DELPHI CLASSICS

Patricia Wentworth

Complete Works

Series Sixteen

The Complete Works of

PATRICIA WENTWORTH

(1877-1961)

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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

Version 1

The Complete Works of

PATRICIA WENTWORTH

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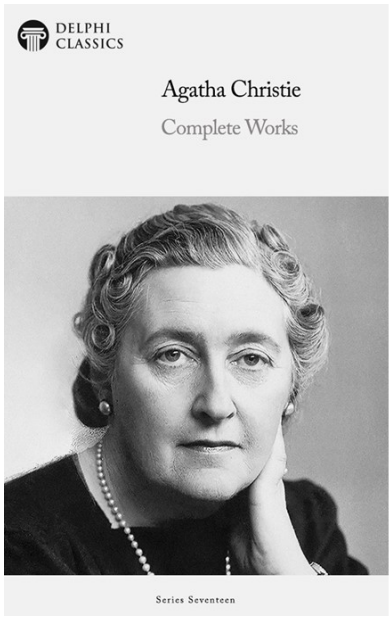
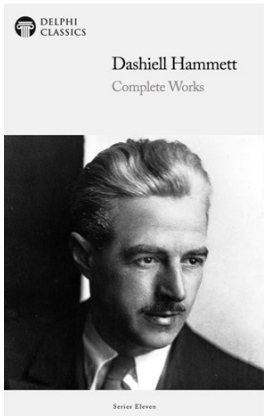
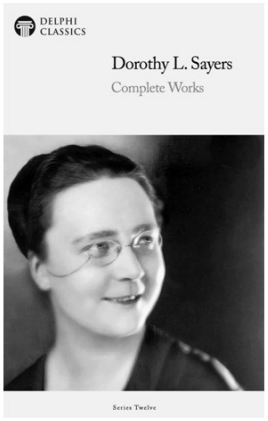
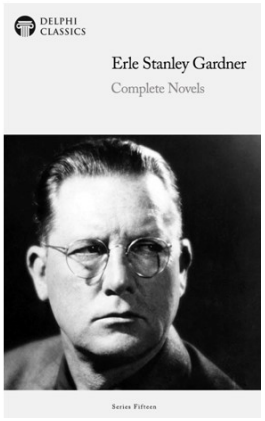
Vintage Thrillers…









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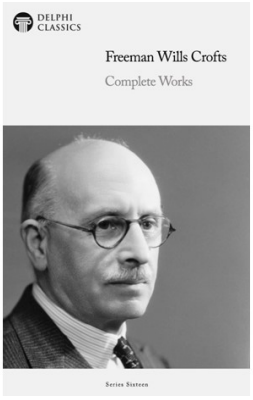
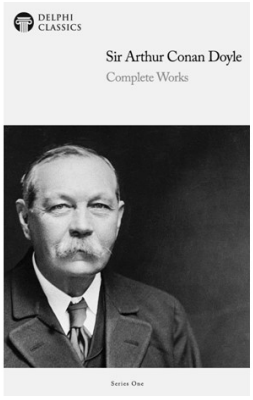
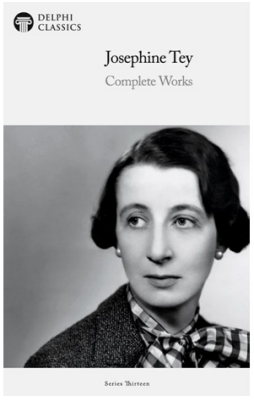
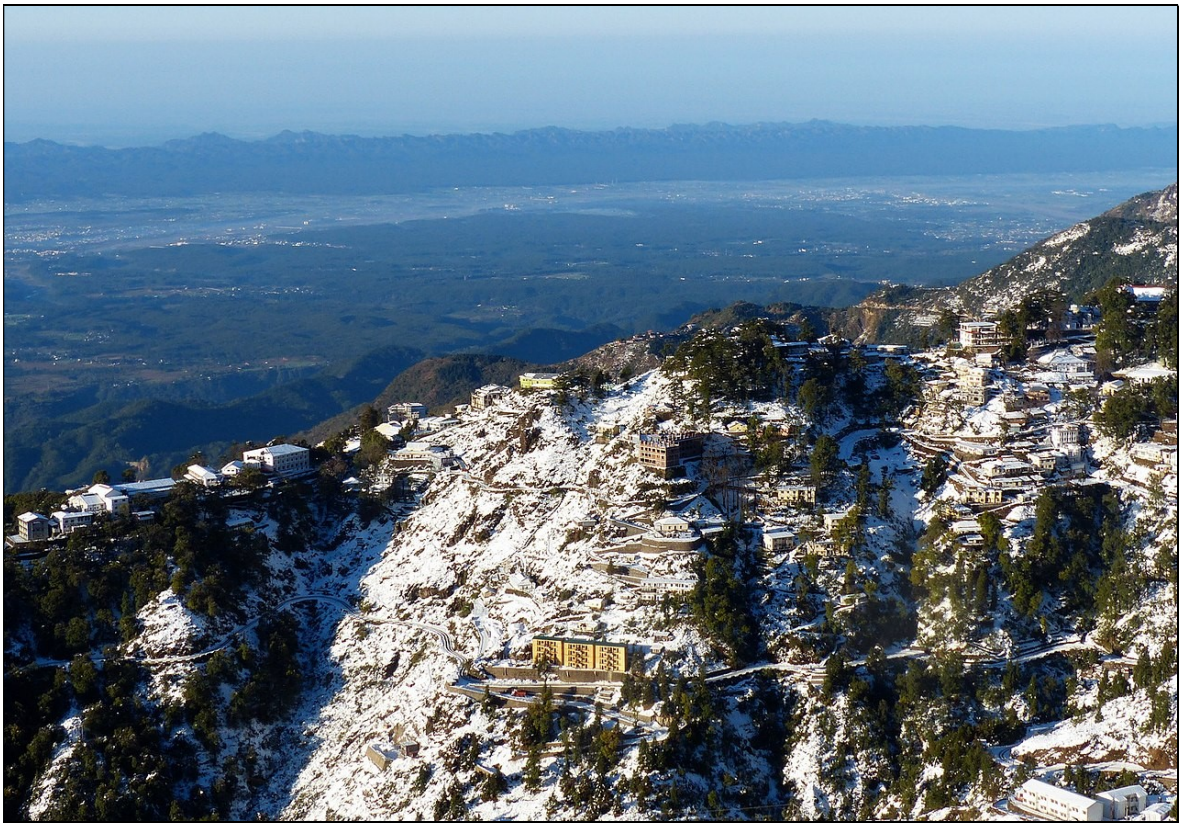






