan gets tired of us, Partridge disapproves of you, Florence disapproves of both of us.'

Joanna said, 'I wonder why Megan *did* leave?'

'She got bored.'

'I don't think she did. Do you think, Jerry, it could have been something that Aimée Griffith said?'

I was about to reply that she might easily have upset Megan when the door opened and Miss Emily came in. Her face was pink and she seemed excited. Her eyes were very blue and shining.

'Oh dear, I'm so sorry I'm late. I was just doing a little shopping in the town, and the cakes at the Blue Rose didn't seem to me quite fresh, so I went on to Mrs Lygon's . . .'

Joanna said quickly, 'No, Miss Barton, you are not late. We were early. Jerry is walking so fast now that we arrive everywhere too soon.'

'You could never be too soon, dear. One cannot have too much of a good thing, you know.'

Joanna brightened up. At last, it seemed, she was being a success.

And then the door opened and Florence came in with a tray of tea and some little cakes.

Joanna and I ate far more than we wanted to and of course we talked about the people who lived in Lymstock. Miss Barton said

how kind and clever Dr Griffith was. Mr Symmington, too, was a very clever lawyer, and had helped Miss Barton to get some money back from the income tax. He was so nice to his children, too, and to his wife.

She was less sure about Mr Pye. All she said was that he was very kind, and very rich, too. He had very strange visitors sometimes, but then, of course, he had travelled a lot.

'I have often thought I would like to go on a holiday,' said Emily Barton.

'Why don't you go?' asked Joanna.

'Oh, no, no, travelling alone would not be suitable for a lady, don't you agree?'

'I'm not sure,' said Joanna, and then quickly tried to calm her by asking a question about the Red Cross sale in the village. This led us to talk about Mrs Dane-Calthrop.

'You know, dear,' Miss Barton said, 'she does say some very *strange* things sometimes.'

I asked what things.

'Oh, very *unexpected* things. And the way she looks at you, as though you weren't there but somebody else was. And then she won't – well, *do* anything. There are so many cases where a vicar's wife could tell people what is right, and make them behave better. But she refuses, and she also has a habit of feeling sorry for the most unpleasant people.'

'That's interesting,' I said, looking quickly at Joanna.

'But she is very loyal to her husband who is such a clever man – and such a good man, too.'

V

At dinner that night, Joanna said to Partridge that she hoped her tea party had been a success.

Partridge's face went red. 'Thank you, but Agnes didn't come after all.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

'It didn't matter to *me*,' said Partridge. 'It wasn't me who asked her!'

'Perhaps she was ill,' Joanna said. 'Did you phone her to find out?'

'No, I did not,' Partridge replied. 'If Agnes likes to behave rudely, that's her problem, but I shall tell her exactly what I think when we meet.' And she went out of the room, stiff with hurt pride.

Joanna and I laughed, then began talking of the anonymous letters and wondered how Superintendent Nash and Inspector Graves were getting on.

'It's a week today exactly', said Joanna, 'since Mrs Symmington's suicide. They must have got on to something by now. Fingerprints, or writing or *something*.'

But I was thinking about something else and a strange sense of uneasiness was growing in my mind. It was connected with the phrase that Joanna had used, 'a week exactly'.

And Joanna noticed suddenly that I wasn't listening to her. 'What's the matter, Jerry?'

I did not answer because my mind was busy putting things together. Mrs Symmington's suicide . . . She was alone in the house that afternoon . . . Alone in the house *because the maids were having their day off* . . . A week ago exactly . . .

'Joanna, servants have days off once a week, don't they?'

'Yes.'

I crossed the room and rang the bell. Partridge came in. 'Tell me,' I said, 'this Agnes Woddell. Is she a servant in someone's house?'

'Yes, Sir. At Mr Symmington's.'

I looked at the clock. It was half-past ten. 'Would she be back there now, do you think?'

'Yes, Sir. The servants have to be in by ten.'

I went out into the hall and picked up the telephone. Joanna and Partridge followed me.

'Sorry to ring you up,' I said when Elsie Holland answered. 'This is Jerry Burton speaking. Has your servant Agnes come in?'

Miss Holland sounded very surprised. 'Agnes? Of course she'll be in by now.'

I felt like a fool, but I went on. 'Do you mind just checking that she has come in?'

Luckily a governess is used to doing things when told. Elsie Holland put down the receiver and went away.

Two minutes later I heard her voice. 'Are you there, Mr Burton?'

'Yes.'

'Agnes isn't in yet.'

I knew then that I had been right. I heard a noise of voices from the other end of the line, then Symmington himself spoke.

'Hello, Burton, what's the matter?'

'Your servant Agnes isn't back yet?'

'No. There's not been an accident, has there?'

'Not an accident,' I said.

'Do you mean you think something has happened to the girl?'

'I shouldn't be surprised,' I told him.

Chapter 8

I

I slept badly that night. I must know who wrote those evil letters. 'No smoke without fire.' There *was* a pattern, if only I could find it . . .

At last I fell asleep.

It was the telephone that woke me.

I sat up and looked at my watch. It was half-past seven. I jumped out of bed, ran down to the hall and picked up the receiver.

'Hello?'

'Oh, thank goodness, it's *you*!' It was Megan's voice, upset and frightened. 'Oh, please do come – *do* come! Will you?'

'I'm coming at once,' I said.

I ran back upstairs and into Joanna's room.

'I'm going to the Symmingtons'.'

She rubbed her eyes like a small child. 'Why – what's happened?'

'I don't know – it was something to do with the girl Agnes, I'm sure.'

I washed, shaved, dressed, got the car out and drove to the Symmingtons' in half an hour. Megan came running out of the house. 'Oh, you've *come*!'

She was shaking. I put my arm round her. 'Yes. Now what is it?'

'I – I found her.'

'You found Agnes? Where?'

'Under the stairs. There's a cupboard, and she was in there among the fishing rods and things. When I touched her she was cold – she was *dead*!'

'What made you look there?' I asked.

'After you telephoned last night, we waited for a while, but she didn't come in, and at last we went to bed. I didn't sleep well and got up early. I had some bread and butter, and then suddenly Rose came in and said that Agnes's outdoor clothes were still in her room. And I began to wonder if she'd ever left the house, and I started looking round, and . . . The police are here. My stepfather rang them up straight away. Then I felt I couldn't bear it, and I rang *you* up. You don't mind?'

'No,' I said. 'Come on, let's go to the kitchen.'

We went round to the back door. Rose, a plump middle-aged woman, was drinking tea by the fire. When she saw us she put her hand on her heart.

'Just think, it might have been *me*, it might have been any of us, murdered in our beds . . .'

I interrupted her. 'Make a good strong cup of that tea for Miss Megan. She's had a shock; remember, it was she who found the body.'

The word 'body' made Rose open her mouth to talk again, but I stopped her with a fierce look and she poured out a cup of strong tea.

'There you are,' I said to Megan. 'Drink that.' Then I told her to stay with Rose and went through into the house.

I met Elsie Holland in the hall. 'Oh, Mr Burton, isn't it *awful*? Whoever can have done such a dreadful thing? And *why*? Poor Agnes, I'm sure she never did anyone any harm.'

'No,' I said. 'Somebody made sure of that.'

She looked surprised, then said, 'I must go up to the boys. Mr Symmington is so anxious that they shouldn't be upset.' She hurried upstairs.

Then a door opened and Superintendent Nash stepped out into the hall. 'Oh, Mr Burton, I'd like to speak to you. You got here very quickly? How did you know?'

I said that Megan had rung me up; and followed him into a little morning room.

'I hear that you telephoned last night and asked about this girl? Why was that?'

I told him about Agnes's telephone call to Partridge and how she had not come to tea as arranged.

He said, 'Yes, I see. Well, it's murder now. The question is, what did the girl know? Did she say anything to Partridge?'

'I don't think so.'

'Well, I'll come up and ask her when I've finished here.'

'What happened?' I asked.

'Well, it was the servants' day off. Rose comes from Nether Mickford, and in order to get there she has to catch the half-past two bus. So yesterday Rose went off at two twenty-five. Symmington left for his office at twenty-five to three. Elsie Holland and the children went out at a quarter to three. Megan Hunter went out on her bicycle about five minutes later. Agnes was then alone in the house. She normally left between three o'clock and half-past three, but yesterday it is clear that she didn't, because she was still in her uniform when we found her body.'

'How was she killed?'

'She was first hit on the back of the head. Afterwards a small kitchen knife was pushed in the base of the skull, immediately killing her.'

'Very cold-blooded,' I said. 'Who did it? And why?'

'I don't suppose', said Nash slowly, 'that we shall ever know exactly why. But we can guess.'

'Did she know something?'

'She knew something. Rose said she'd been upset ever since Mrs Symmington's death, and she'd been getting more and more worried, and kept saying she didn't know what to do.' He shook his head. 'If only she had come and told us what was worrying her, she would be alive today.'

'It's awful,' I said, 'not knowing.'

'Actually, I think I know what may have been worrying her. You see, on the afternoon that Mrs Symmington killed herself, both servants were supposed to be out. But actually Agnes came back to the house.'

'You know that?'

'Yes. Agnes had a boyfriend – young Rendell who works in the fish shop. On Wednesdays it closes early and he used to come here to meet Agnes. That Wednesday they had a quarrel almost as soon as they met. Rendell had received an anonymous letter saying that Agnes was seeing another man. He was very angry with her so Agnes ran back to the house.'

'And?'

'Now, that letter to Mrs Symmington *didn't come by post*. But it had a used stamp on it so that it would look as though it had. You understand what that means?'

I said slowly, 'It means that it was pushed through the letterbox some time before the afternoon post was delivered, so that it would be amongst the other letters.'

'Exactly. So my theory is this. The girl was looking through the window, hoping that her young man would come and apologize.'

