

The Moving Finger

1943

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but not for other novels]

The Moving Finger is a romance masquerading as a mystery. It is narrated by Jerry Burton, a young vigorous man who flies planes but who is convalescing from a serious accident. Will he ever fly again? Will he remain paralysed condemned to lie on his back? Marcus Kent, who is 'the right kind of doctor' tells him that he will recover completely but it is going to be a long haul. 'You've got to take life slowly and easily, the tempo is marked Legato.' 'Dogs are wise' Jerry tells us, 'when they are sick they crawl into quiet corners and lick their wounds.' And so Jerry goes to the quiet country town of Lymstock to lick his wounds, although he does have his sister, Joanna, to look after him. As his health recovers so does his interest in women, and what woman can resist a handsome young man who flies planes and needs a little nursing?

At first it looks as though Elsie Holland will be the young woman to capture Jerry's heart.

Suddenly my eyes were held in glad and incredulous surprise.

Along the pavement towards me there came floating a goddess. There really is no other word for it.

The perfect features, the crisply curling golden hair, the tall exquisitely shaped body! And she walked like a goddess, without effort, seeming to swim nearer and nearer. A glorious, an incredible, a breath-taking girl!

But Christie is no writer for Mills and Boon. What follows are some acute observations about physical attraction. As soon as this 'goddess' – Elsie Holland - speaks 'the magic died completely before the flat, competent voice.' Elsie is very beautiful but she has 'absolutely no S.A' – no sex appeal.

This leads Jerry to reflect on sexual attraction.

How strange that a girl could trouble your inmost soul so long as she kept her mouth shut, and that the moment she spoke the glamour could vanish as though it had never been.

I had known the reverse happen, though. I had seen a little sad monkey-faced woman whom no one would turn to look at twice. Then she opened her mouth and suddenly enchantment had lived and bloomed and Cleopatra had cast her spell anew.

It is the rather gauche unloved twenty-year old Megan Hunter, a somewhat similar character to Lettice Protheroe in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, who becomes the love interest for Jerry. Megan emerges as the major character – the person who keeps walking ‘on stage’ throughout the novel. The character, one feels, who most interests the author. In a whodunnit this is usually the murderer. Indeed I thought Megan was the murderer, mainly because it was clear that the author had given her more consideration than the other characters and also because several clues point her way. But I was reading the novel as a whodunnit. It is more satisfying to read it as a romance.

The reader, and Joanna, know that Jerry fancies Megan before he knows it himself. Not that the ways he refers to her will strike a modern reader as terms of endearment. On various occasions he calls her funny face, slabface, and catfish.

The clues that Jerry is falling in love with Megan, that Jerry himself misses, are rather better worked out than the clues to the identity of the murderer. Miss Griffith who runs the local Girl Guides, talks to Jerry about Megan: ‘Much too fond of pottering, that child. Still I suppose she can’t help it, being practically half-witted.’ Jerry jumps to Megan’s defence:

‘I think she’s rather an intelligent girl’

‘First time I’ve ever heard any one say that of her. ... 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’

'If so, she's extremely rude'

'That may be. But not half-witted.'

And a few moments later Miss Griffith says 'Work, Mr Burton. There's nothing like work .. The one unforgivable sin is idleness.' This leads Jerry to a spirited defence of idleness. He cites Sir Edward Grey, later foreign minister, who was sent down from Oxford for incorrigible idleness; and the Duke of Wellington who was 'dull and inattentive to his books.' He goes on:

And has it ever occurred to you, Miss Griffith, that you would probably not be able to take a good express train to London if little Georgie Stephenson had been out with his youth movement instead of lolling about, bored, in his mother's kitchen until the curious behaviour of the kettle lid attracted the attention of his idle mind? ... we owe most of our great inventions and most of the achievements of genius to idleness .. The human mind prefers to be spoon-fed with the thoughts of others, but deprived of such nourishment it will, reluctantly, begin to think for itself.