Miss Silver Books



Mussoorie, a hill station in the Dehradun district of the Indian state of Uttarakhand, 180 miles north of New Delhi — Patricia Wentworth's birthplace

Grey Mask (1928)

This first outing for the spinster detective Miss Maud Silver was published by Hodder and Stoughton at a cost of 7/6d and date wise it can be placed firmly within the 'Golden Age' of crime fiction, certainly in the UK. By 1928 Wentworth had been publishing novels for nearly two decades and was a popular novelist, if rather a 'safe' story teller; today, she would most likely fall into the sub-genre murder mystery category of 'cozy crime'.

Out of a career total of 65 mystery novels, Wentworth wrote a series of 32 crime books featuring Miss Maud Silver, the retired governess and teacher, who becomes a professional private detective in London. Miss Silver is well-born and of good education and likes to highlight this by quoting the poet Tennyson as often as she can. She is sometimes compared to Miss Jane Marple, the elderly detective created by Agatha Christie and it has been suggested that Miss Silver deserves more recognition for being the first detective of her kind in crime fiction, as Miss Marple first appeared in a novel-length story in October 1930 with the publication of *Murder at the Vicarage*. However, Miss Marple's first published outing was in 1927, in Christie's short story collection, *The Thirteen Problems*. There are some differences in personality between the two detectives; Miss Silver is aloof, sometimes abrupt and can be patronising in her explanations to her rather dim-witted clients; perhaps this reflects her former role as a governess, involving both the everyday care of children (in families of rank), but also responsibility for their education. She is also absent for large parts of her own mysteries, materialising at a few crucial moments when Wentworth thought the mystery needing explaining or elaborating on, whereas over the Marple series of books, Jane Marple is by comparison omnipresent with her constant 'interference' and she grows in personality from a rather irritating, but astute village busybody to a more empathic and sage-like character, but always one who is in the thick of a mystery — sometimes to the chagrin of others involved, even the innocent characters. Both women had a working relationship of sorts with the police — as a professional herself, Miss Silver works well with Scotland Yard detectives Inspectors Randal March, Ernest Lamb and Frank Abbott, whereas Miss Marple appears as an irritating presence who, whilst at first seeming to get in the way of the case, soon earns grudging respect for her astute thinking.

Both women clearly have 'good' family backgrounds and Miss Silver uses hers to access areas of society she would otherwise find barred to her; similarly, Miss Marple seems to have 'independent means' and although not rich by any means, her social standing is good enough to allow her into most company. One crucial difference is that Miss Silver is a professional with her own agency and a mysterious crew of 'people' that act on her behalf — although she pops up in person in some very dangerous situations and is not averse to mysteriously announcing that she knew what had happened as she had 'been there' in person.