'*And she saw whoever it was deliver that letter*?'

'That's my guess, Mr Burton. I may be wrong, of course.'

'I don't think you are . . . and it means that Agnes knew *who the anonymous letter writer was.*'

'Yes.'

'But then why didn't she . . .?'

'Because the girl *didn't understand what she had seen.* Not at first. But the more she thought about it, the more worried she became. So she decided to ask Partridge whether she should tell someone.'

'Yes,' I said. 'And somehow, Poison Pen found out. How did she find out?'

'You're not used to living in the country, Mr Burton. First of all there's the telephone call. Who overheard it in your house?'

I thought. 'I answered the telephone. Then I called up the stairs to Partridge.'

'Mentioning the girl's name?'

'Yes – yes, I did.'

'Did anyone overhear you?'

'My sister or Miss Griffith possibly.'

'Ah, Miss Griffith was visiting. Was she going back to the village straight afterwards?'

'She was going to Mr Pye first.'

Superintendent Nash shook his head. 'That's two people who could have spread it all over the village. And then, of course, there is this house. Miss Holland, Rose – they could have heard what Agnes said. And Rendell may have told people that Agnes came back here that afternoon.'

I felt cold. I was looking out of the window. In front of me was a path and a small gate. Someone had opened the gate, had walked up to the house, and pushed a letter through the

letterbox. I saw, in my mind, the woman's shape. The face was blank – but it must be a face that I knew . . .

'But what do you think happened yesterday?'

'I think a certain lady walked up to the front door and rang the bell. Maybe she asked for Miss Holland, or perhaps she had brought a parcel. Anyway, Agnes turned round to put her visiting card or the parcel on the table, and our caller hit her on the back of the head.'

'And then stabbed her in the neck and hid her in the cupboard?' I thought for a moment. 'But if Agnes suspected this person . . .'

Nash interrupted me. 'She didn't. She just thought it was "strange". She didn't suspect that she was dealing with a woman who would commit murder. You see, Mr Burton, we're dealing with someone who is highly respected!'

II

We left the morning room and went to find Elsie Holland, who was organizing the boys' lessons. She led us into another room.

'Miss Holland,' Nash said. 'Will you tell me exactly what happened yesterday afternoon?'

'Well, we had lunch as usual at one o'clock. Then Mr Symmington went back to the office, and I took the boys out.'

'Where did you go?'

'Towards Combeacre, by the field path – the boys wanted to fish. I forgot the bait and had to go back for it.'

'What time was that?'

'About ten minutes to three, perhaps.'

'Did you go into the house?'

'No. I'd left the bait in the shed.'

'Did you see Megan or Agnes?' Nash asked.

'No, I didn't see anyone.'

'You make the tea on Wednesdays, Miss Holland?'

'Yes. The food is all ready in the sitting room for Mr Symmington. I just make the tea when he comes in. The children and I have ours in the schoolroom.'

'What time did you get in?'

'At ten minutes to five. Then when Mr Symmington came in at five I went down to make his tea, but he said he would have it with us. The boys were so pleased. We even played a card game. It seems awful to think of it now – with that poor girl in the cupboard all the time.'

'So you noticed nothing unusual when you came back yesterday afternoon?'

Her blue eyes opened very wide. 'Oh no, Superintendent, nothing at all.'

'And what about the week before?'

'You mean the day Mrs Symmington . . .'

'Yes. Were you out all that afternoon also?'

'I always take the boys out in the afternoon as we do lessons in the morning. We went up on the hill – quite a long way.'

'You didn't go up to see Mrs Symmington when you got back?'

'Oh no.'

Nash said lightly, 'So no one would take the post up to her?'

'No. Mrs Symmington used to come down and get it herself. She was usually awake by four.'

'You didn't think anything was wrong because you hadn't seen her that afternoon?'

'No. Mr Symmington was hanging up his coat and I said, "Tea's not quite ready, but the kettle's nearly boiling," and he called out, "Mona, Mona!" – and then as Mrs Symmington

didn't answer he went upstairs to her bedroom . . . then he called me and said, "Keep the children away," and . . .'

Nash said, 'That letter she received, Miss Holland, do you think it was true that one of her sons wasn't her husband's?'

Elsie Holland said firmly, 'No, I don't. But Mrs Symmington was very *sensitive* and anything so *unpleasant* would have given her a great shock.'

Nash was silent for a moment, then he asked, 'Have you had any of these letters?'

'No, I haven't had any.'

'Are you sure? We know that the statements in them are all lies, so you don't have to feel embarrassed.'

'But, Superintendent, really I haven't.' She was almost tearful.

When she went back to the children, Nash said, 'Well, she says she hasn't received any of these letters. And she sounds as though she's speaking the truth. So what I want to know is, why hasn't she received one? I mean, she's a pretty girl, isn't she?'

'She's rather more than pretty.'

'Exactly. So why has she been left out?'

I shook my head. 'But she's not the only person. There's Emily Barton, remember.'

Nash gave a small laugh. 'You mustn't believe everything you're told. Miss Barton had one all right – more than one.'

'How do you know?'

'Because her former servant, the faithful Florence was very angry about it and told us.'

'Why did Miss Emily say she hadn't received any?'

'Because the language isn't nice.'

'What did her letters say?'

'That she poisoned her mother and most of her sisters!'

I said, 'How can this mad and dangerous person be free to write all these things and we can't see who it is?'

'We will,' said Nash. 'She'll write just one letter too many.'

'But she won't, will she – not after the murder.'

He looked at me. 'Oh yes she will. You see, *she can't stop now.* She *needs* to write them.'

Chapter 9

I

Nash and I went up to our house together so that he could speak to Partridge. Afterwards he joined Joanna and me.

'She wasn't much help. She just said that the girl was worried about something and that she wanted Partridge's advice.'

'There's something I want to ask,' I said. 'Why were my sister and I sent anonymous letters when we had only just arrived here?'

The superintendent said, 'I don't know if either of you looked closely at the envelope of the letter Miss Burton got. If so, you may have noticed that it was actually addressed to Miss Barton, and the *a* altered to a *u* afterwards.'

That remark ought to have given us a new idea about the whole business. But none of us noticed it then. When Nash had gone, Joanna said, 'You don't think that letter was really meant for Miss Emily, do you?'

'No. Because it would not have begun, "You are an evil painted woman,"' I replied.

Then Joanna suggested that I should go down to the town. 'You ought to hear what everyone is saying this morning!'

II

Joanna was quite right. The High Street was full of people talking. I met Griffith first.

'You've no idea who committed this murder?' I asked.

'No. I wish I knew.' He asked how Joanna was, and said that he had some photographs she wanted to see. I offered to take them to her.

'Oh, it doesn't matter. I shall be passing that way later in the morning.'

I let him go as I saw his sister coming and this time I wanted to talk to her.

'Absolutely awful!' Aimée Griffith called. 'It's the first murder we've ever had in Lymstock. I hear Megan found the body? It must have given her a bit of a shock.'

'It did,' I said shortly. Then I made a sudden decision. 'Tell me, Miss Griffith, was it you who persuaded her to return home yesterday?'

'Well, I wouldn't say persuaded.'

'But you did say something to her?'

Aimée Griffith looked straight into my eyes, 'That young woman doesn't know how people talk.'

'Talk, what talk?'

Aimée Griffith continued, 'Oh, I don't think any of it's true! But it's rather hard on the girl when she's got to earn a living.'

'Has she got to earn a living?' I asked, confused.

'It's a difficult position for her. I mean, she can't go immediately and leave the boys with no one to look after them. But, of course people will gossip!'

'Who are you talking about?' I asked.

'Elsie Holland, of course.'

'And what are people saying?'

Aimée Griffith laughed. It was, I thought, rather an unpleasant laugh. 'That she is planning to become Mrs Symmington No. 2. Of course, it's mad! And poor Dick Symmington hasn't

any idea of all this! But if the girl is always there, making him comfortable, and looking after the boys – well, he will begin to depend on her. And that's why I told Megan that she ought to go home. It looks better than having Dick Symmington and Miss Holland alone in the house, don't you agree?' she said, and walked away.

III

I met Mr Pye by the church. He was talking to Emily Barton and turned to me with obvious pleasure. 'So, a real Sunday newspaper murder here in Lymstock! Only a little servant. But still it is news.'

Miss Barton said, 'It is shocking. She was such a nice girl. She came to me from the children's home where she had lived for most of her life and Partridge was very pleased with her. Then she went to work for the Symmingtons.'

'Of course,' said Mr Pye. 'But Lymstock, I am afraid, is not what it was! Anonymous letters, murders, what next?'

Emily Barton said, 'They don't think that the two are connected, I hope.'

'An interesting idea,' said Mr Pye. 'The girl knew something, therefore she was murdered. Yes, yes, of course. How clever of you to think of it.'

'I can't bear to think of it.' And Emily Barton turned away, walking very fast.

'What do you really think about all this business?' I asked Mr Pye.

'Such unlikely people can surprise you by doing such strange things,' he replied. 'So I would advise the police to forget fingerprints and handwriting and to study *character.*

Notice instead what people do with their hands, and the way they eat their food, and if they laugh sometimes for no obvious reason.'

'Mad?' I said.

'Completely mad,' said Mr Pye, 'but you'd never know it!' And he walked happily off down the street.

IV

I arrived back at Little Furze just a few minutes before lunch time and went out to join Joanna on the veranda. There were two chairs by the iron table and two empty glasses on it. On another chair was a strange object. 'What on earth is this?' I asked.

'Oh. It's a photograph of a diseased lung which Dr Griffith thought I'd be interested in.'

I looked at the photograph. Every man has his own ways of connecting with women. But I would not, myself, choose to do it with photographs of lungs, diseased or otherwise.

'It looks most unpleasant,' I said. 'How was Griffith?'

