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Charles Williams
Complete Works



Series Thirteen

The Complete Works of
CHARLES WILLIAMS

(1886-1945)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charles Williams". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

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Version 1

The Complete Works of
CHARLES WILLIAMS



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Complete Works of Charles Williams



First published in the United Kingdom in 2023 by Delphi Classics.

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ISBN: 978 1 80170 122 8

Delphi Classics

is an imprint of

Delphi Publishing Ltd

Hastings, East Sussex

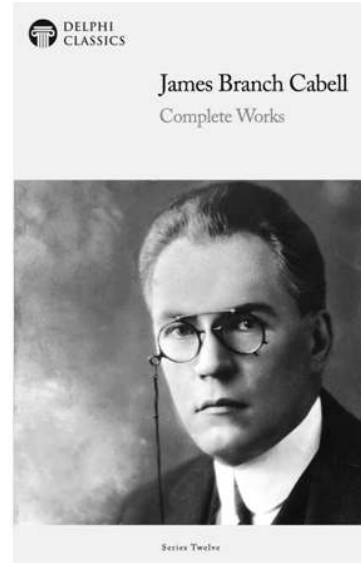
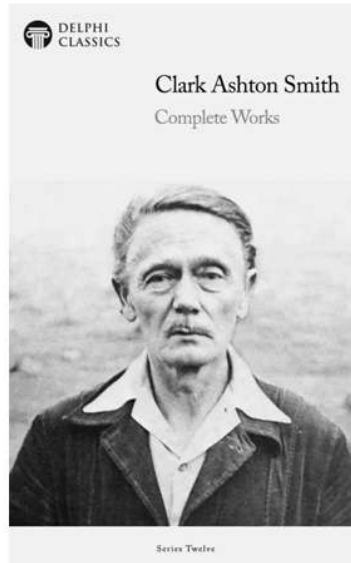
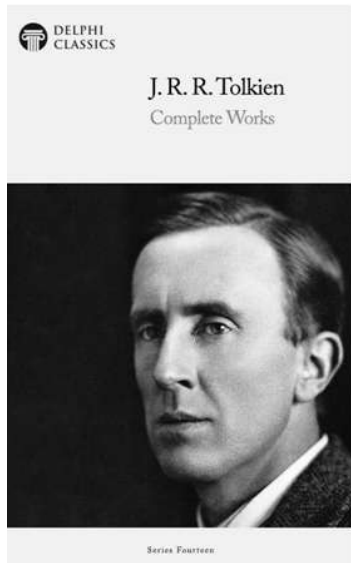
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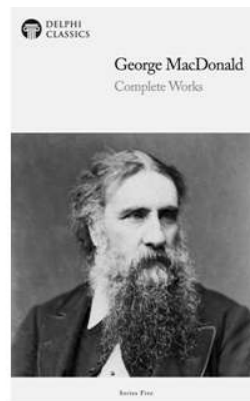
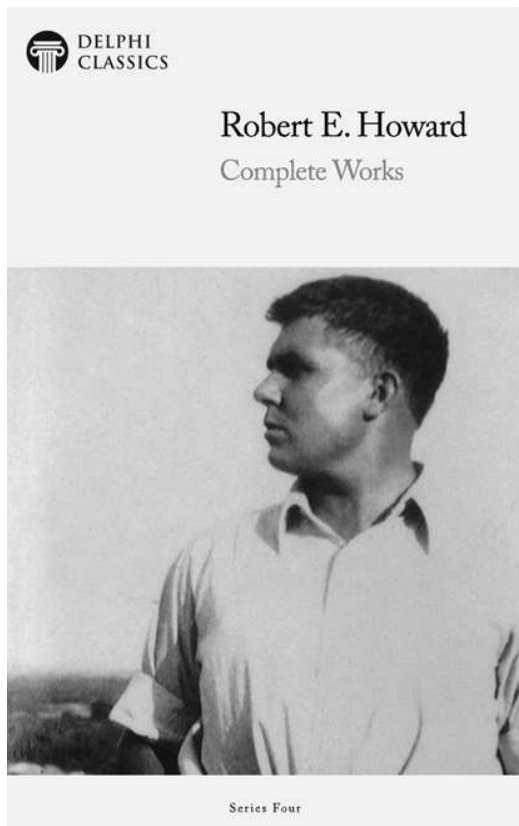
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The Novels