Both female sleuths are also, of course, well-known for being habitual knitters. Whilst as a cultural trope this is a useful indicator of the spinster state, it has to be remembered that most women in the 1920's and 1930's did knit or undertake some other needlecraft such as crochet on an almost daily basis. Reasonably priced manufactured knitwear was far less readily available and hand knitted items were a popular gift to give; the first commercial knitting patterns having only been published just before the First World War, the hobby was still a very strong trend at the time. It

was also commonplace to knit in company, on public transport and so on and a knitter with experience could still work at their craft, listen unobtrusively to conversations, observe and comment in a way that might encourage loose talk from those around them. One might also say it is more a representation of traditional femininity than marital status, but that with the repetitiveness of working the stitches, it does encourage the sort of mindful thinking that might apply to anyone trying to work out the solution to a mystery. As the reviewer in the *Morecambe Guardian* of 17 August 1929 wrote, '[Miss Silver] knits socks, bootees and baby's coats as she mentally gathers up and sorts out the tangled threads of the problems brought for her unravelling.'

At the same time the reviewer called the plot 'hackneyed', but conceded that the presence of Miss Silver — as a novelty character — and the freshness of the prose made it an enjoyable read. The literary editor of the *Leicester Evening Mail* of 9 October 1928 was both flattering and critical:

> 'In saying that *Grey Mask*… is a breathless book, it is not meant that the excitement is so intense as to make one hold one's breath…although the story is well written and parts are thrilling, the 'breathlessness' applies to the characters more than the plot. They all seem to be talking at once, in a terrific hurry; and about nothing in particular; especially fluffy little Margot Standing, whose prattle reminds one more of a child than a girl of eighteen. Nevertheless, the tale holds one's interest till the end and many of the characters are well drawn…[the author] tells the story well and leaves the villain unsuspected throughout.'

Despite the warm words here, many modern aficionados of the 'inter-wars' crime novel like to advise a reader new to the series not to read this book first, but to dip into a later one, where Miss Silver and her world are better defined. Over the series one learns in more detail about Miss Silver's role as a professional detective, well connected socially and with the respect of Scotland Yard and with over thirty novels to choose from, Wentworth could afford to take her time in building Miss Silver's world.

Readers who like a thrilling story with a dash of romance will enjoy this series, as it almost always revolves a young couple, whose love story is hindered by a mystery or threat — something that may well have deterred some readers even at the time from reading the novels, especially when compared to Miss Marple stories, which have a much wider cast of characters and more complex personalities too.

The narrative introduces Charles Moray, who has been away for four years travelling widely across the world, recovering from the terrible blow of his beloved and beautiful fiancée, Margaret Langton, jilting him on the eve of their wedding day. She had done so with no warning of her change of feelings and therefore no opportunity for Charles to try to salvage their relationship. Charles almost literally runs away, also failing to face up to the responsibilities of the death of his father and his inheritance of the family house and concerns, instead spending several years travelling and working abroad.

On his return to his home city of London, he feels he has made his peace with his trauma and even enjoys being back in the rain and damp of the city. A little reluctantly — because of the adverse memories it now holds — he goes one evening to the large Georgian town house that has been in his family for generations, in a leafy suburb and which is now his. It has been locked up with just a couple of servants, the Latterys, (somewhat stereotypically depicted as rather shifty working class 'types') to maintain it. It is a wonderfully atmospheric scene with the darkened house revealing itself to him again, as memories flood back, not all unpleasant.

There is something amiss in his old home, however. The front door is not locked as it should have been. There are strange noises here and there; can they be just the settling sounds of an old house at night? Charles decides they are voices… men talking. He quietly ventures upstairs and to his horror, hears voices in the room that had been the parlour of his beloved late mother. He hides in a little cupboard in the corridor adjoining the room, which affords a view of the parlour through a hole he created when he was a boy.

What he sees is shocking and almost a violation of his happy family home:

> 'There were two men sitting at the table. One of them had his back to Charles, who could see no more than a black overcoat and a felt hat. The other man was in the shadow facing him. Charles…beheld a white shirt-front framed…in a sort of loose black cloak. Above the shirt front a blur, formless and featureless. Certainly the man had a head; but…he seemed to have no face…The man didn't seem to have any hair or any jaw; he was just a shirt front and a cloak and a greyish blur that had no form or feature. It was rather beastly.'

Eventually, Charles notes that the strange man with the amorphous face is wearing grey rubber gloves and he realises with a shock that the man's face is strange because it, too, is covered with grey rubber — a mask.

The strangeness of the scene, violating the private sitting room of his beloved mother's home, is bad enough, but then the men begin to talk of a young woman and the significance of a certificate of some kind to her destiny, as well as the question of a will. If the mysterious certificate exists: 'Why, she must go of course. I should think a street accident would be the safest way.'