'He looked tired and very unhappy. I think he's got something on his mind.'

'I should say he's got *you* on his mind. I wish you'd leave the man alone, Joanna.'

'Oh, do be quiet. I haven't done anything.' She turned and walked away across the lawn.

The diseased lung was beginning to curl up in the sun. I picked it up by one corner and took it into the sitting-room. Then I pulled out a heavy book from the bookcase in order to press the photograph flat again between its pages. It was a book of somebody's sermons and it came open in my hand in

a surprising way. In moment I saw why. *From the middle of it a number of pages had been neatly cut out.*

I was looking at the book which Poison Pen must have used to cut out words to use in the anonymous letters. But who had cut the pages out?

Well, it could have been anyone who had been alone in this room, any visitor who had sat here waiting for Emily Barton. So, almost anyone in Lymstock.

V

After lunch I took the book down to the police station.

They were excited. They tested it for fingerprints, but they didn't find any of interest. There were mine, and Partridge's because she cleaned very carefully, but nobody else's.

I asked Nash how he was getting on. 'We're narrowing it down. We know the people it couldn't be.'

'Ah,' I said. 'And who remains?'

'Miss Ginch. She had arranged to meet someone yesterday afternoon at a house they were selling not far along the road from the Symmingtons'. And the day of Mrs Symmington's suicide, which was Miss Ginch's last day at Symmington's office, she could also have walked past the house when she went out to get some stamps.'

'Who else remains as a suspect?'

Nash looked very straight ahead of him. 'You'll understand that we can't decide to leave out anybody.'

'No,' I said. 'I see that.'

He said, 'Miss Griffith went to Brenton for a meeting of the Red Cross yesterday. She arrived rather late.'

'You don't think . . .'

'No, but I don't *know*. Miss Griffith seems a very healthy-minded woman but . . .'

'What about last week? Could she have put the letter in the letterbox?'

'It's possible. She was shopping in the town that afternoon. The same is true of Miss Emily Barton. She was out shopping yesterday afternoon and she went to see some friends on the road past the Symmingtons' house the week before.'

I shook my head. I remembered Miss Emily coming in yesterday so bright and happy and excited. . . Yes, excited . . . surely not because . . .

'And there's Mr Pye,' Nash said. 'A strange character – not, I think, a very nice character. And he says he was alone in his garden on both occasions.'

'So you're not only suspecting women?'

'I don't think a man wrote the letters, but we've got to include *everybody*. Because this is a murder case. *You're* all right,' he smiled, 'and so is your sister. And Mr Symmington didn't leave his office, and Dr Griffith was visiting patients.'

I said, 'So your suspects are down to those four – Miss Ginch, Mr Pye, Miss Griffith and Miss Barton?'

'Oh, no, no, we've got a couple more – as well as the vicar's wife.'

'You've thought of *her*?'

'We've thought of *everybody*, and Mrs Dane-Calthrop could have done it. She was in the woods bird-watching yesterday afternoon – and the birds can't speak for her.'

He turned sharply as Owen Griffith came into the police station. 'Hello, Nash. I heard you wanted to speak to me.'

Nash said, 'Mrs Symmington was taking some pills that you gave her. Would too many of those have killed her?'

'Not unless she'd taken about twenty-five of them! Anyway, there's no doubt about the cause of death. It was cyanide.'

'Oh, I know that – I only thought that when committing suicide, you'd prefer to take a lot of pills that would make you go to sleep, rather than to take cyanide.'

'Oh, right. But cyanide is almost certain to kill you. With the pills it might have been possible to save her if she was found quickly.'

'I see, thank you, Dr Griffith.'

Griffith left, and I walked slowly up the hill to Little Furze. Joanna was out, and there was a note written on the telephone pad.

If Dr Griffith rings up, I can't go on Tuesday, but could manage Wednesday or Thursday.

I went into the sitting room, sat down and tried to think the whole thing over. Owen's arrival had interrupted my conversation with the superintendent, who had just mentioned two other people as being possible suspects. I wondered who they were.

Partridge, perhaps? After all, the book with the pages cut out had been found in this house. But who was the other? Somebody that I didn't know?

I closed my eyes and considered four people in turn. Gentle little Emily Barton? What points were there actually against her? Controlled from early childhood? Her dislike of discussing anything 'not very nice'? Was that actually a sign of an inner interest in such things?

Aimée Griffith? Surely nobody could control her. Cheerful and successful. Yet there was something . . . Ah, yes! Owen Griffith saying, 'We had some anonymous letters sent to people

in the north of England when I was working there.' Had that been Aimée Griffith?

No, because they'd found the writer of those. Griffith had said it was a schoolgirl.

Why did I suddenly feel so cold and upset?

Perhaps it was Aimée Griffith, *not* the schoolgirl? And Aimée had started her tricks again. And that was why Owen Griffith was looking so unhappy. He suspected his sister.

Mr Pye? Not a very nice little man. I could imagine him arranging the whole business . . . laughing . . .

Then that message on the telephone pad in the hall . . . why did I keep thinking of it? Griffith and Joanna – he was falling in love with her. No, that wasn't why the message worried me. It was something else . . .

My thoughts were going round and round and I kept repeating to myself, 'No smoke without fire. No smoke without fire. . . That's it . . . it all fits together . . .'

Then I was suddenly in the church and Elsie Holland was getting married to Dr Griffith and the Reverend Dane-Calthrop was reading the service in Latin. And in the middle of it Mrs Dane-Calthrop jumped up and cried, 'It's got to be stopped!'

Then I woke up, and I was in the sitting room of Little Furze and Mrs Dane-Calthrop had just come through the French windows and was standing in front of me saying, 'It has got to be *stopped*, I tell you.'

I jumped up. 'Sorry, what did you say?'

Mrs Dane-Calthrop banged a small table with her hand. 'It's got to be stopped. These letters! Murder! We can't go on having poor children like Agnes Woddell *killed*!'

'You're quite right,' I said. 'But what do you suggest we do?'

'I said this wasn't an evil place. I was wrong. It is.'

'Yes, but what are you going to *do*?'

'I'm going to call in an expert. Someone who knows all about *evil*!'

Before I could say anything, Mrs Dane-Calthrop went out into the garden again.

Chapter 10

I

The next week felt like a dream.

The inquest on Agnes Woddell was held and the only possible verdict was returned, 'Murder by person or persons unknown.' So poor little Agnes, having had her hour of fame, was then buried in the old churchyard and life in Lymstock went on as before.

No, that last statement is untrue. Not as before . . .

There was a half-scared, half-excited light in almost everybody's eye. Neighbour looked at neighbour. Somewhere in Lymstock was a person who had cracked a girl's skull and pushed a knife into her brain.

But no one knew who that person was.

And in the evenings, with the curtain drawn, Joanna and I sat talking and arguing, over all the various possibilities.

Mr Pye?

Miss Ginch?

Mrs Dane-Calthrop?

Aimée Griffith?

Emily Barton?

Partridge?

And all the time, nervously, we waited for something to happen.

But nothing did happen. Emily Barton came to tea. Megan came to lunch. We went for drinks with Mr Pye. And we went to tea at the vicarage.

Our afternoon there, in the big comfortable sitting room, was one of the most peaceful we had spent. The Dane-Calthrops had

a guest staying with them, a gentle old lady who was knitting something with white wool. It was very pleasant.

I don't mean that we did not mention the murder, because we did.

Miss Marple, the guest, was very excited by the subject. 'Tell me, dear,' she said to Mrs Dane-Calthrop, 'what do the townspeople – say? What do *they* think?'

'Mrs Cleat still, I suppose,' said Joanna.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Dane-Calthrop. 'Not now.'

Miss Marple asked who Mrs Cleat was. Joanna said she was the village witch.

'She's a very silly woman,' said Mrs Dane-Calthrop. 'She goes out to gather plants when there is a full moon and makes sure that everybody knows about it.'

I asked, 'But why shouldn't people suspect her of the murder? They thought she had written the letters.'

Miss Marple said, 'Oh! But the girl was killed with a *knife*, very unpleasant! So that means it *can't* be this Mrs Cleat. Because she could just use her powers to make the girl die from natural causes.' She turned to me. 'Mr Burton, now *you* are a stranger here. Perhaps you can find a solution to this problem.'

I smiled. 'The best solution I have had was a dream. In my dream it all fitted together. Unfortunately when I woke up the whole thing was nonsense!'

'How interesting. Do please tell me about the nonsense!'

'Oh, it all started with the silly phrase "No smoke without fire." And then I got it mixed up with other phrases: smoke screens, torn bits of paper, telephone messages – No, that was another dream.'

'And what was that dream?'

'Well, Elsie Holland, the Symmingtons' governess, was getting married to Dr Griffith and the vicar here was reading the service in Latin, and then Mrs Dane-Calthrop got up and said it had got to be stopped! But that part,' I smiled, 'was true. I woke up and found you standing over me saying it.'

'And I was quite right,' said Mrs Dane-Calthrop.

'But where did a telephone message come in?' asked Miss Marple.

'Oh, I'd forgotten, that wasn't in the dream. I came through the hall and noticed Joanna had written down a message to be given to someone if they rang up.'

Miss Marple looked at Joanna. 'Will you think me *very* rude if I ask just what that message was?'

'I don't mind,' Joanna said. 'I can't remember anything about it myself.'

I repeated the message as best I could, worried that it was going to disappoint Miss Marple, but she smiled.

'I thought it might be something like that.'

Mrs Dane-Calthrop said sharply, 'Like what, Jane?'

'Something quite ordinary.' Miss Marple had begun knitting again. 'You know, to commit a successful murder must be very much like doing a magic trick. You've got to make people look at the wrong thing and in the wrong place.'

'Well,' I replied. 'So far everybody seems to have looked in the wrong place for our mad person.'