Holloway, north London, c. 1900 — Charles Williams was born in Holloway in 1886, the only son of Richard Walter Stansby Williams (1848-1929) and Mary (née Wall). His father was a journalist and foreign business correspondent for an importing firm, writing in French and German, as well as a 'regular and valued' contributor of verse, stories and articles to many popular magazines.



Williams' birthplace, 3 Caedmon Road, Holloway

War in Heaven (1930)



Charles Williams had begun his life's work in 1904 in a Methodist bookroom. Then he was employed by the Oxford University Press as a proofreading assistant and he soon climbed to the position of editor. He continued to work at the OUP in various positions of increasing responsibility until his death.

By 1926 he had written a novel, *The Corpse*, which was rejected and so he stored the manuscript in a box in his office and he tried to forget about it. One day a few years later, when he was having a clear-out of old papers, his secretary noticed a script which he said should be thrown away. She remonstrated and Williams said she could do what she liked with it. So she sent *The Corpse* to the newly founded publishing firm of Victor Gollancz Ltd. Victor sat up all night reading and accepted the novel, though he insisted that the title should be changed. Williams' mind was full of studying *Paradise Lost* at the time, so he called it *War in Heaven*. It was the first of his books to be published at the commercial risk of a firm not his own. It gave him a small but "satisfactory profit", as he later described it.

The story opens with the discovery of a murdered body in the office of Lionel Rackstraw, who works for the publisher Stephen Persimmons. Once the police have begun their investigation the staff are free to go and after a solitary dinner, Kenneth Mornington, a colleague of Rackstraw, goes to the Vicarage of St Cyprian's, taking some financial papers he's been working on for them. There he meets the Archdeacon of Castra Parvulorum, who wonders if the publisher would be interested in publishing his book. When the Archdeacon visits the publisher the next day he's given the proofs of another book to peruse, a book that suggests the Graal (or Holy Grail) rests in the parish church at Fardles. Soon the Archdeacon is hot on its trail, alongside Gregory Persimmons, who will commit mayhem if necessary to get hold of it. Mornington finds himself caught in the crossfire between Satanic forces and divine defenders, as well as Rackstraw's wife, Barbara.

Many critics liked this first novel from Williams, with one writing,

"This extraordinary novel published today is probably outside the taste of the average fiction reader who, very likely, would be rather pathetically muddled — even shocked — by it. But the reader who is not bewildered or frightened by unusual ideas will respond to it joyfully. The central idea is certainly unusual and startling...The book amuses and excites. It has the supreme merit of originality. It gives a new sensation".

One described it as, "an illuminated missal and a guide-book to Hell" and went on to say that, "It has the elements of a great mystery story, of keen satire and, above all, of a sweet, sorrowful apprehension of beauty, horror and death". Some, however, weren't so keen: "I confess I could work up very little interest in the story...Mr. Williams is a poet and writes admirably. He can tell a story too, but certainly this one has laid no hold on me."

Film rights to the book were sold to 20th Century Fox in September 1949. They planned to incorporate it into a film called 'Scotland Yard Story' which would be produced by Samuel G Engel, but it was never made.

CHARLES WILLIAMS

WAR
IN HEAVEN

LONDON
VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD
14 Henrietta Street Covent Garden
1930

The first edition's title page

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PRELUDE



THE TELEPHONE BELL was ringing wildly, but without result, since there was no one in the room but the corpse.