Can they be talking of murder - an assassination, even? No-one's name is mentioned and the visiting people connected to the weirdly costumed man are referred to by a number, not by name. They are like secret agents and Grey Mask man is their handler. Number 27 reports their activities and leaves; then in comes 26. Charles soon realises that it is a woman and she is uncannily familiar. In fact, it is Margaret Langton. He is stunned. He had imagined her married by now, living a solid domestic life, but here she is, involved in what looks like the worst kind of 'dirty criminal conspiracy'. She hands over some letters. Charles is stunned, but at the same time, immediately realises that he is still in love with her and must protect her — save her — no matter what the cost.

After conducting some more business along the same lines, Grey Mask and his associates leave. Lattery denies all knowledge of the goings-on and Charles is left obsessing over the perilous situation Margaret had become embroiled in.

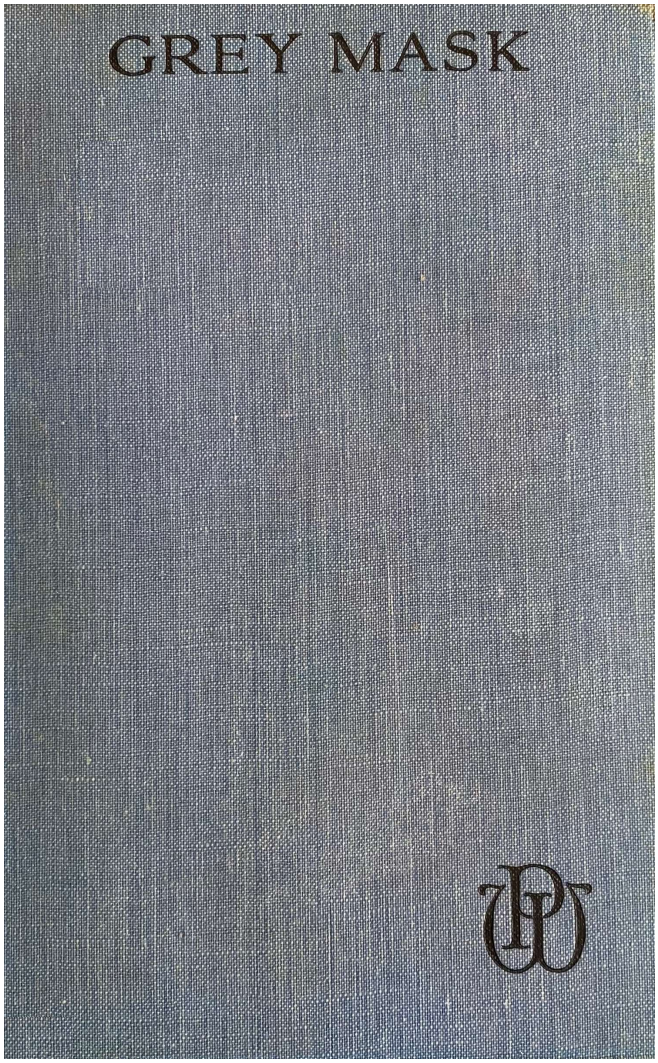
Whilst a troubled Charles tries to settle back in London, Margot Standing, a young girl in her late teens, has just arrived home from finishing school in Switzerland. She is an empty-headed heiress, whose favourite activities appear to be eating chocolate, writing to her school friends and dreaming about boyfriends and dating — despite the fact that her father has recently died in a yachting accident. She stays in her father's sumptuous London home, which is decorated with priceless works of art for which she has no regard at all and her girlish world is only spoilt by her father's solicitor, Mr Hale, who questions her closely about her mother, long deceased and her father — where were her parents married? Where was Margot born? It is as if he is questioning her right to be heiress to the family fortune! She is mildly irritated. As the only child, of course she must inherit, but apparently only if it can be proved she is not illegitimate and that her parents were lawfully married at the time of her birth. It is complicated by the fact that the marriage may have happened abroad. If the paperwork cannot be found and in the absence of a will in Margot's favour, Margot's

obnoxious cousin Egbert will inherit all and worse still there is talk of his pursuing Margot as a wife.

Meanwhile, Charles slowly pieces together details of Margaret's life, whilst dining with his old friend, Archie, after his friend had filled him in on the latest high society scandal — the dubious claim of the only daughter of millionaire Mr Standing to his estate. Apparently Margaret no longer lives with her stepfather, Freddy, but has determined to be independent, abandoning her lovely family home for a tiny low cost apartment and an equally low paid job in a hat shop. In turn, Charles confides what he has heard in his own house, of the business dealings of Grey Mask. When Archie hears the details of Grey Mask's project concerning a will, a certificate and an estate, he is astonished and tells Charles that the person in danger can only be Margot Standing. What should Charles do now?