'I myself,' said Miss Marple, 'would probably look for somebody very sane.'

'That's what Nash said,' I told her. 'He also said they would be very respectable.'

'Yes,' agreed Miss Marple. 'That's important.' She looked at Joanna. 'Have you had a letter, Miss Burton?'

Joanna laughed, 'Oh, yes! It said the most awful things.'

'I'm afraid,' said Miss Marple, 'that people who are young and pretty are likely to be chosen by the writer.'

'That's why I think it's odd that Elsie Holland hasn't had any,' I said.

'Is that the Symmingtons' governess – the one you dreamt about, Mr Burton?' Miss Marple asked.

'Yes.'

'She's probably had one and won't say so,' said Joanna.

'No,' I said, 'I believe her. So does Nash.'

'Dear me,' said Miss Marple. 'Now that's very interesting. That's the most interesting thing I've heard yet.'

II

It was two nights later that I was driving back from having dinner with an old friend, and it was already dark before I got into Lymstock. Something was wrong with the car lights, so I got out and managed to fix them.

The road was empty. The first few houses were just ahead, and amongst them was the Women's Institute building. Something made me want to go and have a look at it. A short path led up to the door. I stood for a moment wondering what I was doing there. Then suddenly I heard a slight sound, like the movement of a woman's skirt, so I turned and went round the corner of the building towards where the sound had come from.

I couldn't see anybody, so I went on and round the back of the house where there was an open window. I moved nearer to it and listened. I could hear nothing, but I felt sure that there was someone there.

My back still wasn't very good, but I managed to climb up and drop down inside. Then I moved forward, until I heard a

faint sound ahead of me. I had a torch in my pocket and switched it on.

At once a low, sharp voice said, 'Switch that off.'

And I obeyed, for I had immediately recognized the voice. I felt Superintendent Nash take my arm and guide me through a door and into a passage. Here, where there was no window, he switched on a lamp and looked at me more in sadness than in anger.

'You *would* have to interrupt just at that minute, Mr Burton.'

'Sorry,' I said. 'But I had a feeling that something was happening.'

'And it probably was. Somebody came round the house before you. They stopped by the window, then moved on quickly – because they heard *you*, probably.'

I apologized again. 'But why are you here?'

Nash said, 'I believe that the writer of the letters will want to keep them looking the same. She's got the cut-out pages of that book, and can go on using them. But she'll want to type the envelopes on the same machine. So, I worked out that she would come to the Institute after dark to get at the typewriter.'

For the third time I apologized for my unwanted presence and went out into the night. Someone was standing beside my car.

'Hello!' Megan said. 'What have you been doing?'

'What are you doing is much more to the point?' I said.

'I'm out for a walk. I like walking at night. Nobody stops you and says silly things, and I like the stars.'

'All of that is true,' I said. 'But only cats and witches walk in the dark. And your family will worry about you.'

'No, they won't. They never worry where I am or what I'm doing.'

'Well, get in the car and I'll drive you home.'

It was not quite true what Megan had said. Symmington was standing on the doorstep as we drove up. 'Hello, is Megan there?' he called.

'Yes, I've brought her home.'

Symmington said sharply, 'You mustn't go off like this without telling us, Megan. Miss Holland has been very worried about you.'

Megan said something I couldn't hear and went past him into the house.

Chapter 11

I

The next day I went mad. Looking back on it, that is really the only explanation I can find.

It was time for my monthly visit to my London doctor, Marcus Kent. To my surprise Joanna decided to stay behind. Usually she was keen to come and we would stay there for two days. This time, however, I intended to return the same day.

The station of Lymstock is half a mile outside Lymstock itself, and as I was driving there I saw Megan wandering along the road. So I stopped. 'Hello, what are you doing?'

'Just out for a walk.'

'Not your usual sort of healthy walk.'

'Well, I wasn't going anywhere particular.'

'Then you'd better come and wave goodbye to me at the station.' I opened the door of the car and Megan jumped in.

When we arrived, I parked the car and went in to buy my ticket. 'Would you lend me some money so that I can get some chocolate out of the machine?' Megan asked.

'Here you are,' I said, handing her a coin.

She went off to the chocolate machine, and I looked after her with a feeling of annoyance. She was wearing muddy shoes, and thick stockings and a shapeless woollen top. I said as she came back, 'Why do you wear those awful stockings?'

'What's the matter with them?'

'Everything. And why do you . . .'

At this minute the train arrived, so I got in and leaned out of the window to continue the conversation. Megan asked me why I was so cross.

'I'm not cross.' I lied. 'I just hate you not caring about how you look.'

'I can't look nice, anyway, so what does it matter?'

'My goodness,' I said. 'I'd like to take you to London and buy you a completely new set of clothes.'

'I wish you could,' said Megan.

The train began to move. I looked down into her sad face. And then, as I have said, madness came upon me. I opened the door, took Megan's arm and pulled her into the train.

'What on earth did you do that for?' she asked.

'Because' I said, 'I'm going to show you what you can look like if you try.'

'Oh!' said Megan in an excited whisper.

The ticket collector came along and I bought her a return ticket. We arrived in London with half an hour to spare before my appointment at my doctor's. So we took a taxi straight to Joanna's dressmaker, Mary Grey, who is a clever and very pleasant woman.

I said to Megan. 'I'll say you are a relation of mine.'

'Why?'

'Don't argue,' I said.

I took Mary Grey aside. 'I've brought a young relation along. Joanna was going to accompany her but was prevented at the last minute. She said I could leave it all to you. You see what the girl looks like now?'

'I certainly do,' said Mary Grey.

'Well, I want her dressed perfectly from head to foot. Stockings, shoes, underwear, everything! By the way, the man who does Joanna's hair is near here, isn't he?'

'Antoine? Round the corner. I'll arrange that too. I shall enjoy it.' Mary looked at Megan. 'She's got a lovely figure.'

'You are a true professional,' I said. 'She looks completely shapeless to me. Right, I'll come back and collect her at about six.'

II

Marcus Kent was pleased with my progress. 'It's wonderful what country air, no late nights, and no excitement will do for a man.'

'The first two are true,' I said. 'But don't think that the country is free from excitement. We've had a lot.'

'What sort of excitement?'

'Murder,' I said.

Marcus Kent whistled. 'Some country love story? Farm boy kills his girl?'

'Not at all. A clever, determined killer.'

'I haven't read anything about it. When did they arrest him?'

'They haven't, and it's a she!'

'Whew! I'm not sure that Lymstock's the right place for you, Burton.'

I said firmly, 'Yes, it is. And you're not going to get me out of it.'

'Oh, all right. It certainly hasn't done you any harm. What about having dinner with me this evening? You can tell me all about this murder.'

'Sorry. I'm already doing something.'

'With a lady, eh? You're definitely getting better.'

'I suppose you could call her that,' I said, rather amused at the idea of Megan described in that way.

I was at the dressmaker's at six o'clock and Mary Grey came to meet me. 'You're going to have a shock! I've done some good work.'

I went into the main room. Megan was standing looking at herself in a long mirror. I hardly recognized her! Tall and stylish

with lovely legs in fine silk stockings. Her hair had been cut and it shone, also like silk. She did not wear make-up, or if she did it was so light that it did not show.

And there was something about her that I had never seen before, a new innocent pride in the way she looked at me with a small shy smile. 'I do look – rather nice, don't I?'

'Nice?' I said. 'Nice isn't the word! Come on out to dinner and if every man doesn't turn round to look at you I'll be surprised.'

Megan was not beautiful, but she was unusual and she had personality. She walked into the restaurant ahead of me and, as the waiter hurried towards us, I felt a strange pride. We had cocktails first. Then we ate. And later we danced. For some reason I hadn't thought Megan would dance well. But she did. Her body and feet followed the rhythm perfectly.

'Gosh!' I said. 'You can dance!'

'Well, of course I can. We had dancing class every week at school.'

'It takes more than dancing class to make a dancer,' I said.

It was a perfect evening and I was still behaving in a rather mad way. Megan brought me back to reality when she said, 'Shouldn't we be going home?'

'Goodness!' I said, and knew that the last train had gone. So I ordered a taxi to come round as soon as possible.

It was very late when we arrived at Lymstock. Symmington's house was dark and silent. On Megan's advice, we went round to the back and threw stones at Rose's window.

Eventually she came down to let us in. 'Well now, Miss Megan, I thought you'd gone to bed.'

I said that bed was where Megan should go now.

'Good night,' she said, 'and thank you. It's been the loveliest day I've ever had.'

So I was also driven home and as the car left, the front door opened and Joanna said, 'It's you at last, is it?'

'Were you worried about me?' I asked, going inside.

'Worried about you? No, of course not. I thought you had decided to stay in London and have fun.'

'I have had fun – of a kind.' I smiled and then began to laugh.

Joanna asked what I was laughing at and I told her all about the fun I'd had with Megan.

'But Jerry, you can't do things like that – not in Lymstock. It will be all round the town tomorrow.'

'I suppose it will. But Megan's only a child.'

'She isn't. She's twenty. You can't take a girl of twenty to London and buy her clothes without a most awful scandal. Goodness, Jerry, you'll probably have to marry the girl.' Joanna was half-serious, half-laughing.

It was at that moment that I made a very important discovery. 'I don't mind if I do,' I said. 'In fact – I'd like it.'

A strange expression appeared on Joanna's face. As she went towards the stairs she said, 'Yes, I've known that for some time . . .'

Chapter 12

I

I went along to the Symmingtons' house at eleven o'clock the next morning, rang the bell, and asked to see Megan.

Rose put me in the little morning room and when the door opened Megan was in her old clothes again but she had managed to make them look completely different.

She grinned. 'Hello!'

It's wonderful what the knowledge of her own attractiveness can do for a girl. Megan, I knew suddenly, had grown up. I said, 'You didn't get into trouble about yesterday, I hope?'