Jerry then takes from his desk a photo of his favourite picture from 'the Chinese exhibition'. It is called 'Old Man enjoying the Pleasure of Idleness'. Miss Griffith is unimpressed. 'Oh well, we all know what the Chinese are like' she responds. A few moments later Joanna and Megan return from a walk. Jerry shows Megan his Chinese picture. In contrast with Miss Griffith, Megan's face lights up: 'It's heavenly, isn't it?' she says. Megan has passed the test that Jerry, unconsciously, has set her: she has chosen the lead casket.

The theme of idleness, or at any rate of a leisurely start to the day, is taken up again.

Joanna and I came down rather late to breakfast the next morning. That is to say, late by the standards of Lymstock. It was nine-thirty, an hour at which, in London, Joanna was just unclosing an eyelid, and mine would probably be still tight shut. .. To my annoyance, Aimée Griffith was standing on the door-step... 'Hallo, there, slackers! I've been up for hours.'

Jerry remarks to the reader that that is no excuse for 'coming and butting in on one's more somnolent neighbours. Nine-thirty is not the time for a morning call.'

Jerry is still unaware of his feelings for Megan when, over three quarters the way through the novel, he writes: 'On the following day I went mad. Looking back on it, that is really the only explanation I can find'. He is off to London by train to see his doctor. He passes Megan as he is driving to the local station, picks her up so that she can 'see me off at the station'. Whilst waiting for the train he is looking at her as she walks along the platform to buy chocolate from the slot machine. 'I looked after her with a feeling of mounting irritation. She was wearing trodden over shoes, and coarse unattractive stockings and a particularly shapeless jumper and skirt.' With his usual lack of insight Jerry writes: 'I don't know why this should have infuriated me, but it did.' The train arrives. He gets into a first class carriage and then in his fit of 'madness', as the train is pulling out, he grabs Megan, hauls her into the carriage, takes her to London, and pays for her to be made over, with fashionable new clothes by Joanna's dressmaker Mary Grey, and hair by Antoine. The whole episode is reminiscent of the make over of Elfine, a character not unlike Megan, in Stella Gibbon's 1932 comic novel *Cold Comfort Farm*.

Jerry takes the transformed Megan out to dinner in London. They dance – she is surprisingly good – and they miss the last train back to Lymstock. Jerry hires a car and chauffeur to drive them back, delivers Megan to her house, and goes home himself. The next morning he tells his sister about the whole escapade. Joanna says: 'You can't take a girl of twenty to London and buy her clothes without a most frightful scandal. Good gracious, Jerry, you'll probably have to marry the girl.' 'It was at that moment' Jerry tells us, 'that I made a very important discovery. 'Damn it all,' I said. 'I don't mind if I do. In fact – I should like it.' Joanna remarks drily – echoing the reader's thoughts: 'Yes, I've known that for some time.'

All romcoms need a secondary romance – another couple – to give colour to the main story: a Jane and Bingley as a foil to Elizabeth and Darcy. And it is indeed Jerry's

sister who provides this foil. She is courted by the shy and serious doctor – Aimée Griffith’s brother, Owen. His way of courting Joanna seems ill-suited to her character. He brings her a photograph of a diseased spleen. Jerry remarks to the reader: ‘Every man has his own way of courting the female sex. I should not, myself, choose to do it with photographs of spleens, diseased or otherwise. Still no doubt Joanna had asked for it!’

The rather spoiled and frivolous Joanna has to have her mettle tested before Owen Griffith can move beyond attraction to love. Her ‘coming of age’ moment occurs when Dr Griffith has been called to a home delivery at a farm but ‘things were going wrong’. The district nurse was not around and at the crucial time Joanna happens to walk by the farm. Dr Griffith tells her to help. She says that she had never done anything like that before. Dr Griffith explodes with anger. She had talked, he tells her, as though she were interested in doctoring and wished she were a nurse: ‘All pretty 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 ornamental nit-wit.’ And she rises to the occasion. Mother and baby are saved, and soon Joanna and Owen are engaged.