The characters in this story can be irritating with their Wodehousian dialogue, but if the setting and circumstances were updated, the prose would stand scrutiny against many a twenty-first century murder mystery. It is sharp and punchy, with short sentences and stark statements of emotion contributing to the rise of the tension, whilst there are sufficient dark moments to please most mystery readers, particularly in the latter third of the book. With the character of Miss Silver, it really is necessary to read more than one of her stories to get the best picture of her. In this first novel she is sketchy at best, with many questions the reader may have being left unanswered. Interesting snippets reveal themselves throughout the series — for example, one learns eventually that Miss Silver has deliberately not updated her manner of dressing so that she looks like the quintessential old maid, harmless and absent-minded, an 'old dear' in front of whom people would be indiscreet because she is, in a sense, invisible.

Overall, *Grey Mask* is a pleasing start to a series that in the end spans 32 books, ending with *The Girl in the Cellar* in 1961.



The first edition

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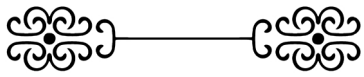
One of the few surviving photos of Wentworth as a young lady, c. 1928

Chapter I



MR PACKER DANGLED the heavy bunch of keys for a moment before laying it on the table.

'Four years is a long time to be away,' he said.

His voice was so drily polite that Charles Moray could not fail to be aware that in the eyes of his solicitor four years' absence, and a consequent neglect of all the business arising out of his father's death and his own succession, was a dereliction. An only son who succeeded to a large estate had no business to walk the uttermost parts of the earth. He should step into his place as a citizen, stand for Parliament in the constituency represented by three generations of his family, and — settle down.

Charles picked up the bunch of keys, looked at them with an odd fleeting frown, and put them in his pocket.

'You won't be going to the house tonight, I suppose,' said Mr Packer.

'No. I'm staying at The Luxe. I just thought I'd look in and get the keys.'

'I asked because I believe — in fact I know — that the caretaker Lattery, is out. He is always out on Thursday evening. I am aware of the fact, because it is his practice to call at this office for his wages; he comes very punctually at five o'clock. And I thought that if you had any intention of calling at the house, his absence might surprise you.'

'No, I shan't go round there tonight,' said Charles. He glanced at his watch. 'Haven't time — Millar's dining with me. I expect you remember him.'

Mr Packer remembered Mr Millar; not, apparently, with enthusiasm.

Charles got up.

'Well. I'll be round in the morning. I can sign anything you want me to then. I hope I haven't kept you. I'd no idea it was so late.'

He walked back to The Luxe in the dusk of the October evening — dampish, coldish — a gloomy, depressing sort of climate to welcome a man who has had four years of tropical sunshine.

Charles sniffed the cold wet air and found it good. It was surprisingly good to be at home again. The rage and pain which had driven him out of England four years ago were gone, burnt to the ash of forgetfulness by the very fierceness of their own flame. He could think of Margaret Langton now without either pain or anger. She was married of course; a girl doesn't turn a man down like that on the very eve of their wedding unless there's another man. No, Margaret must be married. Very likely they would meet. He told himself that it would be quite an interesting meeting for them both.

At The Luxe a telegram from Archie Millar— 'Awfully sorry. My Aunt Elizabeth has wired for me. She does it once a month or so. Hard luck she hit on tonight. Cheerio. Archie.'

Charles ate his dinner alone. During the soup he regretted Archie Millar, but with the fish the regret passed. He did not want Archie or Archie's company; he did not want to go to a theatre or do a show; he wanted vehemently and insistently to go to the house which was now his own house, and to go to it whilst it stood empty of everything except its memories. He didn't want to hear Lattery's account of his stewardship, or to listen to Mrs Lattery deploring the way that the damp got into

things. ‘No matter what you do, sir, or how much you air — and I’m sure I’m such a one for airing as never was.’ Her high-pitched, querulous voice rang sharply in his ears. No, he didn’t want to talk to Mrs Lattery. But he wanted to see the house.

His impatience grew as he walked westward facing a soft wind that was full of rain. The house drew him. And why not? His great-grandfather had built it; his grandfather and his father had been born there; he himself had been born there — four generations of them — four generations of memories. And the house stood empty, waiting for him to come to it.

A hundred years ago Thorney Lane was a real lane, whose hedgerows were thick with thorn that blossomed white as milk in May and set its dark red haws for birds to peck at in October. It was a paved walk now, running from one busy thoroughfare to another, with wooden posts set across it at either end to show that it was for the use of foot passengers only. When Mr Archibald Moray built his big house the thoroughfares were country roads.

Half-way up Thorney Lane a narrow alley separated the houses which looked on to Thornhill Square from the houses of the more modern George Street. The old lane had wandered pleasantly between high banks where the alley ran straight between high brick walls. No. 1 Thornhill Square was the corner house.