'Oh, *no*,' she said. 'Well, yes, I think I did. I mean, they said a lot of things – but you know how excited people can get about nothing.'

'I came round this morning,' I said, 'because I like you a lot, and I think you like me . . .'

'Very much!' said Megan.

'And we get on very well together, so I think it would be a good idea if we got married.'

'Oh,' said Megan. 'You mean, you're in love with me?'

'I'm in love with you.'

Her eyes were serious. She said, 'I think you're the nicest person in the world – but I'm not in love with you.'

'I'll make you love me.'

'That wouldn't work. I'm not the right wife for you. I'm better at hating than loving.'

I said, 'Hate doesn't last. Love does.'

'Is that true?'

'It's what I believe.' I paused. 'So it's "No," is it?'

'Yes, it's no.'

II

I walked away from the house feeling confused. I had felt so certain that Megan was right for me that I had expected her to feel the same.

But I was not giving up. Oh no! Megan was my woman and I was going to have her.

When I got home Joanna was out and she did not return for lunch. It was half-past three when she walked into the sitting room. I had heard a car stop outside, but Joanna came in alone. She seemed upset.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

She sat down. 'I've had the most awful day. I've done the most unbelievable thing.'

'But what –'

'I went out for a walk. I walked for miles, then in a small valley I saw a farmhouse. I was thirsty, so I wandered into the yard to ask for some water, but then the door opened and Owen came out.'

'Yes?'

'He thought I might be the nurse. There was a woman in there having a baby and things were going wrong. So he said to *me*. "Come on, you can help me – better than nobody." I said I couldn't, that I'd never done anything like that –

'He said what did that matter? He said, "You're a woman, aren't you? Don't you want to help another woman?" And he reminded me that I'd mentioned I might be interested in becoming a doctor. "Just silly talk, I suppose! You didn't mean

anything real by it, but this *is* real and you're going to behave like a decent human being and not like a useless half-brain!" Now I've done the most unbelievable things, Jerry. Held instruments and boiled them and handed things to him. I'm so tired I can hardly stand up. But he saved her – and the baby. It was born alive. Oh dear!' Joanna covered her face with her hands.

I said, 'There's a letter for you in the hall. From your ex-boyfriend Paul, I think.' I went out into the hall and brought Joanna her letter.

She opened it, looked at it then dropped it on the floor. 'Owen was really rather wonderful. The way he fought to save the baby, the way he wouldn't be beaten! He was rude and awful to *me* – but he *was* wonderful.'

Chapter 13

I

Things never come when they are expected.

My mind was full of Joanna's and my personal affairs and I was shocked the next morning when Nash's voice said over the telephone, '*We've got her,* Mr Burton! Can you come down to the police station?'

I left immediately and when I got there I was taken to a room where Nash and Sergeant Parkins were waiting.

'It's been a long chase,' Nash said, smiling. 'But we're there at last.'

He passed a letter across the table. This time it was all typewritten and compared to the others, almost gentle.

It's no use thinking you're going to step into a dead woman's shoes. The whole town is laughing at you. Get out now. Soon it will be too late. This is a warning. Remember what happened to that other girl. Get out now and stay out.

'Miss Holland received that this morning,' said Nash.

'Who wrote it?' I asked.

Some of the pleasure left Nash's face. 'Aimée Griffith.'

II

Nash and Parkins went to the Griffiths' house that afternoon, and I went with them.

'The doctor hasn't many friends here,' Nash said. 'Perhaps you could help him deal with the shock.'

We rang the bell, asked for Miss Griffith, and were shown into the sitting room. Elsie Holland, Megan and Symmington were there having tea. Nash asked Aimée if he could speak to her privately for a moment.

'Not in trouble over my car lights again, I hope?' She led us across the hall into a small study.

As I closed the drawing room door, I saw Symmington raise his head sharply. I supposed that because of his legal training he had recognized something in Nash's manner.

Nash told Aimée that she must come with him to the police station. And he read out the charge. It was about the letters, not murder yet.

Aimée Griffith laughed loudly. 'What nonsense! As though I'd write disgusting things like that. You must be mad.'

Nash showed the letter to Elsie Holland. 'Do you swear you did not write this, Miss Griffith?'

'Of course I do. I've never seen it before.'

Nash said, 'I must tell you, Miss Griffith, that you were seen typing that letter on the machine at the Women's Institute between eleven and eleven-thirty p.m. on the night before last. Yesterday you entered the post office with several letters in your hand . . .'

'I never posted this.'

'No, *you* did not. While waiting for stamps, you dropped it on the floor, so that somebody else would pick it up and post it.'

The door opened and Symmington came in. 'What's going on? Aimée, if there is anything wrong, you ought to be legally represented. If you wish me . . .'

She lost control then. She covered her face with her hands and said, 'Go away, Dick. I don't want you to know – about this. Not *you*!'

'Then I'll ask my partner Mildmay to do it.' Symmington went out of the room. In the doorway he bumped into Owen Griffith.

'What's this?' said Owen. 'My sister – you think she was responsible for those letters?'

'I'm afraid there is no doubt of it,' said Nash. He turned to Aimée, 'You must come with us now, please.'

She walked past Owen without looking at him. 'Don't say anything. And please don't *look* at me!'

They went out and Owen just stood there unable to move. I waited a bit, then said. 'If there's anything I can do . . .'

He said, 'Aimée? I don't believe it.'

'It may be a mistake,' I suggested weakly.

'She wouldn't behave like that if it was a mistake.' He sat down on a chair. I made myself useful by pouring a strong drink and bringing it to him. It seemed to do him good. He said, 'I'm all right now. Thanks, Burton, but there's nothing you can do. Nothing *anyone* can do.'

The door opened and Joanna came in, went over to Owen and looked at me. 'Get out, Jerry. This is my business.'

As I went out of the door, I saw her sit down on the floor by his feet.

III

I can't remember exactly what happened over the next twenty-four hours. But I do know that Joanna came home looking very tired and saying, 'He says he won't have me, Jerry. He's very, very proud!'

And I said, 'My girl won't have me, either . . .'

To which she replied, 'The Burton family isn't exactly in demand at the moment!'

So I said, 'Never mind, we still have each other,' and Joanna said, 'Somehow, Jerry, that doesn't comfort me much just now.'

But Owen called the next day and went on and on about how wonderful Joanna was, that she was willing to marry him – at once if he liked. But he wasn't going to let her do that. No, she was too good to be associated with the kind of scandal that would soon be in the papers.

I then went down to Lymstock, first to the police station where Nash told me they had completed the case against Aimée. When they had searched her house they had found the cut pages of Emily Barton's book – in the cupboard under the stairs.

'The lady seems to have liked that particular hiding-place,' I said.

The vicarage had been one of the last places to hear the news, and Miss Marple was very upset by it. 'It isn't *true*, Mr Burton.'

'It is, I'm afraid. The police actually saw her type that letter.'

'Yes, yes – perhaps they did. Yes, I can understand *that*.'

'And the printed pages from which the letters were cut were found in her house.'

Miss Marple looked at me. 'But that is really *evil*. 'What can one *do*? There must be *something*. But I am so old and so stupid.'

I felt rather embarrassed and was glad when Mrs Dane-Calthrop took her friend away for a cup of tea. But I saw Miss Marple again that afternoon, much later when I was on my way home. She was standing near the little bridge at the end of the village, talking to Megan.

I walked quickly towards them, but as I came close, Megan turned away and went off in the other direction. It made me angry and I would have followed her, but Miss Marple stopped me.

'No, don't go after Megan now. It wouldn't be wise.' I was just going to give her a sharp reply when she continued, 'That girl has great courage – very great courage. Don't try and see her now. She needs to keep her courage strong.'

There was something in her words that frightened me. It was as though she knew something that I didn't. I was afraid and didn't know why.

I went back into the High Street and wandered around. I don't know what I was waiting for, nor what I was thinking about . . . but then I saw Miss Marple for the third time. She was coming out of the police station.

IV

Where do one's fears come from? Where do they shape themselves? Where do they hide before coming out into the open?

Now in my mind there was one short phrase that I had heard and had never forgotten, 'Take me away – it's so awful being here – feeling so evil . . .'

Why had Megan said that? There could be nothing in Mrs Symmington's death to make Megan feel evil. But did she feel responsible in some way?

Megan? Impossible! Megan couldn't have had anything to do with those letters –

Owen Griffith had known a case in the north of England – a schoolgirl . . .

No, no, not *Megan.*

'I'm not the wife for you. I'm better at hating than loving.' This is what Megan had told me.

Oh, my Megan, not *that*! But Miss Marple suspects you. She says you have courage. Courage to do *what*?

I wanted to see Megan – I wanted to see her very much. At half-past nine that night I left the house and went down to the town and along to the Symmingtons'. It was then that a new idea came into my mind. The idea of a woman whom nobody had considered for a moment. Wildly unlikely, but not *impossible.*

I walked faster. It was now even more important to see Megan soon. I passed through the Symmingtons' gate and up to the house. It was a dark, cloudy night. I saw a line of light from one of the windows. The little morning room?

I paused for a moment, then instead of going up to the front door, I turned and went very quietly up to the window beside a large bush. The light came from between the curtains which were not quite closed. It was easy to look through and see the strangely peaceful scene. Symmington in a big armchair, and Elsie Holland, her head bent, sewing.

I could hear as well as see for the window was open at the top. Elsie Holland was speaking. 'But I do think, really, Mr Symmington, that the boys are old enough to go away to school. I shall hate leaving them, of course, because I'm very fond of them both.'

Symmington said, 'I think perhaps you're right about Brian. I've decided that he shall start next term at Winhays – where I went as a boy. But Colin is a little young. I'd prefer him to wait another year.'