A few moments later there was. Lionel Rackstraw, strolling back from lunch, heard in the corridor the sound of the bell in his room, and, entering at a run, took up the receiver. He remarked, as he did so, the boots and trousered legs sticking out from the large knee-hole table at which he worked, but the telephone had established the first claim on his attention.

“Yes,” he said, “yes.... No, not before the 17th.... No, who cares what he wants?... No, who wants to know?... Oh, Mr. Persimmons. Oh, tell him the 17th.... Yes.... Yes, I’ll send a set down.”

He put the receiver down and looked back at the boots. It occurred to him that someone was probably doing something to the telephone; people did, he knew, at various times drift in on him for such purposes. But they usually looked round or said something; and this fellow must have heard him talking. He bent down towards the boots.

“Shall you be long?” he said into the space between the legs and the central top drawer; and then, as there was no answer, he walked away, dropped hat and gloves and book on to their shelf, strolled back to his desk, picked up some papers and read them, put them back, and, peering again into the dark hole, said more impatiently, “Shall you be long?”

No voice replied; not even when, touching the extended foot with his own, he repeated the question. Rather reluctantly he went round to the other side of the table, which was still darker, and, trying to make out the head of the intruder, said almost loudly: “Hallo! hallo! What’s the idea?” Then, as nothing happened, he stood up and went on to himself: “Damn it all, is he dead?” and thought at once that he might be.

That dead bodies did not usually lie round in one of the rooms of a publisher’s offices in London about half-past two in the afternoon was a certainty that formed now an enormous and cynical background to the fantastic possibility. He half looked at the door which he had closed behind him, and then attempted the same sort of interior recovery with which he had often thrown off the knowledge that at any moment during his absence his wife *might* be involved in some street accident, some skidding bus or swerving lorry. These things happened — a small and unpleasant, if invisible, deity who lived in a corner of his top shelves had reminded him — these things happened, and even *now* perhaps.... People had been crushed against their own front doors; there had been a doctor in Gower Street. Of course, it was all untrue. But this time, as he moved to touch the protruding feet, he wondered if it were.

The foot he touched apparently conveyed no information to the stranger’s mind, and Lionel gave up the attempt. He went out and crossed the corridor to another office, whose occupant, spread over a table, was marking sentences in newspaper cuttings.

“Mornington,” Lionel said, “there’s a man in my room under the table, and I can’t get him to take any notice. Will you come across? He looks,” he added in a rush of realism, “for all the world as if he was dead.”

“How fortunate!” Mornington said, gathering himself off the table. “If he were alive and had got under your table and wouldn’t take any notice I should be afraid you’d annoyed him somehow. I think that’s rather a pleasant notion,” he went on as they crossed the corridor, “a sort of modern *King’s Threshold* — get under the table of the man who’s insulted you and simply sulk there. Not, I think, starve — that’s for more romantic ages than ours — but take a case filled with sandwiches and a thermos.... What’s the plural of thermos?...” He stared at the feet, and then, going up to the desk, went down on one knee and put a hand over the disappearing leg. Then he looked up at Lionel.

“Something wrong,” he said sharply. “Go and ask Dalling to come here.” He dropped to both knees and peered under the table.

Lionel ran down the corridor in the other direction, and returned in a few minutes with a short man of about forty-five, whose face showed more curiosity than anxiety. Mornington was already making efforts to get the body from under the table.

“He must be dead,” he said abruptly to the others as they came in. “What an incredible business! Go round the other side, Dalling; the buttons have caught in the table or something; see if you can get them loose.”

“Hadn’t we better leave it for the police?” Dalling asked. “I thought you weren’t supposed to move bodies.”

“How the devil do I know whether it is a body?” Mornington asked. “Not but what you may be right.” He made investigations between the trouser-leg and the boot, and then stood up rather suddenly. “It’s a body right enough,” he said. “Is Persimmons in?”

“No,” said Dalling; “he won’t be back till four.”

“Well, we shall have to get busy ourselves, then. Will you get on to the police-station? And, Rackstraw, you’d better drift about in the corridor and stop people coming in, or Plumpton will be earning half a guinea by telling the *Evening News*.”