Charles Moray, walking up Thorney Lane turned to the right and proceeded for about a dozen yards along the alley-way. He stopped in front of the door in the brick wall and took out the bunch of keys which Mr Packer had given him. This key, at least, he thought he could find in the dark. How many times had he and Margaret walked the narrow alley in the twilight, in the dusk, in the dark?

He wondered if the Pelhams were still at 12 George Street, and if Freddy Pelham had learned any new stories in the last four years — Freddy and his interminable pointless tales about nothing! Even when he had been at the height of his love for Margaret it had been hard work to put up with Margaret’s stepfather. Well, he wouldn’t have to laugh at Freddy’s stories now.

He ran his fingers over the keys until they touched the one he wanted; it had a nick in it half-way down the shaft. He let the other keys fall away from it and put out his left hand to feel for the keyhole. His fingers touched the cold, wet wood and slid down on to colder iron. Under the pressure of his hand the door moved. He pushed, and it swung. There was no need for him to use his key on a door that had stood not only unlocked but unlatched. Lattery had grown slack indeed if he made a practice of going out by the back way and leaving the door ajar.

It was very dark in the garden. The high brick wall cut off the last glimmer of the lamp which was supposed to light Thorney Lane and the alley that ran into it.

Charles walked down the flagged path with as much assurance as if he had had daylight to show him what only his mind was showing him now. Here the thorn tree, a seedling eighty years ago, dropped from some survivor of the old hedge. Next, lavender bushes, sweet in the dark as he brushed them by. The garden was of a good size, and had been larger before his grandfather built out a ballroom upon what had once been a formal terrace.

Charles passed the long dark windows with slender fluted columns between them. It was inevitable that he should think of the June night which had seen every window brilliant, open to the soft summer dusk. The dancers had only to step out from between the pillars and descend two marble steps to find themselves amongst flowers.

He frowned and walked on; then threw up his head and stopped. What was that June evening to him now, that he should shirk the remembrance of it? If the past had any ghosts, it was better to look them in the face and bid them begone for ever. The

June night rose vividly. The last hours of his engagement to Margaret rose; he saw himself and her; her father, proud and pleased; Margaret in white and silver, radiant and for once beautiful. He could have sworn that the radiance and the beauty flowed from some lamp of joy within; and, with their wedding day only a week ahead, he had not doubted what flame burned high in that lamp of joy. Yet next day she had sent him back his ring.

Charles stared at the dark windows. What a fool he had been! His incredulity was the measure of his folly. He could not believe Margaret's own words in her own writing — not till the telephone had failed him; not till he had forced an entrance into the Pelhams' house, only to hear that Margaret had left town; not till he read in every newspaper the cold announcement that 'the marriage arranged between Mr Charles Moray and Miss Margaret Langton will not take place'.

Did he accept the facts? It is not a pleasant thing to be jilted. Charles Moray flung out of England in as bitter a rage as the galling humiliation warranted. He had never had to think of money in his life: if he wanted to travel he could travel. His father made no demur. India first, and Tibet; then China — the hidden, difficult, dangerous China which only a few Europeans know. Then in Peking he fell in with Justin Parr, and Parr persuaded him into an enthusiasm for the unexplored tracts of South America.

He was still hesitating, when his father died suddenly; and there being nothing to come home for, he set off with Parr on a voyage of adventure with a secret unacknowledged lure, the hope of forgetting Margaret.

Charles looked steadily at these ghosts of his and saw them vanish into the dark, thin air. He was immensely pleased with himself for having faced them, and it was with a glow of self-approbation that he came to the end of the flagged path and groped for the handle of the garden door.

The glow changed to one of anger. This door was open too. He began to have serious thoughts of celebrating his return by sacking Lattery. He stepped into a passage. It ran a few feet and ended in a swing door which gave upon the hall. There was a light here; not one of the hanging lamps which could flood the whole place, but a small, discreet shaded affair set away in a corner.

There is something very melancholy about a big empty house. Charles looked at the light and wondered if this house was really empty. It ought to have felt empty. But it didn't. And he ought, perhaps, to have felt melancholy. Instead, he was experiencing a certain elated feeling which was partly expectancy, and partly the instinct that scents adventure. He went up the stairs and turned into the right-hand corridor. This floor was in darkness. A faint glow came up from the well of the stairs and made the gloom visible. He had his hand on the switch which controlled the light, when he paused and after a moment let his hand fall again.

At the end of the corridor two doors faced each other. The right-hand door was invisible in the darkness, but across the threshold of the left-hand door lay a faint pencilling of light.

Charles looked at this pencilling, and told himself that Mrs Lattery was in the room. All the same he walked softly, and when he reached the door he stood still, listening. And as he stood, he heard one man speak and another answer him.