'Well, Colin is perhaps a little young for his age . . .'

It was quiet homely talk – a quiet homely scene –

Then the door opened and Megan came in. She stood very straight in the doorway, and I was aware at once of something different about her. Her eyes were bright and determined.

She said to Symmington, 'I would like to speak to you, please. Alone.' Symmington looked surprised and not very pleased. But Megan turned to Elsie Holland and said, 'Do you mind, Elsie?'

'Oh, of course not,' Elsie Holland jumped up, and went to the door. Then, just for a moment stood there looking over her shoulder, one hand stretched out, the other holding her sewing. I couldn't breath, so strong was the power of her beauty. Then she was gone.

Symmington said rather crossly, 'Well, Megan, what do you want?'

Megan had come right up to the table. She stood there looking down at him. 'I want some money.'

Symmington said sharply, 'Don't you think your allowance is big enough?'

Megan said, 'I want a lot of money.'

Symmington sat up straight. 'You will be twenty-one in a few months' time. Then you will receive the money left you by your grandmother.'

Megan said, 'You don't understand. I want money from you. Nobody's ever told me much about my father, but I do know that he went to prison and I know why. It was for blackmail!' She paused. 'Well, I'm his daughter, and perhaps I'm like him. Anyway, I'm asking you to give me money because if you don't . . .' she stopped and then went on very slowly, '*if you don't, I shall say what I saw you doing to the pills that day in my mother's room.*'

There was a silence. Then Symmington said, 'I don't know what you mean.'

Megan said, 'I think you do.' And she smiled. It was not a nice smile.

Symmington got up and went over to the desk. He took a cheque book from his pocket, wrote out a cheque and held it out to Megan.

'You're grown up now,' he said. 'I can understand that you may want to buy some nice clothes. I don't know what you were talking about. But here's a cheque.'

Megan looked at it. 'Thank you. That will be enough for the present.' She turned and went out of the room.

Symmington stood looking at the closed door, then he turned round and as I saw his face I made a quick movement forward.

But suddenly the large bush by the window stopped being a bush and Superintendent Nash's arms went round me and Superintendent Nash's voice breathed in my ear, 'Quiet, Burton. Quiet!' Then, very carefully he made his way back to the path, taking me with him.

'That girl isn't safe,' I said. 'You saw his face? We've got to get her out of here.'

Nash held my arm firmly. 'Now, Mr Burton, you've got to *listen*.'

V

Well, I listened. I didn't like it – but I said I'd do as he wanted.

So I went with Nash and Parkins into the house by the back door. And I waited with Nash upstairs behind a curtain until we could hear the clocks striking two, and Symmington's door opened and he went along the passage and into Megan's room.

And I did not move because I knew that Sergeant Parkins was there behind her door, and I knew that Parkins was good at his job, and I knew that I couldn't have trusted myself to keep quiet and not go mad.

And I saw Symmington come out of the room with Megan in his arms and carry her downstairs, as Nash and I followed at a careful distance behind him.

He carried her through to the kitchen and he had just arranged her with her head in the oven and had turned on the gas when Nash switched on the light.

And that was the end of Richard Symmington. Even while I was pulling Megan out of the oven and turning off the gas, I saw that he was finished. He didn't even try to fight.

VI

Upstairs I sat by Megan's bed waiting for her to wake up.

'How do you know she's going to be all right?' I said to Nash. 'It was too big a risk.'

Nash was very calm. 'He just put a gentle sleeping powder in the water by her bed. He thought the whole thing was finished with Miss Griffith's arrest. He couldn't risk another mysterious death. But if a rather unhappy girl put her head in the gas oven and committed suicide – well, people will just say that the shock of her mother's death had been too much for her.'

I said, watching Megan, 'She's taking a long time to wake up.'

'You heard what Dr Griffith said? Her heart is perfectly all right – she'll just sleep and wake naturally.'

Then Megan moved and said something. So Superintendent Nash left the room.

She opened her eyes. 'Jerry.'

'Hello, my dear.'

'Did I do it well?'

'You might have been blackmailing ever since you were born!'

Megan closed her eyes again. 'Last night I was writing to you – in case anything went – went wrong. But I was too sleepy to finish. It's over there.'

I went across to the desk. 'My dear Jerry,' the letter began, 'I was reading my school Shakespeare and the sonnet that begins:

So are you to my thoughts as food to life
Or as sweet-seasoned showers are to the ground.

and I know that I am in love with you after all, because that is what I feel . . .'

Chapter 14

'So you see,' said Mrs Dane-Calthrop, 'I was quite right to call in an expert.'

I looked at her, surprised. 'But did you? Who was it? What did he do?'

We were all at the vicarage. The rain was pouring down outside and there was a pleasant wood fire.

'It wasn't a he,' said Mrs Dane-Calthrop and turned to where Miss Marple sat knitting. 'That's my expert. Jane Marple. She knows more about human evil than anyone I've ever known.'

'I don't think you should put it quite like that, dear,' said Miss Marple.

'But you do.'

So Miss Marple put down her knitting and explained to us what she had learned about murder. 'Most crimes are very simple. This one was. The truth was really so obvious. You saw it, Mr Burton.'

'I did not.'

'But you did. To begin with, that phrase "No smoke without fire." It annoyed you, because you understood what it was – a smoke screen. Everybody looking at the wrong thing – the anonymous letters. But the whole point was that there *weren't* any anonymous letters!'

'But Miss Marple, there *were*. I had one.'

'Oh yes, but they weren't real. Even in Lymstock there are plenty of scandals, and any woman living in the place would have known about them and used them. But a man isn't usually interested in gossip – especially a man like Mr Symmington. So if you look through the smoke and come to the fire you see that just one thing happened – Mrs Symmington died.

'So then, naturally, one thinks of who might have wanted Mrs Symmington dead, and of course the first person one thinks of is, I am afraid, the *husband*. And one asks is there any *reason*? – for example, *another* woman?

'And the very first thing I hear is that there is a very attractive young governess in the house. So clear, isn't it? I'm afraid that when older gentlemen fall in love, they get the disease very badly. It's a madness. And for Mr Symmington, only his wife's death would solve his problem, because he wanted to marry Elsie. He wanted everything, his home, his children, his respectability. And the price he would have to pay for that was murder.

'But he knew that if a wife dies unexpectedly, the first suspect is the husband. So he created a death which seemed to be the result of something else. He created an anonymous letter writer. And the clever thing was that the police were certain to suspect a *woman* – and they were quite right in a way. All the letters *were* a woman's letters; he copied them from the letters in the case in the north of England that Dr Griffith had told him about. He took words and phrases from them and mixed them up, and the result was that the letters definitely represented a woman's mind.

'He knew all the tricks that the police use, handwriting and typewriting tests. So he typed all the envelopes before he gave away the typewriter to the Women's Institute, and he cut the pages from the book at Little Furze when he was waiting in the sitting room one day. People don't open books of sermons much!

'And finally, when he had got his false Poison Pen established, he organized the real thing. A sunny afternoon when the governess and the boys and his stepdaughter would be out, and the servants were having their regular day off. He couldn't know that Agnes would quarrel with her boyfriend and come back to the house.'

Joanna asked, 'But what did Agnes *see*?'

'I don't know. But I would guess that she saw nothing.'

'So she imagined it all?'

'No, no, my dear, I mean that she stood at the window all the afternoon waiting for her boyfriend to come and say sorry and that – surprisingly – she saw *nothing*. That is, *no one* came to the house at all, not the postman, nor anybody else. And afterwards she understood that this was very strange – because Mrs Symmington *had* received an anonymous letter that afternoon.'

'Didn't Mrs Symmington receive one?' I asked, confused.

'But of course not! Her husband just mixed the cyanide with the pills she took every day after lunch. All Symmington had to do was to get home as usual, call his wife, get no answer, go up to her room, drop a little cyanide in the glass of water she had used to swallow the pills, throw the anonymous letter into the fireplace, and put by her hand the torn bit of paper with "*I can't go on*" written on it.' Miss Marple turned to me. 'You were quite right about that, too, Mr Burton. A "torn bit of paper" was all wrong. People don't leave suicide notes on torn bits of paper. They use a *sheet* of paper. Yes, the torn paper was wrong and you knew it.'

'You are rating me too high,' I said. 'I knew nothing.'

'But you *did*, Mr Burton. Otherwise why were you immediately interested in the message your sister left on the telephone pad?'

I repeated slowly, ' "Say that *I can't go on* Friday" – I see! *I can't go on*?'

Miss Marple smiled at me. 'Exactly. Mr Symmington saw a similar message that his wife had written and understood how he might use it. So he tore off the words he wanted for when the time came – a message in his wife's handwriting.'

'Was there anything else clever that I did?' I asked.

Again Miss Marple smiled at me. 'You told me the most important thing of all – that Elsie Holland had never received any anonymous letters.'

'Do you know,' I said, 'last night I thought that was why *she* must be the letter writer.'

'Oh dear, me, no. . . The person who writes anonymous letters almost always sends them to herself as well. No, no, the fact interested me for *another* reason. Because it was Mr Symmington's one weakness. He couldn't bear to write an unpleasant letter to the girl he loved. And that is how I knew he had killed his wife.'

Joanna said, 'And he killed Agnes. Why?'

'He probably heard her telephoning Partridge, saying that she was worried about Mrs Symmington's death. He couldn't risk the idea that she might know something.'

'But he was at his office all that afternoon?'

'I think he killed her before he went. Miss Holland was in the kitchen. He just opened and shut the front door as though he had gone out, then slipped into the little cloakroom and waited there until Agnes was alone in the house.'

Joanna said, 'But what about Aimée Griffith? The police actually *saw* her write that letter.'

'Yes, of course,' said Miss Marple. 'She did write *that* letter.'

'But why?'