Plumpton, however, had no opportunity of learning what was concealed behind the door against which Lionel for the next quarter of an hour or so leant, his eyes fixed on a long letter which he had caught up from his desk as a pretext for silence if anyone passed him. Dalling went downstairs and out to the front door, a complicated glass arrangement which reflected every part of itself so many times that many arrivals were necessary before visitors could discover which panels swung back to the retail sales-room, which to a waiting-room for authors and others desiring interviews with the remoter staff, and which to a corridor leading direct to the stairs. It was here that he welcomed the police and the doctor, who arrived simultaneously, and going up the stairs to the first floor he explained the situation.

At the top of these stairs was a broad and deep landing, from which another flight ran backwards on the left-hand to the second floor. Opposite the stairs, across the landing, was the private room of Mr. Stephen Persimmons, the head of the business since his father’s retirement some seven years before. On either side the landing narrowed to a corridor which ran for some distance left and right and gave access to various rooms occupied by Rackstraw, Mornington, Dalling, and others. On the right this corridor ended in a door which gave entrance to Plumpton’s room. On the left the other section, in which Lionel’s room was the last on the right hand, led to a staircase to the basement. On its way, however, this staircase passed and issued on a side door through which the visitor came out into a short, covered court, having a blank wall opposite, which connected the streets at the front and the back of the building. It would therefore have been easy for anyone to obtain access to Lionel’s room in order, as the inspector in charge remarked pleasantly to Mornington, “to be strangled.”

For the dead man had, as was evident when the police got the body clear, been murdered so. Lionel, in obedience to the official request to see if he could recognize the corpse, took one glance at the purple face and starting eyes, and with a choked negative retreated. Mornington, with a more contemplative, and Dalling with a more curious, interest, both in turn considered and denied any knowledge of the stranger. He was a little man, in the usual not very fresh clothes of the lower middle class; his bowler hat had been crushed in under the desk; his pockets contained nothing but a cheap watch, a few coppers, and some silver — papers he appeared to have none. Around his neck was a piece of stout cord, deeply embedded in the flesh.

So much the clerks heard before the police with their proceedings retired into cloud and drove the civilians into other rooms. Almost as soon, either by the telephone or some other means, news of the discovery reached Fleet Street, and reporters came pushing through the crowd that began to gather immediately the police were seen to enter the building. The news of the discovered corpse was communicated to them officially, and for the rest they were left to choose as they would among the rumours flying through the crowd, which varied from vivid accounts of the actual murder and several different descriptions of the murderer to a report that the whole of the staff were under arrest and the police had had to wade ankle-deep through the blood in the basement.

To such a distraction Mr. Persimmons himself returned from a meeting of the Publishers' Association about four o'clock, and was immediately annexed by Inspector Colquhoun, who had taken the investigation in charge. Stephen Persimmons was rather a small man, with a mild face apt to take on a harassed and anxious appearance on slight cause. With much more reason he looked anxious now, as he sat opposite the inspector in his own room. He had recognized the body as little as any of his staff had, and it was about them rather than it that the inspector was anxious to gain particulars.

"This Rackstraw, now," Colquhoun was saying: "it was his room the body was found in. Has he been with you long?"

"Oh, years," Mr. Persimmons answered; "most of them have. All the people on this floor — and nearly all the rest. They've been here longer than me, most of them. You see, I came in just three years before my father retired — that's seven years ago, and three's ten."

"And Rackstraw was here before that?"

"Oh, yes, certainly."

"Do you know anything of him?" the inspector pressed. "His address, now?"

"Dalling has all that," the unhappy Persimmons said. "He has all the particulars about the staff. I remember Rackstraw being married a few years ago."

"And what does he do here?" Colquhoun went on.