Megan too is tested although Jerry has already proposed to her before her test, but has been refused. Megan’s test is to play the part of a blackmailer in order to catch the murderer. It is a dangerous assignment which involves being drugged with a soporific – always risky particularly before the development of benzodiazepines. But she agrees to do it and carries it off with courage. And then, as she comes round from the sedative, with Jerry by her side, she tells him that she had tried writing to him the night before ‘in case anything ... went wrong’. She had begun her letter with a Shakespeare sonnet [number 75]:

So are you to my thoughts as food to life
Or as sweet-season’d showers are to the ground.”

And that, she writes, is how she feels towards him.

Is Jerry both the male romantic lead and also the detective? He might easily have been. Although arrogant and thoughtless he is at least a more interesting young man than the rather wet Tommys who play second fiddle to the bright female Tuppences in many of Christie's earlier crime adventures. And the police treat him as beyond suspicion even though most of the poison pen letters and the murders occur only after he comes to Lymstock. But he is not the detective. Listen to the voice of this elderly female discussing the spate of poison pen letters in the village.

'Oh dear, I don't like that. .. I can't help feeling it's all wrong. ... There are so many things the letters might say, but don't. That is what is so curious.'

This sounds just like Miss Marple talking but is in fact Mrs Dane Calthrop, the rather splendid wife of the vicar, Caleb Calthrop. When Jerry asks her whether she has received one of the poison pen letters she replies: 'Oh yes ... three. I forget exactly what they said. Something very silly about Caleb and the school-mistress, I think. Quite absurd, because Caleb has absolutely no taste for fornication. He never has had. So lucky, being a clergyman. .. Caleb would have been a saint' she continues 'if he hadn't been just a little too intellectual.' But Mrs Dane Calthrop is not the detective either, and neither is it the policeman, Nash, although he does most of the work. No. It turns out that this is a Miss Marple story after all. But she does not appear until three-quarters of the way through the novel and even then she is not a major character. As an aside, Mrs Dane Calthrop is the one link, in Christie's *oeuvre*, between the worlds of Marple and Poirot. She will pop up again in the novel, *The Pale Horse*, first published in 1961. Although Poirot himself does not appear in that novel, one of his friends does - the detective story writer Ariadne Oliver.

The central crime mystery plot involves a spate of poison pen letters and two murders. The main murder, that looks like suicide, is that of Mrs Symmington, wife of the local solicitor. The second murder is of her maid, Agnes, who knows something that incriminates the murderer. The purpose of the poison pen letter to Mrs Symington is to provide a motive for her apparent suicide. The purpose of the other poison pen letters is to hide the fact that it is only the one letter that is

important. A series of crimes to disguise the crime that really matters: a ploy that Christie used to much greater effect in a previous novel.

The clues that implicate the actual murderer are not robust. The clues pointing to Megan, who is not the murderer, are equally suggestive. There is however one powerful reason available only to Christie aficionados for rejecting Megan as murderer: on several occasions she is associated with the character of a dog. And Christie loved dogs. Any human who is like a dog cannot be a murderer. When Megan says to Jerry 'I do like you' Jerry tells the reader: 'It was a most warming remark. It is the remark that one fancies perhaps erroneously that one's dog would say if he could talk.' On another occasion we are told that Symmington, Megan's step-father, didn't dislike Megan he just hardly noticed her. 'He felt towards her much as a man who doesn't care much for dogs would feel about a dog in the house.' And when Jerry gets on the London train and watches her still on the platform he tells the reader that she had 'looked like a wistful dog being left behind.' This is the moment when he scoops her up into the carriage. Her expression changes and her look is now of 'the incredulous pleasure of the dog who has been taken on the walk after all.'

And who is the murderer? There is just one big clue. It is that person whose feelings for Megan are like those of a man who does *not* care much for dogs.

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