'Oh, my dear, Miss Griffith had been in love with Symmington all her life. She probably thought, after Mrs Symmington's death, that perhaps – well –' Miss Marple coughed delicately. 'And then the gossip began spreading about Elsie Holland and I expect that upset her badly. So she thought, why not add one more anonymous letter, and frighten the girl away?'

'Well,' said Joanna. 'What happened next?'

'I think,' said Miss Marple, 'that when Miss Holland showed that letter to Symmington he knew at once who had written it, and he saw a chance to make himself safe. So he took the family to tea at the Griffiths's house and easily managed to hide the torn-out book pages under the stairs. Which was also a very clever detail as it reminded everyone of where Agnes's body had been found.'

'Right,' I said. 'But there's one thing I can't forgive you for, Miss Marple – using Megan.'

Miss Marple looked at me over her glasses. 'Mr Burton, *something* had to be done. There was no proof against this very unpleasant man. I needed someone to help me, someone clever and with great courage.'

'It was very dangerous for her.'

'Yes, it was dangerous, but we are not put into this world, Mr Burton, to avoid danger when an innocent person's life is at risk. You understand me?'

I understood.

Chapter 15

It was morning in the High Street. Miss Emily Barton came out of a shop. Her face was pink and her eyes were excited.

'Oh dear, Mr Burton, I am going on a holiday at last!'

'I hope you'll enjoy it.'

'Oh, I'm sure I shall. For a long time I've felt unable to sell Little Furze as I couldn't bear the idea of *strangers* there. But now that you have bought it and are going to live there with Megan – it is quite different. And although I would never have dared to go by myself, dear Aimée, after her terrible experience, has agreed to come with me! It will do her so much good. Because she has also just heard that her brother is getting married. But how nice to think you are *both* going to stay in Lymstock!'

I went along to the Symmingtons' house and Megan came out to meet me.

It was not a romantic meeting because a very big dog came out with Megan and nearly knocked me over.

'Isn't he sweet?' she said.

'A little energetic. Is he ours?'

'Yes, he's a wedding present from Joanna. We have had nice wedding presents, haven't we? That knitted woollen thing that we don't know what it's for from Miss Marple, and the lovely china bowl from Mr Pye, and Elsie has sent me a cake-stand –'

'How typical,' I said.

'She's got a job with an accountant and is very happy. And – what was I talking about?'

'Wedding presents. Don't forget if you change your mind, you'll have to send them all back.'

'I won't change my mind. What else have we got? Oh, yes, there's one thing I don't understand. As well as the dog's own collar and lead, Joanna has sent an extra collar and lead. What do you think that's for?'

'That,' I said, 'is Joanna's little joke.'

Character list

Jerry Burton: a young man injured in flying accident – now renting Little Furze in Lymstock while he recovers

Marcus Kent: Jerry Burton's London doctor

Joanna Burton: Jerry Burton's sister

Miss Emily Barton: elderly owner of Little Furze

Miss Partridge: a middle-aged servant at Little Furze

Beatrice: a servant girl at Little Furze

Dr Owen Griffith: a young doctor who lives in Lymstock

Miss Megan Hunter: Mrs Symmington's twenty-year old daughter from her first marriage

Miss Aimée Griffith: Dr Griffith's older sister

Richard Symmington: a lawyer who lives in Lymstock

Miss Ginch: Mr Symmington's middle-aged secretary

Miss Elsie Holland: the governess who looks after the two Symmington boys

Mr Pye: the owner of Prior's End, a large house in Lymstock

Mrs Symmington: Mr Symmington's wife

Colonel Appleton: a friend of the Symmingtons' who lives in a village nearby

Brian and Colin Symmington: Mr and Mrs Symmington's two young sons

Mrs Baker: Beatrice's mother

George: Beatrice's boyfriend

Mrs Cleat: a woman known as the village witch

The Reverend Caleb Dane-Calthrop: vicar of Lymstock

Mrs Maud Dane-Calthrop: the vicar's wife

Superintendent Nash: the policeman inquiring into the deaths

Inspector Graves: an expert on anonymous letters

Agnes Woddell: a young servant at the Symmington's house

Florence: a former servant of Emily Barton, who has now given her rooms in her house

Rose: an older servant at the Symmingtons' house

Miss Jane Marple: elderly friend of Mrs Dane-Calthrop

Cultural notes

Origin of the book's title *The Moving Finger*

The book's title comes from a book of Persian Poetry written in the 11th or 12th century.

> The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
> Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
> Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

The meaning of the phrase 'The Moving Finger' is that whatever you do in your life, it is your own responsibility and cannot be changed.

The structure of the police in England

The different levels of police officer in Britain, starting at the lowest, are: Police Constable, Sergeant, Inspector, Chief Inspector, Superintendent, Chief Superintendent. In the story, Superintendent Nash takes control of the investigation. Normally something like the issue of anonymous letters would be handled by a lower ranking officer, but the death of Mrs Symmington makes the case more serious. Inspector Graves is a middle ranking officer.

In the story, some people in the village are not happy about talking to the police. They don't want to get involved and they think that if they talk to the police, they will end up in trouble themselves.

Inquest

In cases of sudden, violent or suspicious death, it is common to hold a public inquiry called an inquest to find out why the person died. The coroner is the person in charge of the inquest, and the official cause of

death is decided by a selected group of twelve people known as the jury.

At the inquest the coroner and the jury hear medical evidence, as well as evidence from any other people that may be relevant. The family of the person who died, and members of the public can also attend the inquest.

Once all the evidence has been heard, the jury gives its verdict – for example, 'natural death', 'accidental death', 'suicide while temporarily insane', or 'murder by person or persons unknown'.

Poison for killing wasps

At the time Agatha Christie was writing, it was common for people in the country to keep cyanide in the garden shed to put on wasps' nests to kill them all quickly. Now, it is against the law to possess these kinds of poisons.

Servants

In a typical large house at the time of the story, the family often employed several servants. Some lived in the house, some lived nearby. Servants included a cook, and a housemaid who did the cleaning. There could also be a gardener, and for larger, richer families, a driver or chauffeur. In the story, Faithful Florence is often mentioned as the former servant of Emily Barton who now offers Miss Barton a room in her house.

Governess

Wealthy people sometimes employed a governess, a teacher to live with the family and educate the children at home, rather than going to school. In the story, the governess Elsie Holland has more responsibilities, including taking the children out and organising their meals.

No smoke without fire

This is a British proverb meaning that there may be something true behind a rumour. In other words, if you see evidence of something (i.e. the smoke), you assume that there is the cause (i.e. the fire)

somewhere, even if you cannot see it. In the story, this theme runs throughout. People in the village assume that there is something true in the accusations in the anonymous letters.

Stepchildren/parents

If someone marries someone who already has children from a previous marriage, the children are called stepchildren, and the new 'parent' is called stepfather or stepmother.

Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth

In Chapter 2, Megan refers to three of England's greatest poets of the 18th and early 19th centuries, whose poems are often studied at school. These poets often wrote about their feelings for nature and the English countryside. In particular she refers to the famous poem by William Wordsworth entitled 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' (1804) in which he writes about a field full of daffodils, the tall yellow flower.

Shakespeare – King Lear – Goneril and Regan

King Lear is one of Shakespeare's most famous plays. In the story, Megan refers to Goneril and Regan, the two elder daughters of King Lear.

Shakespeare's sonnets

In chapter 13, Megan quotes a couple of lines from one of Shakespeare's sonnets – these were 154 poems written towards the end of the 16th century. She makes a romantic connection between her love for Jerry and how rain (sweet-seasoned showers) is vital to the ground it falls on.

Freud and Jung

At the time that the story was written, the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were becoming more widely known. Agatha Christie was probably interested in these ideas about the mind. In the story, people wonder how someone could write such horrible anonymous letters and what the person is hiding and thinking.

Witches

In the story, Mrs Cleat is referred to as a witch. Witches were persecuted and often killed during the medieval period in Britain, because it was believed they were involved in devil worship. At the time that the story was written, people were still suspicious of people who they believed might be witches.

Cocktails

These strong alcoholic drinks became popular in the 1920s amongst the upper classes. They were different mixtures of spirits with other drinks, and given special names.

George Stephenson

George Stephenson (1781–1848) is regarded as the inventor of the railway train. In the story he is referred to by Jerry Burton, incorrectly, as the person that invented the steam engine – using the power of steam from boiling water. This is in fact credited to James Watt, an 18th century Scottish engineer. It is said that he had the idea by watching the lid of a kettle moving as the water boiled inside. What Jerry Burton is trying to say is that great ideas sometimes come from someone who is not working at the time.

The Women's Institute

This is a British, community-based organization for women. It was formed in 1915 with two main aims: to develop country communities and to encourage women to become more involved in producing food during the First World War. Since then the organization's aims have broadened and it is now the largest women's voluntary organization in the UK. The organization celebrated its 95th anniversary in 2010 and currently has approximately 205,000 members in 6,500 individual locations.

The Red Cross

This is an international organization formed in the 19th century in order to provide medical help to soldiers wounded in battles. It takes its name

from its flag – a red cross on a white background. It now has a much wider international role and is involved in humanitarian aid throughout the world. In the story, the local Red Cross Society was raising money through local events and activities.

Village life

An English village is a small group of houses in the countryside, usually with a church at its centre. Sometimes there is a very large house in a village where rich people live who may own the local farm land and the houses of farm workers. A village often has a post office, an inn (or pub), and a shop. It may also have a local doctor.

Historically, village life was quieter and slower than life in a town and everyone knew who everyone else was, even if they did not meet socially. They also knew quite a lot about each other's lives. In this story there is much discussion amongst the characters about the personal lives of certain individuals. This often negative and critical gossip means that rumours can circulate quickly round a small village.