Moving quite noiselessly, he stepped backwards until he could touch the opposite door; then, putting his hand behind him, he turned the handle, passed into the dark room, and closed the door again.

The room into which he had come was the one which had been his mother's bedroom. The room opposite was her sitting-room, and between the two, across the

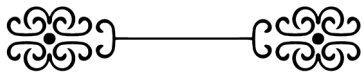
end of the corridor, there ran a windowless cupboard — a delightful place for a child to play in. He could remember his mother's dresses hanging there, silken, lavender scented, whispering when you touched them. She died when he was ten; and then there were no more dresses hanging there.

Charles opened the door very softly. The seven feet of black emptiness gave out a cold, musty smell — Mrs Lattery had not done very much of her boasted airing here. He went forward into the blackness until his fingers touched the panelling on the far side of it. Long ago there had been a door here too; but it had been shut up to make more space for Mrs Moray's dresses. The keyhole had been filled and the handle removed.

Charles had regretted the keyhole. It had figured in his games, and he could still remember the thrill with which he had discovered a peep-hole which replaced it handsomely. Four feet from the floor on the extreme edge of the panelling a knot hole had been filled with glue and sawdust stained to match the wood of the door. With infinite patience the little boy of nine had loosened the filling until it could be withdrawn at will like a cork. It was the memory of this peep-hole which brought him into the cupboard now. An unlatched gate, and an open door, and men's voices — these things seemed to require an explanation.

He knelt down, felt for the knot-hole, and gently, cautiously, pulled out the plug that filled it.

Chapter II



CHARLES MORAY LOOKED through the hole in the panelling and saw what surprised him very much. The room beyond was half in shadow and half in light. There was a lamp with a tilted shade on the rosewood table which held his mother's photograph albums. It stood perched on the fattest album with its green silk shade tipped back so as to throw all the light towards the door.

Charles drew back instinctively lest he should be seen; but the ray fell away to the left of his panelling and was focused on the door across whose threshold he had seen the pencilled line of light.

There were two men sitting at the table. One of them had his back to Charles, who could see no more than a black overcoat and a felt hat. The other man was in the shadow facing him. Charles, peering and intrigued, beheld a white shirt-front framed, as it were, in a sort of loose black cloak. Above the shirt front a blur, formless and featureless. Certainly the man had a head; but, as certainly, he seemed to have no face. However deep the shadow, you ought to be able to see the line where the hair meets the forehead, and the outline of the jaw.

Charles drew a longish breath. The man didn't seem to have any hair or any jaw; he was just a shirt front and a cloak and a greyish blur that had no form or feature. It was rather beastly.

Then as he felt the short hairs on his neck begin to prickle, the man with his back to him said,

'Suppose there's a certificate?'

The shoulders under the black cloak were shrugged; a deep, soft voice gave an answer;

'If there's a certificate, so much the worse for the girl.'

'What do you mean?' The first man hurried over the question.

'Why, she must go of course. I should think a street accident would be the safest way.' The words were spoken with a gentle, indifferent inflexion. The man in the shadow lifted a paper, looked down at it with that blur of a face, and inquired, 'You are sure there was no will?'

'Oh, quite sure. The lawyer took care of that.'

'There might have been a second one — millionaires have a curious passion for making wills.'

'Twenty-seven was quite sure. Here's his report. Will you look at it?'

A paper passed. The lamp was turned a little, the shade adjusted. Charles saw the light touch part of a hand, and saw that the hand wore a grey rubber glove. His heart gave a jump.

'By gum! That's what he's got on his face too! Beastly! All over his face and head — grey rubber — a grey rubber mask!'

The lamp was his mother's reading-lamp. The room, unused since her death, remained for Charles Moray a place of warmth and shaded light, a place where he mustn't make a noise, a fire-lit evening place where he sat cross-legged on the floor beside a sofa and a soft, tired voice told him stories. What were these unbelievable people doing in this place? It made him feel rather sick to see the light slant from the

reading-lamp across that grey, smooth hand on to the pages of Twenty-seven's report; it made him very angry too. Of all the infernal cheek —

The pages turned with an even flick; Grey Mask was a quick reader. He dropped the report in a heap and said, in that deep purring voice,

'Is Twenty-seven here?'

The other man nodded.

'Are you ready for him?'

'Yes.'

Charles jerked back from his peep-hole. Someone had moved so near him that the recoil was instinctive. Coming cautiously forward again, he became aware that there was a third man in the room, away on his left, keeping guard over the door. When he stood close to the door he was out of sight; but when he opened it he came sufficiently forward to be visible as a blue serge suit and the sort of khaki muffler which everybody's aunts turned out by the gross during the war. The muffler came up so high that the fellow was really only a suit of clothes and a scarf.

Through the open door there came a man who looked like a commercial traveller. He wore a large overcoat and a bowler hat. Charles never got a glimpse of his face. He walked up to the table with an air of assurance and looked about him for a chair.