"Oh, he does a good deal of putting books through, paper and type and binding, and so on. He rather looks after the fiction side. I've taken up fiction a good deal since my father went; that's why the business has expanded so. We've got two of the best selling people to-day — Mrs. Clyde and John Bastable."

"Mrs. Clyde," the inspector brooded. "Didn't she write *The Comet and the Star*?"

"That's the woman. We sold ninety thousand," Persimmons answered.

"And what are your other lines?"

"Well, my father used to do, in fact he began with, what you might call occult stuff. Mesmerism and astrology and histories of great sorcerers, and that sort of thing. It didn't really pay very well."

"And does Mr. Rackstraw look after that too?" asked Colquhoun.

“Well, some of it,” the publisher answered. “But of course, in a place like this things aren’t exactly divided just — just exactly. Mornington, now, Mornington looks after some books. Under me, of course,” he added hastily. “And then he does a good deal of the publicity, the advertisements, you know. And he does the reviews.”

“What, writes them?” the inspector asked.

“Certainly not,” said the publisher, shocked. “Reads them and chooses passages to quote. Writes them! Really, inspector!”

“And how long has Mr. Mornington been here?” Colquhoun went on.

“Oh, years and years. I tell you they all came before I did.”

“I understand Mr. Rackstraw was out a long time at lunch to-day, with one of your authors. Would that be all right?”

“I daresay he was,” Persimmons said, “if he said so.”

“You don’t *know* that he was?” asked Colquhoun. “He didn’t tell you?”

“Really, inspector,” the worried Persimmons said again, “do you think my staff ask me for an hour off when they want to see an author? I give them their work and they do it.”

“Sir Giles Tumulty,” the inspector said. “You know him?”

“We’re publishing his last book, *Historical Vestiges of Sacred Vessels in Folklore*. The explorer and antiquarian, you know. Rackstraw’s had a lot of trouble with his illustrations, but he told me yesterday he thought he’d got them through. Yes, I can quite believe he went up to see him. But you can find out from Sir Giles, can’t you?”

“What I’m getting at,” the inspector said, “is this. If any of your people are out, is there anything to prevent anyone getting into any of their rooms? There’s a front way and a back way in and nobody on watch anywhere.”

“There’s a girl in the waiting-room,” Persimmons objected.

“A girl!” the inspector answered. “Reading a novel when she’s not talking to anyone. She’d be a lot of good. Besides, there’s a corridor to the staircase alongside the waiting-room. And at the back there’s no-one.”

“Well, one doesn’t expect strangers to drop in casually,” the publisher said unhappily. “I believe they do lock their doors sometimes, if they have to go out and have to leave a lot of papers all spread out.”

“And leave the key in, I suppose?” Colquhoun said sarcastically.

“Of course,” Persimmons answered. “Suppose I wanted something. Besides, it’s not to keep anyone out; it’s only just to save trouble and warn anyone going in to be careful, so to speak; it hardly ever happens. Besides — —”

Colquhoun cut him short. “What people mean by asking for a Government of business men, I don’t know,” he said. “I was a Conservative from boyhood, and I’m stauncher every year the more I see of business. There’s nothing to prevent anyone coming in.”

“But they don’t,” said Persimmons.

“But they have,” said Colquhoun. “It’s the unexpected that happens. Are you a religious man, Mr. Persimmons?”

“Well, not — not exactly religious,” the publisher said hesitatingly. “Not what you’d call religious unpleasantly, I mean. But what — —”

“Nor am I,” the inspector said. “And I don’t get the chance to go to church much. But I’ve been twice with my wife to a Sunday evening service at her Wesleyan Church in the last few months, and it’s a remarkable thing, Mr. Persimmons, we had the same piece read from the Bible each time. It ended up— ‘And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.’ It seemed to me fairly meant for the public. ‘What I say unto you,’ that’s us in the police, ‘I say unto all, Watch.’ If there was more of that there’d

be fewer undiscovered murders. Well, I'll go and see Mr. Dalling. Good day, Mr. Persimmons."

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End of Sample