At the time that this story was written, village life was very traditional and conservative. Few people had cars, so ordinary village people led quite isolated lives, especially if they were far from large towns or cities. The train was the only means of long distance transport for most people.

The Church of England

Many English villages have a church belonging to the Church of England. The administrative area of the church and the surrounding villages is called a parish. Each parish is looked after by a vicar, which is the name for a priest in the Church of England.

The vicar leads church services, during which he gives a sermon – a talk about spiritual and religious matters. The vicar is responsible for taking care of the spiritual needs of the people of the village, so he often visits

those who are ill or have other worries. The vicar will carry out baptisms, marriage ceremonies and funerals. People will often ask the vicar for advice regarding personal matters. In the story, the reverend Dane-Calthorp and his wife were considered important and respectable leaders of the local community.

Glossary

Key
n = noun
v = verb
phr v = phrasal verb
adj = adjective
adv = adverb
excl = exclamation
exp = expression

adultery (n)
to be married and have sex with someone that you are not married to

allowance (n)
money that is given regularly to someone

anonymous (adj)
unknown

anxious (adj)
to very much want something

awful (adj)
bad

awkward (adj)
embarrassed and shy

bait (n)
food which you put on a hook or in a trap in order to catch fish or animals

blackmail (v)
to threaten do something unpleasant to someone unless they do what you want them to do

bridge (n)
a card game for four players

brighten up (v)
to suddenly look happier

bump into (phr v)
to meet someone by chance

bumping (v)
to hit something while moving

call (v)
to make a short visit

case (n)
a crime or mystery that the police are investigating

cheque (n)
a printed form on which you write an amount of money and say who it is to be paid to

cold-blooded (adj)
without showing pity or emotion

collar (n)
a leather band which is put round the neck of a dog or cat

Colonel (n)
a senior military officer

coroner (n)
the person who is responsible for investigating sudden or unusual deaths

crack (v)
to hit and break

curled up (phr v)
to bring your arms, legs and head in towards your stomach

daffodil (n)
a yellow flower that blooms in the spring (see Cultural notes: Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth)

dare (v)
to have enough courage

dogs' dinner (n)
a mess or muddle

drawing room (n)
a room, especially a large room in a large house, where people sit and relax

dreadful (adj)
very unpleasant

drive someone to do something (exp)
to force someone to do something

fellow (n)
a man or boy

feel a fool (exp)
feel silly

fierce (adj)
aggressive or angry

fingerprint (n)
a mark made by a person's finger which shows the lines on the skin and can be used to identify criminals

fishing rod (n)
a long thin pole which has a line and hook attached to it and which is used for catching fish

fix (v)
to repair

floating (v)
to move slowly and smoothly

gasp (v)
to take a short, quick breath through your mouth

Gosh! (exp)
used to show surprise or shock

gossip (n)
informal conversation, often about other people's private affairs

governess (n)
a woman employed to teach children in a private household (see Cultural notes)

grin (v)
to smile widely

guilty (adj)
to have committed a crime or offence

hatred (n)
an extremely strong feeling of dislike for someone or something

how dare he (exp)
an expression you use when you are shocked and angry about something that someone has done

idleness (n)
having no job or work and doing nothing

immorality (n)
behaviour which is morally wrong

income (n)
the money that a person or organization earns or receives

inquest (n)
a meeting where evidence is heard about someone's death to find out why they died

insane (adj)
having a mind that does not work in a normal way

instrument (n)
a tool or device that is used to do a particular task

Irish stew (n)
a traditional dish made from lamb, or mutton, as well as potatoes, carrots, onions, and parsley

knitting (n)
something, such as a piece of clothing, that is being knitted

lawn (n)
an area of grass that is kept cut short and is usually part of a garden or park

lead (n)
a long chain or piece of leather attached to the dog's collar so that you can control the dog

lid (n)
the top of a container which you open to reach inside

load (v)
to put a large quantity of things or heavy things into something

lung (n)
one of two organs inside your chest which you use for breathing

mend (v)
something that is damaged or broken is repaired so that it works properly or can be used

Messrs (n)
is used as the plural of Mr in front of the names of two or more men

narrow something down (phr v)
to reduce the number of things included

No smoke without fire (exp)
if people are saying that someone has done something bad but no one knows whether it is true, it probably is true (see Cultural notes)

nonsense (n)
something that you think is untrue or silly

pattern (n)
a particular way in which something is usually or repeatedly done

plump (adj)
a person who is rather fat

Poison Pen (n)
a person who writes unpleasant, unsigned letters to upset someone or to cause trouble

pride (n)
a feeling of satisfaction which you have because you or people close to you have done something good or possess something good

quarrel (n)
have an angry argument with someone

receiver (n)
the part of a telephone that you hold near to your ear and speak into

recover (v)
to become well again

remark (n)
what someone has said about something

respectability (n)
liked or admired by other people and considered to be morally correct

roughly (adv)
using too much force

rude (adj)
not polite

scandal (n)
a situation, event, or someone's behaviour that shocks a lot of people because they think it is immoral

selfish (adj)
caring only about yourself, and not about other people

sensitive (adj)
easily worried and offended

sermon (n)
a talk on a religious or moral subject given during a church service

sew (v)
to use a needle and thread to make or mend something such as clothes

shave (n)
to cut hair from your face or body using a razor or shaver

shed (n)
a small building used for storing things such as garden tools

silk (n)
a very smooth, fine cloth made from a substance produced by a kind of moth

skull (n)
the bony part of your head which holds your brain

stab (v)
to push a knife or sharp object into something

stiff (adj)
not moving as easily as normal

stockings (n)
item of women's clothing which fit closely over their feet and legs. Stockings are usually made of nylon or silk and are held in place by suspenders.

stylish (adj)
smart, elegant, and fashionable

suicide (n)
the act of deliberately killing yourself

superintendent (n)
a senior police officer of the rank above an inspector (see Cultural notes)

suspect (v)
to believe that something is true but you want to make it sound less strong or direct

swear (v)
to promise

switch off (phr v)
to make something stop working by operating a switch (opposite of '**switch on**')

switch on (phr v)
to make something start working by operating a switch

tearful (adj)
used to describe someone when their face or voice shows signs that they have been crying or that they want to cry

tenant (n)
someone who pays rent for the place they live in, or for land or buildings that they use

torch (n)
a small, battery-powered electric light which you carry in your hand

torn (v)
past participle of 'tear' – to cut something roughly or by accident

treasures (n)
valuable objects, especially works of art and items of historical value

typewritten (adj)
written using a **typewriter** or word processor

typewriter (n)
a machine with keys which are pressed in order to print letters, numbers, or other characters onto paper

unbelievable (adj)
extreme, impressive, or shocking

uneasiness (adj)
feeling that something is wrong

valuable (adj)
useful

veranda (n)
a platform with a roof along the outside wall of a house

verdict (n)
the decision that is given by the jury or judge at the end of a trial

vicar (n)
an Anglican priest who is in charge of a church and the area it is in

vicarage (n)
a house in which a **vicar** lives

victim (n)
someone who has been hurt or killed

violent (adj)
someone who uses physical force or weapons to hurt or kill other people

wander (v)
to walk around in no special direction

wasp (n)
a small insect with a painful sting. It has yellow and black stripes across its body.

whistle (v)
to make sounds by forcing your breath out between your lips or teeth

witch (n)
a woman who has magic powers (see Cultural notes)

woods (n)
a large area of trees growing near each other

ALSO IN THE AGATHA CHRISTIE SERIES

The Mysterious Affair at Styles

Recently, there have been some strange things happening at Styles, a large country house in Essex. Evelyn Howard, a loyal friend to the family for years, leaves the house after an argument with Mrs Inglethorp. Mrs Inglethorp then suddenly falls ill and dies. Has she been poisoned? It is up to the famous Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, to find out what happened.

The Man in the Brown Suit

Pretty, young Anne Beddingfeld comes to London looking for adventure. But adventure finds her when she sees a man fall off an Underground platform and die on the rails. The police think the death was an accident. But who was the man in the brown suit who examined the body before running away? Anne has only one clue, but she is determined to find the mysterious killer. Anne's adventure takes her on a cruise ship all the way to Cape Town and on into Africa . . .

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

Roger Ackroyd was a man who knew too much. He knew the woman he loved had poisoned her first husband. He knew someone was blackmailing her – and now she has killed herself. When Roger Ackroyd is found murdered Hercule Poirot is called in to find out who the killer is.

The Murder at the Vicarage

When Colonel Protheroe is found murdered in the vicar's study, it seems that almost everyone in the village of St Mary Mead had a reason to kill him. This is the first case for Agatha Christie's famous female detective, Miss Marple. She needs to use all her powers of observation and deduction to solve the mystery.

Peril at End House

Hercule Poirot is on holiday in the south of England when he meets a young woman called Nick Buckley. Nick has had a lot of mysterious 'accidents'. First, her car brakes failed. Then, a large rock just missed her when she was walking, and later, a painting almost fell on her while she was asleep. Finally, Poirot finds a bullet hole in her hat! Nick is in danger and needs Poirot's help. Can he find the guilty person before Nick is harmed?

Why Didn't They Ask Evans?

Bobby Jones is playing golf . . . terribly. As his ball disappears over the edge of a cliff, he hears a cry. The ball is lost, but on the rocks below he finds a dying man. With his final breath the man opens his eyes and says, 'Why didn't they ask Evans?' Bobby and his adventure-seeking friend Lady Frances, set out to solve the mystery of the dying man's last words, but put their own lives in terrible danger . . .

Death in the Clouds

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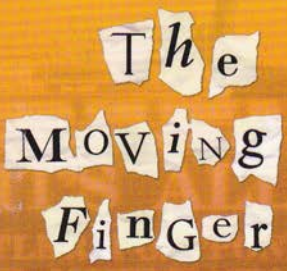

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