There was no chair within reach, and under Grey Mask's silent, unmoving stare some of the assurance seemed to evaporate. The stare was a very curious one, for the holes in the smooth grey face were not eye-shaped but square — small square holes like dark dice on a grey ground. They gave Charles himself an indescribable feeling of being watched.

'Twenty-seven—' said Grey Mask.

'Come to report.'

Grey Mask tapped the sheets of the written report sharply.

'Your report is too long. It leaves out essentials. There's too much about you — not enough about the facts. For instance, you say the lawyer took care of the will. Did he destroy it?'

Twenty-seven hesitated. Charles suspected him of a desire to hedge.

'Did he?'

'Well — yes, he did.'

'How?'

'Burnt it.'

'Witnesses?'

'One's dead. The other—'

'Well?'

'I don't know. It's a woman.'

'Her name?'

'Mary Brown — spinster.'

'Know who she was?'

'No.'

'Find out and report again. That's essential. Then there's another point. There was no certificate?'

'No.'

'Sure?'

'I couldn't find one. The lawyer doesn't know of one. I don't believe there is one — I don't believe there was a marriage.'

'Too much "you",' said Grey Mask. 'Find out about that witness. You can go now.'

The man went, looking over his shoulder as if he were expecting to be called back.

Charles did not see his face at all. He was cursing himself for a fool. He ought to have got downstairs before Twenty-seven. He had his plan all made, and he ought to have been attending to it instead of listening to the gentleman confessing his criminal activities. Twenty-seven would now get away, whereas if Charles had cut along the corridor and locked the door at the end of it, he might very well have had a bag of four waiting for the police.

At a very early stage of this interview his thoughts had dwelt hopefully on the fact, so much deplored by Mr Packer, that his telephone subscription had been kept going during those four years of absence.

Twenty-seven had faded — must fade if the other three were to be bagged. It was a pity; but perhaps the police would gather him in later.

'I'll get along,' said Charles; and as he said it, he heard the invisible man on his left move again. He moved and he said, in a whispering Cockney voice.

'Twenty-six is 'ere, guvnor.'

Grey Mask nodded. He had pushed Twenty-seven's report across the table, and the other man was straightening the sheets and laying them tidily together.

'Shall I let 'er in?' The ''er' brought Charles's eye back to the knot-hole again. He had withdrawn it an inch or two preparatory to getting noiselessly on to his feet; but the Cockney's 'Shall I let 'er in' intrigued him.

There was the sound of the opening door. The blue serge suit and the khaki muffler bulged into view again, and, passing them, there came a straight black back and a close black cap with a long fold of black gauzy stuff that crossed the cap like a veil and hung down in two floating ends.

Charles received such a shock that the room went blank for a moment. He saw, and did not see; heard words, and made no sense of what he heard. He was within an ace of lurching sideways, and actually thrust out a hand to save his balance. The hand encountered the panelling against which his mother's dresses used to hang. He kept it there pressed out against the cold wood, whilst with all his might he stared at the straight black back of Number 26 and told himself with a vehement iteration that this was not, and could not be, Margaret Langton.

The iteration died; the rushing sound that filled his ears dwindled. His hand pressed the wall. The blankness passed. He saw the room, with its familiar furnishings — the blue curtains, dark and shadowy; the faded carpet with the wreaths of blue flowers on a fawn-coloured ground; the table with the photograph albums and the lamp with its tilted shade. The ray of light crossing the room showed him the edge of the closing door. It passed out of sight and shut without a sound.

Margaret was standing with her back to him. Margaret was standing at the table with her back to him. The light would miss her face because she was standing above it. He needed neither the sight of that face nor any light upon it to be sure that it was Margaret who was standing there. Her hands were in the light. They were ungloved. She was putting down a packet of papers; they looked like letters.

Charles saw the hands that were more familiar to him than any of the familiar things in the room which he had known ever since he had known anything at all. He looked at Margaret's hands. He had always thought them the most beautiful hands that he had ever seen — not small or slender, but strong white hands, beautifully formed, cool and alive to the touch. The hands were quite bare. He had made sure that Margaret was married, but there was no wedding ring on the finger that had worn his square emerald.

As he saw these things he became aware that Margaret was speaking, her voice so very low that the sound barely reached him and the words did not reach him at all. She stood holding the edge of the table and speaking in that low voice; and then with a quick movement she turned and came back along the ray of light to the door, which swung open to pass her through. The light was at her back. The scarf with the floating ends veiled her face. She moved with her old free step and the little swing of the shoulders that he knew by heart. She held up her head. The ends of the scarf moved behind her. She passed through the door and was gone. The door shut.

Charles drew a very long breath. He had not seen her face.

End of Sample